

WOMEN WITH OVERSIGHT

Some Evidence from Scripture and Tradition

In this paper Revd Dr Charlotte Methuen considers historical examples of women's leadership and oversight in the Church, arguing that considerations from both scripture and tradition suggest that it is both valid and timely for the Church of England to consecrate women as bishops.

***"If you will, traveller, note this inscription:
here lies the venerable lady, bishop Q-,
laid to rest in peace..."***

This sixth-century Umbrian inscription marks the tomb of a "venerable lady, bishop Q-," whose name has been broken away. It is generally interpreted as referring to the wife of a bishop. However, as it survives, the inscription mentions neither a husband nor a male bishop. Moreover, the accolade *venarabilis* refers in most cases to members of the clergy. We may well ask: who was this "venerable lady, bishop Q-," and what was her role?

A mosaic in the Zeno chapel of St Prassede in Rome dating from the ninth century shows four women. Three (Mary and the Saints Praxedis and Prudentiana) have their heads highlighted by the round golden halos of saints; one has her head enclosed in the square white halo which traditionally indicated the portrait of a living person, honoured or regarded as holy. In the mosaic, this figure bears the title "Theodora Episcopa". An inscription on a reliquary in the same chapel records the donation of relics by Pope Paschal I to the chapel, the resting place "of his most good mother, namely the lady Theodora, Bishop." Like that of the "honoured lady, bishop Q-," Theodora's title has been interpreted variously. Was she named bishop in recognition of the position of her son? Was she the supervisor or overseer of virgins and widows, or the equivalent of an abbess? Or had she perhaps been ordained bishop?

Although it is probably impossible to be certain of the correct interpretation of these inscriptions, there seems no reason to assume that leadership titles which refer to women must necessarily be honorific. In her study of Christian inscriptions witnessing to women office bearers, Ute Eisen argues that Latin Christian texts generally refer to the wife of a bishop explicitly as wife (*coniux*) and not as *episcopa*. There is only one case in which *episcopa* may refer to a bishop's wife: Canon 14 of the Council of Tours (567) instructs a bishop that unless he has an *episcopa*, he may not include women amongst leaders of his disciples (*episcopum episcop[i]am non habentem nulla sequatur turba mulierem*), but this too is ambiguous. Eisen does not rule out the possibility that in the context of the conflicts around the ninth-century papacy and her son Paschal I, Theodora had indeed been ordained bishop.

***si uis cog[n]o[s]ce, uia]
tor: hic requie[scit] venerabilis fem[ina]
episcopa Q[...]. depos. in pace [...]***

In the discussion about women bishops in the Church of England, these inscriptions are likely to play a minor role. Their interpretation is disputed and from this distance in time it will never be possible to determine with any certainty the roles of the women to whom they refer. These women who were called bishops remain enigmatic, their commemorative inscriptions a witness to a church which we do not entirely understand. But they are important for exactly that reason: they serve as a reminder that a good deal of what we know about the shifting structures and patterns of ministry of the early church is based on such fleeting glimpses, on fragmentary evidence, on brief inscriptions, on church orders and synod minutes, on epistles and other writings, divorced from their contexts and consequently often difficult to interpret. And they are important because they alert us to the presence in our church's history of honoured women, styled bishop.

Bishops and episcopal leadership in the New Testament

The office of bishop, scarcely mentioned in the New Testament, gained enormously in importance in the second and third centuries until in the course of the fourth and fifth centuries it became central to the dominant structure of the church. There are very few New Testament references either to the person of an *episcopos* or to the *episcopa*, the office as such: Philippians 1:1; Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:1-2; Titus 1:7. These brief allusions give little clue to the function to which they refer. In a unique formulation, Paul sends greetings to "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons," but says nothing further about their roles. This is probably the earliest use of the term in the New Testament. Acts recounts how Paul called the elders (*presbyters*) of the Ephesian church to Miletos, exhorting them: "Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you bishops [or overseers], to shepherd the Church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son." In the Pastoral Letters (specifically, in 1 Timothy and Titus), the characteristics necessary for a person wishing to become a bishop are defined, but the actual duties associated with

the office remain vague. Inscriptions and non-biblical writings suggest that the term *episcopos* generally referred to an administrator or overseer, an interpretation which is reflected in a number of English translations of these passages, in particular Acts 20:28 (NRSV, NIV). Acts shows terms which later came to refer to distinctive roles and offices (*presbyteros* / *episcopos*) being used in a looser way, with different titles being applied to the same people.

