

THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN – THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

Extract from address given by Chancellor Hemmerick of Toronto at Nottingham
8th April 1989

The Anglican Church of Canada has 30 dioceses with about 40 bishops (including assistants and suffragans) on the active rolls. There are somewhat over 2,000 active members of the clergy and another 3,000 in what we would term other ministries. We have about 1,700 parishes and missions throughout the country, with about 3,000 congregations. Total membership on the church rolls is somewhat over 800,000. The Diocese of Toronto is the largest diocese in numbers, covers an area of about 10,000 square miles, has 217 parishes made up of 268 congregations (since in our rural areas many parishes have more than one congregation) and includes about 22 missions or assisted parishes. We have approximately 250 parish clergy with another 45 in institutions or theological colleges or about 300 active clergy altogether.

As in ECUSA our bishops are elected, and it is important to understand something of the electoral process. I will use my diocese as an example. The active clergy have a vote, and each parish sends from one to five representatives to synod depending on the number of people on the roll of the particular parish. The usual mix is about three clergy to four members of the laity (286 to 425 at our last synod). It might be mentioned that the suggestion of the Association for Apostolic Ministry (AAM) that it hoped that “more cautious and wiser counsels might prevail” must have been made with an incomplete understanding of the electoral process. To suggest that one group of people should vote in a particular way in church matters would be similar to Canadians suggesting that the English political elector should vote in some particular way. In political matters this comment would be considered an improper intrusion upon the local political rights of the voters in England and rightly so.

There is no group that controls nominations and in fact any member of the clergy or any bishop is eligible for election as a bishop if that person has been in priestly orders for 10 years. It has been my experience that any suggestion to the members of Synod as to how they might vote or whom they should support has a negative effect, and in most dioceses any suggestions by a retiring bishop that a particular person should be elected to replace him would be the kiss of death. Indeed open campaigning also leads to defeat, some reluctance to seek the position being appreciated by the electors.

The members of Synod value their independence very highly and in every case that I have had anything to do with act responsibly and with a deep sense of their obligations.¹ Insofar as the electoral process is concerned, I should also say that the members of the church (both clergy and lay) in Canada for the most part have very little regard for the interchurch warfare that used to be quite common. Indeed if any member of the clergy who is nominated for the office of bishop is seen as a representative of a particular “party” in the church I am certain

1. The “independence” referred to is really an understanding and acceptance of a personal responsibility to vote in the best interest of the Diocese, and while those involved are aware that their decision may have implications beyond the diocese, very little weight is given to them. Most feel that the responsibility of making decisions in their own area is serious and difficult enough without assuming the responsibility for the wider church.

that he would never be elected. It might even be considered that the electoral process is part of the consensus fidelium, and that while the power of bishops is as great or greater in Canada than it is in England; through the electoral process the church as a whole controls the episcopate. This has resulted in a reasonably homogeneous House of Bishops.

Insofar as the last Lambeth Conference is concerned, the Canadian Bishops who were fortunate enough to be part of the 525 have done their best to explain to the people in Canada just how many matters were discussed, and how many different things went on. We know that there were a number of resolutions having to do with liturgy, but for all of that, our perception is the perception of the news managers from both the church and the secular media. The perception of the news managers was that the main concern of Lambeth was the ordination of women in the United Kingdom, the possible consecration of a female bishop in some other country, and the possible consequences to the entire Anglican Communion which might result. Since this was clearly the perception of the news managers this has become the perception of the people.

The issue of the ordination of women was settled in Canada in the 70s and today it is not an issue for us. I must say that it most certainly was an issue then, and we went through all the arguments and all the stress that others are going through now. Our decision was taken in all seriousness over a period of time, and we think it was made with great care.

The enactment of the "conscience clause" was for us perhaps the most important step in reconciling quite different positions within our church. Because of its importance I would like to quote it as enacted by our General Synod in 1975:

"Be it resolved that no bishop, priest, deacon or layperson including postulants for ordination in The Anglican Church of Canada should be penalised in any manner, nor suffer any canonical disabilities, nor be forced into positions which violate or coerce his or her conscience as a result of General Synod's action in affirming the principle of the ordination of women to the priesthood and requests those who have authority in this matter to act upon the principle set out above".

At that time eight out of 30 dioceses indicated they would not ordain women to the priesthood and that number has gradually diminished until today there are only two dioceses (The Arctic and New Brunswick) which have not ordained women.² In 1986 General Synod dealt with the question of the conscience clause again and determined that it applied only to those who had heretofore availed themselves of its provisions, and further that it would be unwise to continue the clause for those newly taking orders because it was felt by many that it would result in two churches. Nevertheless the beliefs of those who were in orders at the time have been and continue to be respected. (see appendix).

