

Church of England General Synod, 10 July 2011
Address on the Subject of Women in the Episcopate.
Rt Rev Victoria Matthews, Bishop of Christchurch New Zealand.

Opening Prayer:

Gracious God we come before you in thanksgiving for our life in Christ and for the manifold blessings we have received from your hands. In this time we have together considering your call and the exercise of ordered ministry in your church, grant us grace that our ears may hear and eyes see the fullness of the life of the Body of Christ on earth and the promises of your Kingdom yet to be realized. Come Holy Spirit, and set our hearts on fire for love of you. In the strong name of Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.

I would like to begin by thanking WATCH and Open Synod for this invitation. Thank you also to Archbishops Rowan and John for their warm welcome to this General Synod. To begin with a disclaimer, the topic I am asked to address seems a bit dated. I do not say that as a criticism but as an admission. I have been in episcopal ministry for over 17 years, longer than I served in parish ministry and theological education combined. Indeed I have served in three different dioceses [Toronto, Edmonton and Christchurch] as either Suffragan or Diocesan Bishop. Currently I am service the Diocese of Christchurch, New Zealand where we have experienced an astounding and unsettling 7000 plus earthquakes and aftershocks in what is now being described as writing a new chapter in earthquake history. 181 people have died with many others injured. A third of the listed buildings in the city are down and more are to come. 23 Anglican churches are unsafe to enter, with a smaller number of vicarages and halls also listed for demolition. The Cathedral, which is the icon of the city has been sufficiently damaged to require partial or full deconstruction. On June 13, just a very few weeks ago, when the fourth and fifth major earthquakes struck [both over 5.5] the icon within the icon of the cathedral, the Rose Window, fell inwards along with 75% of the west wall. Throughout this time of devastation and upset, the National Government and the Christchurch city council, recognizing that what we are experiencing is the biggest natural disaster ever experienced in New Zealand, have looked repeatedly to the church for leadership. Remember this is New Zealand with a culture that is increasingly secular. But it does have to be said that this secular self-understanding has not always been the identity of Christchurch. The history of Christchurch goes back to Archbishop Sumner and the Canterbury Association when four sailing vessels were sent to New Zealand to establish a new colony more English than England, named for Christchurch Oxford and intended to be clearly Anglican in its vision and reality Today it continues to be the most Anglican part of New Zealand. When I was elected in Christchurch by the Electoral College of the Diocese, the medium level upset was the election of a Canadian bishop sight unseen, elected on reputation and references and not that I was a woman. There was also an upset that I was reputed to be an Anglo Catholic, yet had just been elected Bishop by a clearly evangelical diocese, but again the controversy was not about gender. You may remember that Penelope Jamieson, now retired, was elected in 1990 by the Diocese of Dunedin, New Zealand, as the first woman Diocesan in the Communion. This is not to say there was no concern about gender but simply that it was well down the list.

So again let me say that speaking about the idea of women in the episcopate does seem a bit odd to me. Believe in it? I live the reality. But let me also say that if you are experiencing this conversation and my presence as something of a disaster, an earthquake happening out of the blue, than please know you will be a casualty if you do not actually engage the earthquake. Sitting in shock as your house comes down in not healthy. Earthquakes require response and recovery because the one thing that will not happen is

that they go away and life continues as normal. Earthquakes change your experience of life and knowing that is the first step to a healthy and life-saving response.

