

## A BRIEF HISTORY of the Journey to Women Bishops in the Church of England

sion to the Revision Committee. We are delighted that we are no longer debating whether women should be bishops, but rather the arrangements for those who remain unable to receive the ministry of women priest and bishops. Unfortunately, some of the arrangements in the current draft legislation are deeply discriminatory, not only to female bishops, but also to male bishops who support female bishops.

of Bishops, where it was revised and then sent to General Synod for debate in July 2008. The amended motion went back to the Legislative Drafting Group and the House of Bishops for further work before being debated in General Synod in February 2009. That debate determined to send the proposals to a Revision Committee, which will be considering hundreds of submissions during its meetings this year. It is hoped that the revised draft legislation will be debated in General Synod in February 2010. After that, it will go for further revision and come back to General Synod in July 2010, when it is intended to send it out for debate in the dioceses.

### Still Watching

WATCH believes that there should be nothing in law that differentiates between bishops on the basis of their gender and made this and other detailed points in its nearly 4,000 word submission to the Revision Committee.

WATCH believes that part of Jesus' saving, transforming, liberating and reconciling work on the cross was to heal hurtful divisions between women and men and to help us live more fully in the unity to which we are called. WATCH believes that only when women are included at all levels in the ordained ministry will the Church of England be able to bring – and be – the Good News of Christ to a broken and divided world.

May 2009

For further reading:

- The Call for Women Bishops** Edited by Harriet Harris and Jane Shaw, SPCK 2004, ISBN 0 281-05621-8
- Women as Bishops** Edited by James Rigney with Mark Chapman, Affirming Catholicism 2008
- Women Bishops in the Church of England?** The Rochester report of the House of Bishops' Working Party on Women in the Episcopate - GS 1557, Church House Publishing 2004 ISBN 0-7151-4037-X
- Voices of This Calling - Experiences of the First Generation of Women Priests** Edited by Christina Rees, published by SCM/Canterbury Press, 2002.
- Act of Synod – Act of Folly?** Edited by Monica Furlong, published by SCM Press, 1998.

If you would like speakers for deanery or diocesan synods, or for any other meeting, please contact Jenny Standage, Secretary, WATCH, telephone: 020 8319 3372 or email: [jennystandage@pobox.com](mailto:jennystandage@pobox.com)

If you would like to talk to someone about any of the issues raised in this leaflet, please contact Hilary Cotton, telephone: 01483 856827 or email: [hilary.cotton@ntl.world.com](mailto:hilary.cotton@ntl.world.com)

For further information about National WATCH, write to the Administrator, WATCH, St John's Church, Waterloo Road, London SE1 8TY or visit the WATCH website: <http://www.womenandthechurch.org>

### The Women Priests Measure

This paper outlines the Church of England's move to ordain women as priests and explains the current situation as the Church prepares for having women as bishops

### MOW and WATCH

On 11th November 1992, the General Synod of the Church of England voted to open the priesthood to women. This historical vote came after 70 years of formal discussion and debate in the Anglican Communion, begun in 1920 when the Lambeth Conference first considered the issue of women's ordination. The subject was placed on the Lambeth agenda largely in response to one of London's most popular preachers of the day, a woman called Maude Royden, being denied permission to preach from a pulpit the year before. In preparation for the vote in 1992, the General Synod had debated the matter for over 25 years. As long ago as 1975, Synod had agreed "that there are no fundamental objections to the ordination of women to the priesthood". In 1987, women were first ordained as deacons, part of the historic threefold ministry of deacons, priests and bishops. Before then women had ministered as deaconesses and in many forms of lay ministry and also as members of religious communities. Just over a year after the 1992 vote, the Women Priests Measure was ratified by Parliament, with large majorities in both Houses, and in March 1994 the first ordinations took place in Bristol cathedral. By the end of the year, 1,500 women deacons had been ordained to the priesthood. In all, 4,000 women have been ordained as priests, with 3,000 currently serving. Nearly one in four priests in the Church of England is female.

### Financial Provisions and Resolutions A and B

Various qualifying clauses were included in the Women Priests Measure, including financial provisions for those priests who felt unable to minister in a Church that ordained women. In total, the Church of England paid out £27.1 million to 441 priests who made claims under the financial provisions. Of those priests who resigned during the ten year period, over 60 have since returned, with 31 going back into stipendiary ministry and 20 into non-stipendiary ministry. Fifteen retired priests have also returned to the Church. Of all those who have returned, only



one is known to have offered to repay the money given to them when they resigned their positions.

In addition to the Financial Provisions clauses, there are two clauses in the Women Priests Measure known as Resolutions A and B. Resolution A states that a Parochial Church Council (PCC) may vote not to accept a woman priest to take services. Resolution B states that a PCC may vote not to accept a woman as their incumbent, priest-in-charge or team vicar.

### **The Act of Synod**

In November 1993, almost one year to the day after the vote for women priests, General Synod voted for an Act of Synod that would provide an additional set of arrangements for those who opposed ordaining women. At the time there were great misgivings about the proposed Act, but Synod was urged to pass it as a practical way forward and as a gesture of generosity. Even then, it was widely acknowledged to be a theological nonsense. Unlike the Women Priests Measure, the Act, known as the Episcopal Ministers Act 1993, was not part of canon law, and carries only the moral weight of the Synod that passed it.

