

## **WOMEN AND THE EPISCOPACY**

### **Reflections from the 4 EGGS members on the Steering Committee**

**PHILIP GIDDINGS** writes :

1. What is before us is not ideal, but it is much better than the 'failed measure'.
2. As the Steering Committee Report stresses, the 4 elements of the package [Measure, Canon HoB Declaration; mandatory and independent dispute resolution procedure] are inter-locked and should therefore (like the 5 principles in Annex A, para 5) be considered as a whole. All sides have given something.
3. Although the package is not 'statutory provision' in the sense in which that term was used in previous debates, in my judgement the arrangements proposed are no less secure than statutory provision would have been if it had been agreed. Moreover, I see no prospect of statutory provision being approved by the requisite majorities in the current General Synod or in the next one. In short, this is as good a set of proposed arrangements which we are likely to see. Note too that 'statutory provision' means resorting to the courts for enforcement; and in the courts, the powerful and the wealthy (in this context bishops and dioceses) are almost always have an advantage, not least in their ability to prolong the legal process. That is one of the main reasons why Ombudsman-type process have been adopted in so many fields of activity in so many countries.
4. Consider the importance of three points: (i) the requirement of two-third majorities in all three Houses for any change to the package once the House of Bishops has made its declaration; (ii) the independence of the Reviewer who is the person who will decide whether or not the procedures followed and arrangements made meet the request of the parish according to the requirements to which the bishops will have signed up; (iii) the clarification in Annex A, para 36, of what the bishops understand the oath of canonical obedience to mean (and not to mean).
5. It is my considered view that this package, whilst not perfect, makes sufficient space in a Church of England with women bishops for the ministry of those who cannot accept that development to continue to flourish, God willing. It will be a church (as is already the case) in which they will be in a minority. Evangelicals have been in the minority for decades – and yet, by God's grace, Evangelical ministry has flourished in many places.
6. Finally, consider the bigger picture: the issues which will be (indeed already are being) brought before us in relating to marriage, family, human sexuality; and, even more critically, the uniqueness and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. To sustain a biblically orthodox position for the Church of England on those issues we need to maximize our representation in future Synods. To achieve that, we need to deal with the women bishops now and get it off the agenda.

**JAMIE HARRISON** writes:

I commend, and support, the package of 5 documents (to include the Steering Committee Report) which together make up the WiE proposals. I believe that, if held in tension, these 5 elements offer the best way forward, and bring the possibility of a just and lasting outcome.

For some Evangelicals, questions will need answering – 'Can I take the Oaths?'; 'Who will ordain me?'; 'Will the grievance procedure work?'; 'How do I know there will not be change in an instant in the future?' Attempts to answer such questions open up themes of trust, wisdom, and theological reflection, and, after such conversation, some may still be left cautious and concerned.

The HoB declaration is derived from the 5 'guiding principles', modelled within the Steering Committee in its very well facilitated and careful conversations. Trust grew out of a desire to listen and to accommodate the other, wherever possible, and within conscience. The expertise of Philip Giddings shaped Stephen Slacks' (to my mind) excellent Disputes Resolution Procedure – Philip contends, with his extensive academic experience, as I do, from my NHS work, that this is robust, and, backed by CDM, that it will work. Recent conversations with a leading scholar of Cranmer helped me to distinguish the legal from the spiritual in matters of oaths and obligations. I hope the documents are helpful in this respect, not least with regard to the action of taking the oath itself.

As noted in the Report, all had to give something in the process – we rejected an Abba-style ‘winner takes it all’ mentality’ (I think back to the 1662 legislation which dashed the hopes of many after the Savoy Conference). But Oliver Twist reminds us that there are risks in ‘asking for more’, when others consent to what is difficult for them (e.g. seeking to appoint ‘headship’ bishops; allowing 2/3rds majorities for future change). Amendments that help to clarify matters, or test the Synod’s future voting, could be helpful – but let us be careful how we debate, using the 5 ‘principles’ as our guide.

**SUSIE LEAFE** writes:

I abstained rather than voted against commending this package to Synod because the problem with the “package” does not lie with the work done by the Steering Group but in the remit they were given.

The first problem is that the principles that underlie this package will ultimately require me, and many others, to deny our understanding of scripture in order to remain within the Church of England. The arrangements provided by this package will mean that every church in a Diocese with a female bishop, whatever their theological conviction, will have to accept canonically that a woman is the Chief Pastor, Father in God and Principal Minister of their church. All those in licensed ministry will, at key points in their ministry, have to swear an Oath of Canonical Obedience to publically affirm this relationship. Even the most well meaning female Diocesan bishop cannot change this ‘relationship’ and thus for many, any provision will, at a very fundamental level, already conflict with their theological convictions.

This was not something that the Steering Group were able to discuss. The House of Bishops determined that issues of jurisdiction were removed from the table before both the General Synod debate in July and the Steering Group deliberations began. They made this choice knowing that this would exclude the possibility of producing a ‘package’ that would be acceptable to many who had voted against the last Measure (GS 1886 para 6&7). That was their prerogative but it is important that they acknowledge the direct consequence of their decision.

The second set of problems is practical. This package has the potential to divide many evangelical congregations who until now have been able to view this as a secondary issue. It may distract us from gospel ministry, as the new resolution has no ‘outcome’ apart from allowing a PCC to enter into potentially time-consuming discussions with the diocesan bishop about the nature of their theological convictions and their episcopal requirements. If the ombudsman works on the basis of ‘shame’ we are asking churches to engage in unedifying public disagreements.

So, if this package is passed then some fellow brothers and sisters will be excluded, Diocese-by-Diocese, from the Church of England on a secondary issue. Other churches will face unnecessary division and difficulty that cannot benefit the gospel.

It is for these reasons of principle and practicality that I cannot support this motion as it stands.

**ROD THOMAS** writes:

The approach taken by the Legislative Steering Group was to tie its discussions fairly tightly to the terms of last July’s General Synod motion. This meant that some issues which have always been regarded as important by those arguing for better ‘provision’ were not covered (eg issues of jurisdiction). Nevertheless, within those confines, many issues of concern were fully explored and I felt that members of the Group were listening to each other carefully and seeking to respond positively. The end result was a set of proposals that I was able to agree should be presented to Synod, so that the legislative process could continue. The proposals need to be read as a balanced package. Taken together, they represent, in my view, provision which is more sensitive to the needs of those who cannot accept the ministry of women bishops than existed in the previous draft Measure. All this leaves me grateful to Bishop Pete Broadbent for initiating a procedure that has been constructive and I look forward to the further discussions in Synod. However, I am conscious that the issue of jurisdiction has not been resolved. I am also aware that the five ‘guiding principles’, for all that they clarify the decision that the Church of England intends to take, do not really clarify the position of those who dissent. I will vote to ensure that the proposals go forward for Synodical consideration, because I believe that they represent the best practicable way forward in our present circumstances. However, if major concerns remain at final approval, it is unlikely that I will be able to vote for them at that stage.’