Women as leaders and overseers of house churches

The New Testament witnesses to a time of mission, in which local congregations and churches were being formed in response to the preaching of wandering apostles, such as Paul himself. The local congregations seem to have taken the form of house churches, generally led—overseen—by the head of the household. These leaders were not only men. In fact, Joan Morris suggests that “all assemblies of Christian communities mentioned in Acts and the Epistles of Paul are said to be in the house of women” (Morris, p. 1, my italics). Although this is an exaggeration, women certainly predominate, and the majority of male house church leaders mentioned by Paul are named together with a woman. We hear of the establishment of a church in the house of Lydia (Acts 16:14-15,40). Acts 12:12-17 seems to witness to such a house church led by Mary, the mother of John Mark. Paul greets or alludes to churches in the house of Chloe (1 Cor 1.11), Nympha (Col 4:16), and Prisca (or Priscilla) and Aquila, evangelists who became overseers of a house church (Rom 16:3-5, 1 Cor 16.19 and compare also Acts 18). In Rom 16:1, Phoebe is described as *prostatis*, a term which is often translated patron or benefactor, but which in 1 Timothy in its verb form is used to characterise the tasks of the bishop, deacon or elder (1 Tim 3:4-5; 5:17).

It is clear that in the first Christian communities fixed patterns of leadership and oversight were not yet established. This is a period in which *charism*—the gift of the Spirit—was of greater importance than office. It is also a period in which the missionary apostle, whether man or woman, inevitably took a leadership role in establishing the community and in which the host of the house church, whether man or woman, was well-placed to take oversight of the community once the apostle or apostles moved on. As already noted, the terms used to refer to these leaders vary and often overlap; they include *episcopos* and *presbyteros*, and perhaps also *prostatis*.

Conflicts about leadership: The Pastoral Epistles and Ignatius of Antioch

By the time Pastoral Epistles came to be written, probably at the very end of the first century or early in the second century, a process of structural definition had begun to take place. Here an attempt is being made to distinguish between office-holders; in particular the terminology of bishop/deacon is used in preference to the term presbyter. The Pastoral Epistles seem to witness to some kind of

conflict between different models of church structure or organisation, a struggle which was to continue for some centuries to come. They display a clearly hierarchical understanding of both society and the church, and they make an explicit distinction between the roles of men and of women. The provisions of 1 Timothy make it clear the bishop is to be a man who has been once married, a householder, of good standing in society (1 Tim 3:1-7). Deacons are also men of good character (1 Tim 3.8-10;12-13), and female deacons appear also to be envisioned (1 Tim 3.11 and probably 12-13; the women in 1 Tim 3.11 are variously understood as women, as deacons’ wives, or as female deacons, but the context seems to suggest the latter). Presbyters receive only brief mention (1 Tim 5.17-18; Tit 1.5), and in Titus are set equivalent to bishops. Intriguingly, there are notable parallels between the requirements for women wishing to be officially recognised as widows and those for bishops: the widows too are to be women with experience of leading a household and educating children, of good standing in the community (1 Tim 5:3-16, especially 9-10). This is especially interesting given that the terms widow (Greek: *chera*) and *presbytera* could be used virtually interchangeably in the first two centuries CE. The restriction of the ministry of widows (or female presbyters) to prayer, allied with the sidelining of presbyters in the Pastoral Epistles (compare Tit 2.2 and 3), suggests that the Pastoral Epistles’ preference for a leadership structure with the (male) bishop assisted by (male and probably also female) deacons having oversight over a church may be intended to oust a structure in which men and women shared responsibility as leaders of the community.