As I have said at the beginning eight of the 30 dioceses did not ordain women, but at no time was there any suggestion that the communion between the dioceses was impaired in any way, nor that the communion between the bishops was impaired in any way, and the Canadian House of Bishops has carried on with its work as a homogeneous group each respecting the others' points of view. Similarly, in the church as a whole there has been no suggestion by those who do not wish to ordain women that they are not in communion with the rest of the church, nor the rest of the church with them.

In the Diocese of Toronto we have 16 women incumbents and 15 assistant curates and they represent some 13% of the active clergy. In addition we have

2. At the time of printing (January 1991) all dioceses have ordained women to the priesthood. W.J.H.

five women either in institutions or chaplaincy work so altogether there are 36 women ordained to the priesthood in the Diocese of Toronto. We may have made a serious theological error but from a practical point of view it has enriched the whole work of the church, and the work of the women clergy has been accepted with enthusiasm not only by the clergy but by the laity. The first woman was ordained in 1977 and the first woman was appointed priest-in-charge in 1979. We welcomed our first female incumbent in October 1982. As their work became known the possibility of having a female incumbent has become more and more acceptable, and we see no reason why this will not continue. The whole question of the ordination of women does not seem to us to be the most serious issue in the church nor in the world at the present time, and the people in Canada at least are becoming tired of the dispute and anxious to move on to what they consider to be the work of the church.

I should make a comment about the breakaway church in Canada. When the ordination of women was being discussed in the mid-70s there was a great deal of publicity about the church in Canada possibly collapsing and breaking apart. Those who favoured schism included not only those opposed to the ordination of women but also those opposed to the use of any services other than those in The Book of Common Prayer. A small parish was formed in Toronto which never had more than a handful of adherents, and a church was formed called the Anglican Catholic Church of Canada. That church has about 40 priests, 30 parishes and a total of some 400 members, and can fairly be said not to be a factor in Canada. In the United States there are many breakaway churches who do not seem to be able to agree with each other. I do not propose to make any comment about this and I will leave it to you to speculate on the reasons. I should mention however that many became members as a result of the American experimental liturgies and particularly the unpopularity of what was called the "Green Book". Now that the ECUSA has experimented with liturgy for some time and has come out with their new revised Book of Common Prayer, the American church seems to be settling down somewhat on the question of liturgy. At the moment as I understand it the breakaway churches are The Anglican Catholic Church (Iowa); The American Episcopal Church (Virginia); United Episcopal Church of North America (Maryland); Anglican Episcopal Church of North America (New Mexico); Anglican Rite Jurisdiction of the Americas (New Mexico); Diocese of Christ the King (California); and of course The Anglican Catholic Church of Canada. I believe that there may also be a few independents.

It is surprising to a number of people in Canada that there was so little concern expressed over the ordination of women in Canada some 12 years ago and that there is so much controversy with respect of the consecration of a female bishop and the ordination of women in England. It would seem that once ordination of women to the priesthood is accomplished it is almost inevitable that at some point one of them will be consecrated as bishop. In our diocesan elections for suffragan bishops there have been women candidates in the last two elections, and I have absolutely no doubt at all that within the next 10 years a woman will be elected a suffragan bishop in the Diocese of Toronto. Some have even suggested that the basic decision was made 2,000 years ago when both men and women were baptised as full members of the Christian church, and that out of that it was almost inevitable that a woman would ultimately be commissioned as a priest in the church.

APPENDIX

CONSCIENCE CLAUSE

Re: Ordination of women to the priesthood

NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

November 1982

That this National Executive Council forward to the General Synod 1983 for its approval the pastoral interpretation of the continuing use of the Conscience Clause by those who remain unable to accept the ordination of women to the priesthood:

We recognise and affirm the continuing validity of the Conscience Clause for those who belonged to The Anglican Church of Canada at the time it was passed.

While continuing to recognise the rights of individual consciences, we believe that those who now come to membership or to any office or ministry in our Church must recognise and accept that the ministry of women priests must also be protected conscientiously as the expressed will of our Church.

Christian charity cannot be legislated, but needs to be implemented more effectively in the future than in the past in order to realise the community which belongs in the Body of Christ.

GENERAL SYNOD 1986

That subject to the continued applicability of the 1975 Conscience Clause to those who have heretofore availed themselves of its provisions regarding ordination, this General Synod rescind the Conscience Clause and adopt the following position statement:

- 1) this General Synod reaffirm its acceptance of ordination of women to the priesthood;
- 2) no action which questions the integrity of any priest or postulant on grounds of sex alone can be defended;
- 3) this General Synod honours all priests, upholds them in its prayers and desires that God's will may be done in and through all priests, regardless of sex;
- 4) while Christian love cannot be legislated, it needs to be practised and demonstrated in the Body of Christ.

The question was raised as to why the Canadian Church does not permit those newly taking orders to take advantage of the Conscience Clause, and this may be explained by our different attitude towards those who were members of the church when the ordination of women to the priesthood was approved. While those who could not accept the decision were in a minority, nevertheless it was felt that their views were sincere and worthy of respect. Those now coming into the church have the choice of accepting or rejecting it as it now is.