Over 20 years on in the history of the episcopal ministry involving both genders, or as the Canadian Church said, bringing completeness to episcopal ministry, I no longer can actually seriously engage the argument about the validity of the sacraments celebrated by women. The sacraments we celebrate are valid and transform lives much as the sacraments celebrated by men in holy orders. That is because in the lives of the men and women the Holy Spirit has conferred gifts of grace. My successor in the Diocese of Edmonton was ordered deacon and priest by a woman in episcopal ministry who then was a co-consecrator at the episcopal consecration. In the USA there are a growing number of bishops all consecrated by the Presiding Bishop, also female. Apostolic Succession has not been endangered by these episcopal acts. Rather Apostolic Succession is the handing on of the apostolic faith and the authority to uphold and protect it, which has less to do with the pedigree of the episcopal minister than the work of the Holy Spirit. Thirty-five bishops participated in my consecration by far more important; the Holy Spirit was present and active in that ordination. So why all the fuss? Let's take a closer look. Beginning in the late 60's and early 70's, the seminaries of the Communion began to emphasize the need to critique the tradition. Liberation theology, Black theology and feminist theology, to cite examples, began to highlight the gaps and oversights we had permitted in our reception of the Biblical narrative. Their insight was that Scriptural proclamation had become increasingly the telling of the Story of Salvation in ways which upheld the authority of the powerful and present day office holders. Everyone had their place and was expected to know their place. Gradually, thanks to Liberation, Black and Feminist Theology, with the emphasis on the Story of the Exodus and a re-reading of the Gospels, new insights began. The insights highlighted what had been overlooked and dared to ask what else needed to be heard again as if for the first time. The concern that they brought to the attention of the churches was not a new problem. If one reads about the preaching of the Gospel on the Plantations in the Southern USA during the days of the slave trade, the reality was that the sermons preached to the owners were most frequently on the epistles. Upholding the status quo was an important part of Christian ministry. The Tradition does need to be critiqued and I say that as one who holds the Tradition in high esteem. However by the time we were into 1990's and frankly into the 21st century as well, there was a distressing tendency to critique the Tradition without first teaching the Tradition. So as you consider the question of the ordination to the episcopate of both genders, in this province, I believe that it is as important to listen carefully to the Tradition as it is to critique the Tradition. For this reason I have been adamant that voices on all sides need to be heard. There is much we can learn from each other. For too long we have been listening only to the voices who agree with us.

For this reason I think it is important to recognize that women have not been part of the ordered ministry of the churches for very long periods of time in church history. Some would say that this is due to questions of headship founded upon Scriptural teaching. Others would say it has to do with the requirement of physical similarity to the male body to the body of the man Jesus. And others would say that it was so in the beginning and always should be.

However, if we look again at the Tradition we notice that in the body of the Scriptures we do have some remarkable examples of leadership, proclamation by, and vocation of both genders. To mention but a few examples, there is Lydia who enables the Gospel to go into Europe by persuading Paul to preach there. Her role is extraordinarily episcopal. Then backing up a touch we have the Pharisee, Saul of tarsus, rounding up the leaders and members of The Way in order to put them to death. Acts 9 clearly says it was men and women that he was targeting. I suggest to you that Paul was enough of an Alpha male that he was most interested in gathering the leaders. Both male and female Christians are his

target. This strongly suggests to me that women held positions of leadership in the early church and that this was recognized and acted on by Saul. But as a catholic as well as evangelical Christian I find the strongest argument is the Virgin Mary who grows in her womb the body and blood of Christ, the incarnate Son of God. She is therefore the first celebrant of the Eucharist. "Let it be according to your word."

The list of arguments goes on and on and I am not going to rehearse them all here. However I will say that what deeply saddens me more than any of these arguments, for or against, is that the church, the Body of Christ, is divided and rent asunder by these arguments. And in fact it is far more than arguments that are at stake. I fear we may be guilty of the sin of idolatry. So let's back up a moment and remember what is of the greatest importance. We are, all of us, called to be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Bishops are the successors of the apostles in every century. To be an apostle, two things are required. First one must be the witness of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. And secondly one must be commissioned or sent by Christ to proclaim the Good News. Mary Magdalene ["I have seen the Lord"] fulfilled both those criteria and hence is called the Apostle to the Apostles. So if we are going to worry about who should be a bishop at this time and in this part of the world, the requirement must be that a bishop, as a successor to the apostles, is able and eager to witness to the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ and be recognized as one who has been sent to proclaim our Lord's Resurrection to the world. That is why Paul who did not know Jesus in the flesh could claim to be an apostle. It was because he was a witness of the resurrection of Christ in the encounter on the road to Damascus and he was sent out by no one less than the Christ to make this proclamation. To state the obvious: this is all about Jesus and the Resurrection, and not about gender. To say that one needs to have certain gender specific human attributes are more important than what we have received as a gift from Almighty God. And that to me is idolatry and serious sin. So I would suggest that all parties in this need to repent and commit, yet again, to praying for God's guidance in this matter.

