

Department on Cooperation
of Men and Women
in Church, Family and Society

Division of Studies
Commission on
Faith and Order

THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

An Anglican View
by Henry R.T. Brandreth, O.G.S.

It is the purpose of this paper to set forth the general Anglican view of the ordination of women as it appears to-day, rather than to state the writer's personal opinions. In the third section, however, we shall examine certain criticisms of the Anglican tradition in this matter. It has seemed well to start with a short survey of the ministry of women as it has developed in the Anglican Church over the last hundred or so years, to proceed thence to the present position in Anglicanism with regard to the admission of women to the full ministry of the Church and, finally, to our third and more critical section.

I

In the past hundred years the Anglican Church has fostered the service of women in a wide number of ministries and, although some of those ministries have been slow to win recognition yet in general Anglicanism has been more forward-looking in this respect than some other churches normally regarded as less traditional. The religious life for women was restarted in the Church of England in 1841, and to-day there are more women professed in religious orders than at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries in England. There are both contemplative and active orders, members of the latter being engaged in teaching, hospital work, the foreign mission field and in parochial ministries. In the last two cases they will be engaged in giving religious instruction, pastoral visiting and preparing candidates for baptism and confirmation.

In addition to the professed religious there are in many parishes full-time, trained women workers, licensed by the Bishop and thus having a professional status, and who assist in the pastoral work of the parish.

The Order of Deaconess was revived in 1862 when the Bishop of London ordained Elizabeth Ferard to that office. The Order was slow to gain recognition and it was not until 1920 that the Lambeth Conference urged its restoration in unequivocal terms throughout the Anglican Communion, though the Conference of 1897 had shown itself ready to urge such recognition. (The Six Lambeth Conferences, ed. Davidson, pp. 216-217; Report of the Lambeth Conference, 1920, pp. 102 ff.). The Order of Deaconess is the only ordained ministry open to women at the present time in the Anglican Communion, and the regulations governing their ordination are almost identical with those governing the ordination of deacons, though the rite is different. The Lambeth Conference of 1930 stated that "the Order of Deaconess is an order sui generis; the only order of ministry open to women, but an Order which both from the solemnity of its ordination and the importance of its functions can satisfy the fullest desires of women to share in the official work of the Church. This may be thought to be a departure from primitive practice, but the times have changed, and though we value historical precedents, we do not think that they need entirely re-

strict us in our endeavour to enlist the great gifts and special contribution of women to the varied and immense needs of the Church to-day". (Report, p. 178). The Anglican Church has, indeed, always insisted that the Deaconess is not a female Deacon, believing that thus it was basing itself upon patristic precedent. Patristic evidence is, however, far from clear and in certain places the deaconess appears not only to have acted as a female deacon, but to have had the status of one. It was to be admitted that the conditions under which deaconesses and lay women are employed are still very far from ideal in spite of the efforts of the official Church to improve them. This is particularly true of their financial status.

In addition to these more formal types of ministry, women serve the Church in a voluntary or paid capacity in a wide variety of ways, and it would be true to say that hardly a sphere of Church life is untouched by their activity. In more recent years, also, they have been elected members of diocesan conferences and of the Church Assembly. Women are not eligible for membership of the Convocations, the most authoritative governing bodies in the Provinces of Canterbury and York. Legislation is, however, in prospect for a fusion of Convocation with the Church Assembly, and one assumes that women will be eligible for election to this new body. In other parts of the Anglican Communion the right of women to sit on such legislative and consultative assemblies differs in practice, though not in theory.

This short survey of the actual position and ministry of women in the Anglican Communion will show that, although Anglicanism takes a traditional view of their admission to the priesthood, this in no sense implies any derogation. The best general survey of the part women play in the ministry of the Anglican Church is contained in Dr. Cecilia M. Ady's "The Role of Women in the Church", published by the Press and Publications Board of the Church of England, in 1947.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

II

The statement that we have already noted, that the Order of Deaconess is the only ordained ministry open to women in the Anglican Church, has been reiterated in a number of reports of commissions on women's work, as well as in a series of Lambeth Conference resolutions. In general it is true to say that this statement has been repeated without any attempt at theological justification. It has been considered usually sufficient to state that the admission of women to the higher orders of the ministry is contrary to Anglican tradition, which is assumed to rest upon an adequate theological basis. A report entitled "Gender and Ministry", prepared for the Church Assembly by the Central Advisory Council for the Ministry in Autumn, 1962, has asked that the theological basis of the Anglican tradition in this respect be given a theological re-examination, and a commission to this end has now been appointed under the chairmanship of the Archbishop of York and composed mainly of those whose theological acumen Anglicans have learned to trust.

