



## INTRODUCTION TO PAPERS

### Preparing for Women as Bishops – Legislating in Fear or in Faith?

The Church of England is in the process of drafting the legislation that will make it lawful for women to be bishops. After debating the issue of women's ordination for over 40 years, WATCH is delighted that the General Synod has agreed that having women as bishops is 'consonant with the faith of the Church'. We are concerned, however, that certain proposals have been put forward which would result in a two-tier episcopacy and a fracturing of the historical Anglican understanding of orders. Further, we are alarmed that the flawed theology of the Episcopal Act of Synod 1993 may be absorbed in the legislation permitting women to be bishops.

Several members of WATCH have written about their hopes and fears for the women bishops legislation and we offer this series of papers as a contribution to the on-going discussions about the way in which the Church will legislate for the Episcopal ministry of women.

#### Breaking down walls

WATCH is committed to breaking down the walls that the Act of Synod has built up, walls based on fear and a widespread lack of trust. We believe it is essential to rebuild trust between those who hold differing views on women's ordination, trust built on Anglican theology and ecclesiology as well as personal honesty and accountability.

WATCH believes that it would be wrong to differentiate in law between male and female bishops on the grounds of gender, or to discriminate against male bishops because they ordain women as priests and will soon consecrate them as bishops. The legislation must make it clear that women are bishops on the same basis as men are bishops and then arrangements can then be made at diocesan level to minister to those opposed to receiving the ministry of female priests or bishops.

The Anglican Communion has had women as bishops for over 20 years, and in none of the nearly 20 provinces which have voted to have women as bishops has any legislation been passed proscribing the Episcopal ministry of women or those male bishops who ordain or co-consecrate women.

WATCH is confident that God is calling our Church to open its Episcopate to women and that this will result in great blessings for our Church and for the wider society. The Church of England is the Established Church and we take seriously our commitment to all the people of this land – not only to those who come to our churches. Being the Established Church is both an immense responsibility and an unprecedented privilege.

WATCH is also aware that the Church is not the only institution facing issues about gender and leadership. The chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission recently commented that sexism was the biggest battle remaining in our society and many have been shocked to learn about the on-going disparity in pay between male and female employees in the financial sector. The statistics of violence against women and girls in this country suggests a badly disordered understanding between the sexes. These issues are being tackled in society while the Church currently remains exempt from the Sex Discrimination Act 1975.

#### The example of Christ

As the body of Christ on earth, the Church should be leading the way with models of mutuality between men and women. We should be setting an example based on the teachings and life of Jesus Christ. We should be the salt and light and the leaven in the lump, transforming our surrounding culture with the truths of the Gospel, based on our understanding of who we are in Christ.

The legislation for women as bishops is crucial: it will shape our Church for future generations. What message do we wish to give about the equality of women and men? In spite of having alleviated the initial shock for the minority of Church goers who remain opposed to ordaining women as priests or bishops, the Act of Synod has now been seen to have been a serious error. It has done much damage to the unity and nature of our Church and set a divisive precedent within the wider Anglican Communion. We face a clear choice: do we want to be a Church that legislates in response to fear and a flawed concept of humanity or a Church that faithfully follows the leading of God's Holy Spirit and bases its laws on a true understanding of who we are in Christ?

Over the next month WATCH will post a new paper about these issues on our website each week. We will start by posting an essay published over a decade ago on the Act of Synod by Canon Judith Maltby. Although many more women have been ordained and are making a significant contribution to the mission and ministry of our Church, the situation regarding the Act of Synod remains the same. We hope very much that these papers will help you to think and pray about the way ahead for our Church as it prepares the legislation making it possible for women to become bishops.

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Chair of WATCH