A similar pattern of “male only” ministry in which every local church was headed by a bishop is characteristic of the churches known to Ignatius of Antioch, writing in the second century. In a metaphorical explication of the hierarchy of the church, Ignatius compares the bishop to God, the deacon to Christ and the presbyters to the apostles, surely a clear indication of the relative values he assigned to their ministries! Here too we see bishops and deacons preferred to presbyters. Widows, also mentioned by Ignatius, are commended to a life of prayer. This development is probably connected to developing practices of liturgy and particularly to questions of who might baptise or preside at the Eucharist. However, it seems likely that there is also a missionary motivation behind this move. Both the Pastoral Epistles and the letters of Ignatius appear to advocate a structure—in terms of leadership and in terms of the roles of men and women—which was more familiar to the people to whom their authors wished the Gospel to be proclaimed.

Mission to the pagans: The Didascalia Apostolorum

This argument may seem surprising, but it is stated explicitly in one third-century document. The *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a church order written probably in Syria, offers some interesting insights into both the means of

introduction of the monarchical episcopacy, and also its motivations. For the author of the *Didascalia*, the bishop is king. Like Ignatius, the *Didascalia* likens the bishop to God, the deacon to Christ, and the presbyters to the apostles, but here the motif is taken further. The female deacon is aligned with the Holy Spirit (still feminine in Syriac at this time) and, finally, again borrowing from Ignatius, the widows are told that they are to be like the altar of God, static and fixed in one place, and that no one may approach them with offerings except the bishop or the deacons. The author counsels his readers not to be baptized by a woman, but only by the bishop, assisted for men by male deacons, and for women by female deacons. Most importantly, he instructs women—particularly widows—and men—other than the bishop and deacons—not to teach, for “the pagans will mock and scoff” if they hear the teaching of the incarnation and the resurrection from a woman. There is one exception to this: female deacons are to be sent by the bishop to teach female catechumens living in pagan households. Other than this, only the bishop or male deacons may teach, and only the bishop may take a public role representing the church. The author sees the bishop as controlling the boundaries of the church, deciding who is to be baptised, who is in error, or who is to be forgiven and readmitted, responsible for the teaching ministry. But the comment forbidding women to teach is telling: women are excluded from this ministry for a pragmatic, missionary reason, because the society to which the congregation is ministering does not respect words spoken by a woman.

Why should this be the case? Christianity was a new religion and it initially attracted members from many social different groups and with many different understandings of their calling as Christians. The teaching of some Christian groups focused on strict asceticism, including celibate marriage, teachings which inspired some wives to abandon their husbands and families. If Christianity was to become a more respectable and established religion, it needed to present an “acceptable” face to those to whom the Gospel was to be preached. Part of that involved showing that social structures, including gender relationships, were not endangered by the new religion, that Christianity was “safe” and would not give people ideas which challenged social mores. Increasingly, groups which challenged these mores, for instance by accepting women’s leadership, came to be viewed as heretical. This tendency is already found in the writings of the North African church father Tertullian, although not all his contemporaries would have agreed with him. Indeed, the lines between “heresy” and “orthodoxy” were often drawn long after the event. Virginia Burrus has shown how fourth-century theologians re-categorised previously “orthodox” writings as “heretical”, simply on the grounds that they offered evidence for women’s leadership. The Pastoral Epistles would appear to be an early witness to the attempt to “tame” Christianity in this way, and the *Didascalia* stands in the same tradition.