It must be stated that the traditional Anglican view has had a certain number of opponents, but their arguments have not carried conviction to the Anglican Church as a whole. Anglican arguments in favour of extending the full ministry to women may best be read in "Women and Holy Orders" by Canon C.E. Raven (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), "Should Women be Priests?" by Canon R.W. Howard (Oxford, Blackwell, 1949), and "Should Women be Priests and Ministers?" by E. Picton-Turberville (London, Society for the Equal Ministry of Men and Women in the Church, 1954).

The priesthood of women has not, until recent years, posed a practical problem for the Anglican Church, and consequently very little theological thought has been devoted to the question. In the standard Anglican treatises dealing with

Holy Orders the subject is normally not even mentioned. In recent years, however, the problem has been brought before Anglicans in three ways, two dealing with internal policy and one with external Church relations.

During the last war the Anglican Bishop of Hong Kong, Dr. R.O. Hall, raised a deaconess of his diocese to the priesthood on the plea of urgent pastoral necessity. It is doubtful whether much theological thought was devoted to the matter at that time, but in the event the Anglican Church repudiated his action and the lady in question reverted to the status of deaconess without any formal judgment being pronounced as to whether, in fact, she was capable of performing priestly functions in virtue of this ordination. The Archbishop of Canterbury at the time was William Temple and it is interesting, as showing how some Anglicans tend to view the matter, to give his views on the subject, written many years earlier, but which, says his biographer, he maintained to the end. "Personally I want (as at present advised) to see women ordained to the priesthood. But still more do I want to see both real advance towards the re-union of Christendom, and the general emancipation of women. To win admission to the priesthood now would put back the former and to moot it would put back the latter." (Iremonger, William Temple, p. 452).

The second case where the matter has presented itself to Anglicans as a question of internal policy concerns a request received by the Lambeth Conference of 1948 from the Anglican Church in China, the Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui, asking the bishops to consider whether liberty to experiment with a proposed Canon allowing the ordination of a deaconess to the priesthood during an experimental period of twenty years, would be in accordance with "Anglican tradition and order". A deaconess so ordained was to remain celibate and to retain her priestly status whatever might be decided at the end of the twenty year period. A special committee of 14 bishops was appointed to consider the question, including three bishops from China and Bishop R.O. Hall. They state in their report that "They have been made aware of the special conditions prevailing in China and, in particular, of the high standing and wide opportunities of women there. But it seems to them plain that an experiment of so radical an order could not properly be made without the fullest previous consideration by the Anglican Communion as a whole for 'Anglican tradition and order' have certainly not hitherto recognised or contemplated the ordination of any woman to the priesthood." (Lambeth Conference, 1948, Part II, pp.119-20). Unfortunately the committee also stated that they were "not asked to discuss the principles upon which that tradition and order rest", and they did not do so.

The ordination of women by the Church of Sweden has brought the problem to Anglicans in a more acute form than either of these domestic incidents has done. Anglican relations with the Swedish Church have long been close and cordial and though, in the strictest sense, there is no full formal relation of intercommunion between the two Churches, in fact widespread intercommunion is general, and many Anglicans visiting Sweden have been accustomed to communicating in the local churches and, of course, members of the Church of Sweden have in like manner been welcomed at Anglican altars. The question has now presented itself to many Anglicans, however, as to whether, in view of the negative attitude which their own Church has always adopted towards a female priesthood, they have the right to continue to accept such hospitality at Swedish altars. Many others feel that they can continue to do so where the celebrant of the Eucharist is not a woman. Many Anglicans have shown themselves openly sympathetic with those elements in the Swedish Church which are opposed to the ordination of women, and such sympathy with a part of the Church of Sweden opposed to the official policy of its Church could, if it became widespread and vocal, introduce a considerable element of restraint in the relation of the two Churches.

III

It is now time to examine the basis on which the Anglican tradition of restricting the full ministry to men rests. It must be admitted that certain presuppositions which have gone to the forming of that tradition will not stand the test of theological examination. What may be called the 'paternal' argument has been shown to be untenable by Professor André Dumas and by Professor E.L. Mascall (*Women and the Priesthood of the Church*, p.24). It is equally true, as Dr. Marga Bührig has shown, that arguments based upon certain passages in St. Paul and the Pastoral Epistles are inconclusive and, indeed, both proponents and opponents of a female priesthood can build cases on a selection of equally valid passages.