My time will start to run out soon so let me say a couple of things about the matter of women in the episcopate: and the concerns raised with respect to ecumenical dialogue. We all know that the actions of provinces such as Canada, the Episcopal Church, New Zealand and Australia in ordaining women to the episcopate has led to increased tension with other Communion specifically Rome and the Orthodox. It would seem this is particularly true if the Church of England takes the step. Frankly I do not understand that as I believe that the Church of England is one province of our beloved Communion and not the head Office. But let's ask a couple of further reaching questions here. Does Rome recognize the episcopate of my brother bishops in the Anglican Communion? She does not. I have worked, as the Anglican Bishop, in dioceses alongside Roman bishops who are conservative, even by Roman standards. Has this proved to be difficult? No it has not. In fact I would have to say that in those instances I enjoyed a particularly good relationship, and we were able to initiate projects together with ease. At the end of the day we still did not agree on everything but the level of respect we had for each other was and is immense. In earthquake devastated Christchurch, I have worked most closely with Bishop Barry Jones my brother in Christ in the Roman Church and together we are spearheading an ecumenical response entitles Rebuilding the Faith of Canterbury, to the disaster.

One other personal story: My mentor as a priest and for many years as a bishop was an exceptionally wise and holy Anglican bishop by the name of Henry Hill. Bishop Henry was Archbishop Robert Runcie's delegate for work with the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox. It was my privilege to preach at Henry's funeral. Afterwards one of the Orthodox prelates said to Alyson Barnett Cowan, with tears in his eyes, that he so regretted not being able to share the Eucharist with Henry and the other Anglicans on that

occasion. HE did not because he knew it would be a stumbling block for his brethren, not because he found there to be a problem.

The decision before the Church of England is of course a decision that only your Church can make. You are presently deciding diocese by diocese. I am aware there is great concern about the outcome tearing the church apart. There are concerns about proper safeguards for minorities. All that only you can decide. But I do want to say that in each of the 3 dioceses I have had the incredible privilege to serve, there have been those who do not agree with the ordination of women to the episcopate. In Edmonton the concern was Anglo Catholic and was about women presiding at the sacraments, and in Christchurch the concern is of the more Sydney minded evangelicals and has to do with women preaching. In every instance we have managed to work together with great respect and mutual support. Following the September and February earthquakes in Christchurch I received numerous telephone calls from the Archbishop of Sydney offering his prayers, financial support and actual fundraising for us. You may remember that Sydney Diocese suffered huge financial losses recently, but that did not stop an initial gift of \$10,000 to the Diocese of Christchurch for pastoral and earthquake response ministry, Subsequent gifts were designated 'to be used at the discretion of the Bishop'. Archbishop Jenson has also invited me to visit and stay in his guest apartment when I need to get away from the devastation in Christchurch. None of this is meant, for one second, to say that I have unique or special gifts at reconciliation. What I am saying to you is that if I can do it, anyone can enjoy a very high level of fellowship and partnership in the Gospel. It is after all our common calling in Christ. The Bishop is the symbol of unity, and whether my brother bishop is Roman, Orthodox, Anglo Catholic or evangelical Anglican, I have never felt that my episcopal ministry has been an insurmountable stumbling block to the ministry that we share in Christ and offer to the glory of God.

In conclusion, I offer you my prayer as this Province continues to seek the mind of Christ, and discern how to serve God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. I pray that as you make your decision Diocese by Diocese, you will be shaped by our calling to give glory to God, to be reconciled in Christ and to proclaim the Gospel in the world our precious Lord Jesus died on the Cross to save. Thanks be to God.