

# Women Bishops – an Update

Within Christ's church, sincere gospel-minded believers hold differing views about the ministries which are appropriate to be carried out by men and women. When the Church of England recently decided to change its practice by introducing women bishops, it made arrangements to attempt to accommodate those who on grounds of biblical conscience could not accept these new developments.

This leaflet explains decisions which have been taken by the Church Council (PCC) in light of those changes and arrangements.

## A bit of history

For many years the majority of the leadership and congregation of St Leonard's have held that the Bible teaches that while men and women are equal in value, status and importance within Christ's kingdom, the roles which it is appropriate for them to exercise in the family and in the church family are different. In particular, leadership of the family and church family, and teaching within the main gathering of the local church, are responsibilities given to men. Reasons for this are outlined in the section "What does the Bible say?" below.

This understanding has been the view of the Church of England for the vast majority of its history and until very recently.<sup>1</sup> However, in 1992 the General Synod of the Church of England voted to ordain women as priests. This decision was taken in full knowledge that some would in conscience be unable to accept it and realising that "care needs to be expressed through detailed safeguards to ensure that people are not forced to accept the ministrations of a woman against their conscience".<sup>2</sup>

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1 Resolution 48 of Lambeth Conference 1920, for example: "The order of deaconesses is for women the one and only order of the ministry which has the stamp of apostolic approval".

Provision was therefore made for parishes to be able to pass resolutions, in particular Resolution B which stated that a female incumbent (Rector or Vicar) would not be appointed in that parish. Early drafts of the relevant measure included time limits on the lifetimes of those resolutions, but those limits were deliberately removed in the final version in order that “protection for incumbents and in particular parishes should remain in perpetuity for as long as anyone wanted it”.<sup>3</sup> George Carey, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, said, “it is our intention for this to be permanent and we are not thinking of rescinding it”.<sup>4</sup>

In 2005, 2006 and 2008 Synod then voted in principle for women to become bishops, and in November 2014 gave final approval to legislation enabling that to happen. Like the previous legislation it was passed on the understanding that a significant minority would not be able to agree, for theological reasons. However, in that process the earlier legislation was repealed, and so, despite previous assurances to the contrary, the ability to pass the existing resolutions was rescinded. Resolutions which have already been passed will cease to have effect on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2016.

The practical upshot of all this is that, whilst the PCC of St Leonard’s has passed Resolution B (more than once, most recently in April 2012), that will cease to have effect on 17<sup>th</sup> November and we would be deemed by default to have changed our position, unless specific action were taken. More on that below, in the section “The recent PCC resolution”.

## **What does the Bible say?**

God has a great deal to say in the Bible about the relationship of men and women, and very many lengthy books have been written on the subject. The overall biblical pattern, however, is clear and relatively straightforward to summarise.

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2 *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: A Second Report by the House of Bishops (GS 829)*, General Synod, 1988, page 108

3 *203<sup>rd</sup> and 204<sup>th</sup> Reports of the Ecclesiastical Committee*, page 66

4 *203<sup>rd</sup> and 204<sup>th</sup> Reports of the Ecclesiastical Committee*, page 134

## Creation – Genesis 1-2

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Right from the beginning it is clear that men and women are created equal in their value and status before God, but two different types of human and with different roles in their relationship. There are clues that there is an *order* in this relationship: the man is made from the dust (2:7) and the woman from the man (2:22); *she* is to be *his* helper (2:18, 20); *he* names *her* ‘woman’ (2:23); it is to the man that God gives his commands, as if he is responsible (2:16-17), and God holds the man responsible when those commands are disobeyed (3:9-11, 17).

We are therefore given a pattern of harmony and dependence, equality and order. Man and woman work together, the same yet different. It is important to see that both this equality of value and this ordering of roles are written into creation, before the Fall – neither is the result of the tragic disordering of relationships which follows.

## Fall – Genesis 3

This distortion and disordering of human relationships is one of the terrible effects of the first man and woman’s rebellion against God. Where before the man had joyfully sung of the woman, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23), he now says, “The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree” (3:12).

And part of the curse which falls as a result is further disordering of relationship: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (3:16). The battle of the sexes has begun – instead of harmony, men now dominate in a heavy-handed way (rather than exercising godly headship) and women fight against it.<sup>5</sup> The divinely-

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5 Exactly the same language of ‘desire’ and ‘rule’ (‘master’) is found in 4:7, where the reference is clearly to the battle for domination between Cain and sin.

appointed order of men and women has become distorted, and that is what we see throughout the rest of Scripture.

## **Redemption – Ephesians 5**

The central message of the whole Bible is, of course, the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ. The ultimate promise of the gospel is for the new heavens and the new earth, but new life begins now when we put our trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

This results in the restoration of our relationship with God – where we are equal before him as those redeemed – and therefore a restoration of relationship between man and woman. In Christ we are enabled to relate to one another in a redeemed way, a return to God's good pre-Fall creation pattern. This redeemed life underpins the teaching of *Ephesians 5:22-25*: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. [...] Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..."