It would not, however, be true to say that all Anglican opposition to the priesthood of women can be so easily dismissed. The Anglican tradition has always been based on Scripture, Tradition and Reason. It is rooted in the Bible, but in its classical expression has always been unwilling to separate the words of Scripture from the tradition of the living Body which recorded them and later gave them canonical status. In a case such as this, then, Anglicans would wish to take account of how the scriptural provisions were interpreted in the primitive Christian community and it is here that the negative evidence is seen as most remarkable. "For", says Dr. Mascall, "it is this same primitive Church, which is appealed to as witnessing to the absolute equality of all Christians, both male and female, in their status as members of the Body of Christ through Baptism, which restricted the Church's ministerial functions to men. And behind the action of the Church in this matter there lies the example of her Founder, who (as we see for example in his condemnation of the Jewish attitude to divorce) was full of sympathy for women but who nevertheless founded the Church's ministry by giving it a purely male Apostolate. It would be absurd to suppose that in doing this Christ was depriving women of their legitimate rights, and mistaking his Church as to their true status, as a concession to the conventions and prejudices of the time; even his enemies never accused him of conventionality or cowardice, and it would ill become his disciples of the twentieth century to do so." (Op.cit., p.12).

The argument, too, that our Lord did not number women among the Twelve because "it should surely be sufficient to enquire what would be thought of a young prophet and teacher, even in these days of female emancipation, who encouraged women to share with men the intimacies of his wanderings in lonely deserts and robber-infested hill-country, or in the crowded life of cities, especially the bazaars and market-places of an Eastern town," (A Memorandum in Response to the Questionnaire issued by the World Council of Churches, by the Society for the Equal Ministry of Men and Women in the Church, 1947, p.9), has only to be stated to be shown to be untenable. It appears to be precisely what Jesus Christ allowed a number of women to do and the fact that he did so, and yet did not number women among the Twelve, argues in precisely the opposite way than this Memorandum would wish to do.

There is an influential strain in Anglican thought which believes that Apostolic Succession depends upon a tactual succession from the Twelve Apostles. The Preface to the Ordinal in the Book of Common Prayer is based upon this notion; it was put forward strongly by the Caroline Divines of the 17th century, re-stated by the Tractarians of the 19th century and again put forward in 1946 in the composite volume "The Apostolic Ministry" edited by the late Dr. K.E. Kirk, Bishop of Oxford. This view has never received the assent of all Anglican theologians, and it was powerfully challenged in 1920 by the late Dr. A.C. Headlam in his Bampton Lectures entitled "The Doctrine of the Church and Christian Reunion". The proponents of this form of the doctrine of Apostolic Succession see the process as a kind of chain - Jesus Christ, the Apostle of the Father, sends twelve men "as the Father

hath sent me", and these, in turn, sent others as they had been sent. If anyone who held this view were asked whether women could receive the Apostolic Succession they would be bound, from the nature of their premisses, to answer 'No'. On the other hand, Anglican ecclesiology is at this point in the process of being radically re-thought in those very quarters which formerly held the traditional Catholic view. The succession may, or may not, have come through a tactual succession from the Apostles, but what matters is that it is a continual partaking of the Apostleship of the Lord. It is the Body of Christ which accepts this call to an individual to participate in the Lord's Apostleship and which seals it by laying-on of hands by its appointed ministers. These new views of the Apostolic Succession have by no means yet obtained universal Anglican acceptance, but it is clear that they allow much greater freedom in the definition of an apostolic ministry.

So far as one dare predict, it seems reasonably certain that the Orders of priest and bishop will not be open to women in the Anglican Church in the foreseeable future. It is equally clear, however, that in the years to come new forms of the ministry will have to be evolved, as they were evolved in the ancient Church, to meet the needs of a new situation. In these few forms of the ministry it seems fully in accord with Anglican "order and tradition" that women should take their full part. Such ministries will be just as "full" ministries as those which now exist. The fact that they will be different seems to be fully in agreement with the doctrine that each member of the Body of Christ is of equal honour and takes an equally full part in its life, for the doctrine of the Body is nullified if all its members have the same office and ministry.

It is greatly to be hoped that the new Anglican Commission sitting will give a lead in defining what these new forms of ministry will be.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

* * * * *