The Act created a separate class of bishops called Provincial Episcopal Visitors (PEVs), which quickly became known as ‘flying bishops’. There are currently three PEVs: one in the Province of York and two in the Province of Canterbury. Originally, it was intended that the PEVs offer the extended Episcopal oversight of the diocesan bishops to those priests and people who requested it, but what developed in fact was virtually an alternative Episcopal ministry, where in places, there was scant or no regard for the diocesan bishop.

The Act of Synod has been the cause of a great deal of pain, confusion and negative treatment for many women priests, some supportive male

priests and bishops, and lay members of the Church. Dr Helen Thorne, in her doctoral study of the first women priests, concluded that the Act was “deeply harmful to women on a practical, emotional and spiritual level. The Act of Synod, and the provision of alternative Episcopal oversight, are offensive to women because they legitimise women’s exclusion and create a form of sexual apartheid by creating areas in the Church where women’s ministry is unacceptable... Spiritually, the Act fosters a theology of ‘taint’ whereby a man’s ministry is made void through his association with a woman priest.” (*Dr Helen Thorne, Journey to Priesthood, CCSRG Monograph Series 3, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Bristol, 2000*)

In 2000, the House of Bishops’ Review of the Act of Synod was debated in Synod, with a number of speakers questioning the ongoing and long-term effects of the Act. Speakers also objected to the tone of the Review, and the fact that the views and opinions of several hundred submissions, including those from bishops, male and female clergy and lay members, were virtually absent from the Review. It has been pointed out by many in the Church, most notably the Church historian, the Revd Dr Judith Maltby, that in its entire history, the Church of England has never reacted to diversity by creating an alternative structure. A few years after the Act was passed, she wrote that “at no point in our history has the endorsement of comprehensiveness ever resulted in the creation of an extended or alternative Episcopal system.” (*Maltby, J. in Act of Synod – Act of Folly? edited by Monica Furlong, SCM Press 1998, p51*)

Maltby also observed that the “Act is saying that if a bishop lays hands on a woman in ordination, others have the right to seek the ministry of a bishop whose hands have not been so exposed”, (ibid, p55) and she went on to question the theological rationale of such an arrangement.

Over the years, bishops, clergy and laity have increasingly spoken out about the damaging effects of the Act of Synod, noting how it has legitimised and normalised prejudice against women priests and against women in general, and how it has built barriers between people and created ghettos which have remained closed to the priestly ministry of women. The Act has also been detrimental to the Church’s ecumenical conversations, most especially with the Methodist and Roman Catholic Churches. The Methodist Church has made it plain that it will not agree to formal unity until and unless women are allowed to minister on the same basis as men and there are some in the Roman Catholic Church who are even more disturbed by the implications of the Act than they are by the prospect of women priests and bishops. In October 2000, a few months after the Review of the Act was published, concern about the Act prompted the launch of GRAS, the Group for Rescinding the Act of Synod. For nearly a decade GRAS has spoken out about the abuses committed under the protection of the Act and has campaigned vigorously for the Act to be rescinded.

### **The House of Bishops’ Working Party on the Theology of Women in the Episcopate**

In July 2000, the then Archdeacon of Tonbridge, the Venerable Judith Rose, presented a Private Member’s Motion to General Synod, which was debated and passed by large majorities. The Motion asked the House of Bishops to “initiate further theological study on the episcopate, focussing on the issues that need to be addressed in preparation for the debate on women in the episcopate in the Church of England, and to make a progress report on this study to Synod within the next two years.”

Accordingly, a House of Bishops’ Working Party was set up under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Rochester, and in July 2002 it brought its interim report to Synod. To many in the Church, it seemed

as if the Working Party had gone over ground already covered by the much earlier debates and discussions about women and the priesthood. However, the Working Party continued to meet for another two years, and then, in November 2004, it published its final report entitled, ‘Women Bishops in the Church of England?’ which was debated at the February Synod 2005. Synod voted overwhelmingly to take note of the Report, and also voted to have time made available at the 2005 July Synod to decide whether to embark on the legislative process that would “remove the barriers to women in the episcopacy”.

### **Guildford Diocesan Synod Motion and others**

Frustrated by the slow progress of the Working Party, and recognising that legislation for women bishops would have to be prepared sooner or later, in June 2002 Guildford Diocesan Synod had passed a motion asking that “General Synod bring forward legislation to permit the consecration of women to the Episcopate in the provinces of Canterbury and York without delay”. Soon, a number of other dioceses had passed similar motions, urging General Synod to begin preparing legislation for women bishops. All these motions were ‘parked’ until the Working Party’s report had been debated. Most have lapsed, but a motion from Southwark Diocese calling for the rescinding of the Act of Synod is still waiting to be debated.

### **Further Debates**

In July 2005, General Synod passed a motion calling for the legal barriers to women bishops to be removed and in July 2006 a motion from the House of Bishops stating that having women as bishops was “consonant with the faith of the Church” was passed. A following motion was also passed providing for the setting up of a Legislative Drafting Group to prepare draft legislation for women as bishops. Two years later the LDG sent its report to the House