Similarly, within the church (which is also a family, 'God's household', *1 Timothy 3:15*), the same ordering of relationships is to be present: "Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (*1 Corinthians 11:3*). And in particular, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man" (*1 Timothy 2:12*, in the context of an argument rooted in the Creation–Fall–Redemption pattern as above).

It is absolutely clear that the Bible has an unusually high view of women, many of whom are mentioned as greatly used by God for his purposes – for example Miriam, Rahab, Deborah (who judged in private and attempted to defer leadership to a man), Ruth, Esther, Huldah (*2 Kings 22:14-20*), Jehosheba (*2 Chronicles 22:11*), the wife of *Proverbs 31*, Elizabeth, Mary, Anna, Martha and Mary, the woman at the well (who was instrumental in the good news of Jesus coming to that area, *John 4:39*), Lydia. Jesus also appeared first to women

after his resurrection (at a time when women's evidence was inadmissible in court).

But not all positions were open to women. When it came to the corporate gathering of God's people, the teaching responsibility reflected the family model. Hence Wayne Grudem's comment: "Women could not assume the role of teacher over God's people in either the Old or the New Testament."<sup>6</sup>

Exactly how these principles work out in practice continues to be a matter of discussion, and those who hold to the above understanding will vary in the details of how they are applied. There is a spectrum of possibilities, but what is clear is that being a bishop is undoubtedly at one end of that spectrum. Men and women are equal, but different. If that is truly God's model, then it is a liberating and wonderful thing both for men and women.

## The recent PCC resolution

Whilst the majority of the leadership and congregation of St Leonard's has held and continues to hold the position outlined above, that is not the case across the Church of England. In seeking to enable 'mutual flourishing' of those on both sides of the discussion, therefore, as part of the package of legislation enabling women to be consecrated as bishops, the House of Bishops agreed a Declaration including the provision that "some PCCs may wish to pass a resolution to take advantage of arrangements available to those who, on grounds of theological conviction are unable to receive the ministry of women bishops or priests."<sup>7</sup>

The guidance goes on to say that "Where a PCC has passed the requisite resolution it is the responsibility of the diocesan bishop to put the arrangements in place after consultation with the PCC".<sup>7</sup>

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6 Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Crossway, 2012), page 137.

7 *House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests – Guidance note from the House* (GS Misc 1077), General Synod, 2014

These provisions are now the *only* legal means available for a PCC to express the conviction that, up until now, had been stated, agreed and accepted by St Leonard's PCC.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, after a number of months of prayer, discussion and consideration, the PCC passed the following resolution at its meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2016 (21 votes for, 2 against, with no absentions):

“This PCC requests, on grounds of theological conviction, and including both the need to support its clergy and to maintain Christian unity, that arrangements be made for it in accordance with the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests.”

This does not necessarily mean that everyone will hold to the same position, but does recognise that the position already agreed has not changed. Had the PCC not passed this resolution it would be assumed *by default* to have changed its position, and the previous position held and expressed by the clergy and PCC would not have been recognised in law. Passing this resolution also has the positive effect of showing the wider Church of England that we are still very much a part of it and continue to desire to flourish within it.

## Some questions

### **Doesn't all this demean women and women's ministry?**

Quite the opposite: many women say that they and their ministry have been most affirmed by those who hold the view outlined in this paper. On the other hand, if God has given different roles to men and women then to say that those roles are somehow not enough and women (or men) should be allowed to do more is implicitly denigrating those roles. Of course, some will talk in terms of 'career' and the injustice of being excluded from the 'top jobs' – but that is not a Christian understanding of either the church or the nature of gospel service.

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8 At its meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2015 the PCC had also reaffirmed its desire to support the clergy in the position they hold and the basis on which they were appointed.

## **Does this mean our relationship with the bishops in our Diocese has been damaged?**

No. Our relationship with our diocesan bishop has not changed in any way as a result of passing this resolution, and the clergy continue to have good personal relations with all three bishops in the Diocese. In particular, Simon has written to and met with Bishop Sarah both before and after this process to assure her that this is entirely a matter of theological conviction and in no sense is it a personal slur on her or her ministry.

## **Has the theological position of St Leonard's changed?**

Not at all. On the contrary, passing this resolution was the only legal means of expressing the fact that our theological position has *not* changed.

## **Does all this really matter? Isn't it just a big distraction from getting on with preaching the gospel?**

It is a great sadness that so much hurt and division has occurred over this issue, and on one level it has indeed been an enormous distraction of energy and resources from getting on with gospel ministry.

This is not a 'salvation issue', in the sense that it is possible for genuine, godly, thinking believers to hold differing views over the issue without compromising their integrity or their salvation.

But if the Bible indeed teaches that men and women are equal but complementary, then it matters enormously whether we live out those truths practically. In a world deeply confused over gender identity and roles, torn apart in part by the battle of the sexes, it is of tremendous importance that we continue to model the wonderful and beautiful pattern of God's creation, both in family life and in the family of God's household, the church.