Despite its restriction on what is acceptable liturgical and

teaching activity for women, and particularly for widows, the *Didascalia* clearly shows that women (in this case deacons under the oversight of the bishop) continued to share responsibility for teaching and preparing women for baptism where it was deemed necessary for reasons of modesty, especially applicable in strongly segregated societies. The fifth-century church order *Testamentum Domini* (“The Testament of the Lord” originating from Syria, Asia Minor or Egypt) shows widows having oversight over female deacons and probably female presbyters in much the same way as bishops had oversight over male deacons and presbyters. Morris describes an inscription to a widow who “sat in the basilica” like a bishop. Perhaps in some churches these women with oversight were called “bishops”. Canon 14 of Tours certainly lends itself to this interpretation. Perhaps the “venerable lady, bishop Q-” in sixth-century Umbria and the *Episcopa Theodora* were bishops in the sense of women with oversight of female officeholders or clergy in a Western, Latin church which had retained such dual structures. What is clear is that structures of leadership and oversight, including the establishment of the episcopate as the principle pattern of oversight, were developed in response to particular situations, determined at least in part by the mores—and consequently the needs—of the social context in which a particular church community was ministering.

The challenge to us: Helping the Gospel to be heard

Ultimately, it may well have been for pragmatic reasons that the episcopacy and a male-dominated church structure survived and thrived: because this was a familiar structure of leadership, derived from secular institutions and conforming to the social expectations of the elite, which enabled the church to get a firm foothold in the society to which it was reaching out to preach the Gospel. The establishment of the episcopate was not a simple process, as the Canons and Acts of Councils and Synods show. There are further stories to be told which are intertwined with this one: of the creation of the three-fold ministry through the (re-)integration of presbyters into the episcopal-diaconal structures, of the adoption of celibacy in the Western Church, of the quasi-episcopal leadership and independent jurisdiction of the Abbesses and Prioresses of medieval monasteries and Canoness Orders such as Hilda’s foundation at Whitby, French Jouarre, Italian Conversano, or German Quedlinburg and Essen (the latter were subject only to the Pope and to the Emperor and retained this status until the advent of Napoleon in the late eighteenth century); and of the shifts in the form and understanding of authority in the Reformation. What is clear is that patterns of ministry, and patterns of involvement of men and women in leadership and oversight, were not fixed throughout the history of the church, but have developed and changed as the centuries passed. Many of the decisions of the early church about its leadership structures were mission-driven, and some were intended to prevent the institution of the Church from becoming a stumbling block or an

embarrassment to those to whom the folly of the Gospel was to be preached.

Perhaps this is a principle that could guide us too as we debate the future patterns of ministry in our church. How can we best reach out to those who are in most need of the Gospel? We live in a society in which women's voices are heard and respected, in which women work alongside men in secular employment and take leadership as required. There are scriptural precedents for women with oversight over house churches and Christian communities. The tradition of the church shows us that the exclusion of women from those offices came about largely for reasons of evangelism, for fear that the pagans would "mock and

scoff" to hear women teach. This is no longer the context in which we preach the Gospel today. Indeed in our context one might argue that the situation is the opposite, and that the refusal to reverse this decision is rather a reason for people to "mock and scoff" at preachers of the Gospel. An attentive reading of Scripture and review of Tradition reveals clear evidence for women with oversight, and a process of exclusion of women from such posts for reasons of mission. Surely, in our context, mission offers an equally good reason for reversing that process and for (re-?)opening the episcopacy to women.

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Further Reading:

Virginia Burrus, "The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius and Jerome," *Harvard Theological Review* 84 (1991), 229-248.

Ute E. Eisen: *Amtsträgerinnen im frühen Christentum* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen 1996); English translation: *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, translated by Linda M. Maloney (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN 2000).

Charlotte Methuen: "Widows, bishops and the struggle for authority in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*," in: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 46 (1995), 197-213

Joan Morris: *Against Nature and God: The History of Women with Clerical Ordination and the Jurisdiction of Bishops* (Mowbray: London/Oxford 1973) = *The Lady was a Bishop: The Hidden History of Women with Clerical Ordination and the Jurisdiction of Bishops* (Macmillan: New York / London 1973).

Harriet Harris / Jane Shaw (eds), *Why We Need Women Bishops* (SPCK: London, forthcoming).

