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THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

Initial Statement by Dr. Lukas Vischer

1. At the Assembly in New Delhi the Committee dealing with the questions of the Department on Faith and Order expressed an urgent request to the Working Committee on Faith and Order "to establish a study of the theological, biblical and ecclesiological issues involved in the ordination of women". The request was made primarily with the situation in the European churches in mind. But in the general discussion it was emphasised that this study must not be restricted to Europe. At the same time the hope was expressed that it would be undertaken "in close conjunction with the Department on the Cooperation of Men and Women in Church, Family and Society". The proposal was accepted by the Working Committee of Faith and Order at its meeting in Paris, which decided to place the question of the ordination of women on the agenda of the Fourth World Conference of Faith and Order, to be held at Montreal, Canada, from the 12th to 26th July, 1963.
2. This decision was undoubtedly the right one. For whatever one's opinion may be on the question of the ordination of women to the ministry, it is evident that many of the member Churches are concerned about it; and indeed the question is not being examined merely theoretically. An increasing number of Churches are changing their practice and giving women position of greater responsibility in the ministries of the Church. The very fact that the discussion is not merely theoretical, but may have direct practical consequences, means that the discussion is extremely heated. If one were discussing how many angels can dance on the point of a needle, it would be easier to keep calm. But when one's findings are to be expressed in actual practice, involving a change in church-organisation, the discussion inevitably becomes somewhat excited.
3. The question whether women can undertake the responsibilities of a pastor in the Church is not a new one. It came up from time to time in earlier centuries. A careful enquiry into the history of the office of deaconess, and the importance of widows in the Christian Church, would bring to light some interesting facts in this connection. But during the last few decades it has cropped up in an entirely new way. In earlier centuries the question was more peripheral and could be dismissed fairly easily. But more recently a much more fundamental question has been raised: does the life of the Church adequately reflect the great truth that "in Christ there is neither male nor female?" Does the Order of the Church adequately express this truth? There is growing insistence that women should assume more responsible functions in the life of the Church; this demand has grown particularly strong within the ecumenical movement, in which so many women have played a leading role. It is typical, for instance, that women spoke at the very first World Conference on Faith and Order (1927). Six women issued a statement, which was recorded in the Minutes: "that the right place of women in the Church is one of grave moment and should be in the hearts and

minds of all". They pointed out that if the Church seeks deeper unity it must re-examine the question of the relationship between men and women, and that the mission task makes it imperative to put to better use all the gifts available in the Church. They deliberately refrained from raising the problem of church Order in this connection. But already at that time it was clear that it would be impossible to avoid facing the question later.

4. The Churches are therefore confronted by a new question, which they must answer in the light of their understanding of the Gospel. It is clear, they are bound to come to different conclusions. For since the Churches are divided on questions of Faith and Order, they approach a new question like this from different assumptions. The assumptions of some Churches are such that they hesitate even to examine the question at all. They do indeed see the need for examining the relationship between men and women, and giving women the position in the Church which God intended. But in the light of the truth they think it is clear that the ministries of the Church should be restricted to men. They are therefore inclined to say that the problem of ordination cannot be raised at all. If the relationship between men and women requires a fresh expression in the Church (they say), at any rate a solution should not be sought at this point. On the other hand other Churches see no fundamental obstacle to examining the question. In the light of their ecclesiology and of their understanding of Scripture they are convinced that the form of Church-Order can never claim to be final: it must be modified in obedience to Christ in a new age where the situation is changed. They are therefore prepared to consider changes which involve a great change from the traditional forms. It must, however, be added that even in cases where this readiness exists, no agreement has yet been reached. The solutions proposed by the different Churches differ widely in many respects, and again one realises how different are the assumptions from which the Churches approach the question. Some Churches draw a careful distinction between different forms and grades of religious office, allowing women a certain restricted place, with careful reservations. Other Churches place men and women on an equal footing, in every respect. In some churches great difficulties are involved in overcoming the obstacles; in others the ordination of women for all the functions of the ministry is taken for granted.
5. We are confronted by a great variety of answers, some in direct oppositions to others, and it is clear that this question has brought out a difference between the Churches which did not exist centuries ago, at any rate not in this way. But should not precisely a question of this kind show that the Churches form a fellowship? Can the Churches allow their divisions to continue, because they arrive at different decisions? Must they not explore every possible avenue, in order to arrive at a common answer?
Or at the very least, must they not take their decisions in living fellowship with other Churches, so that the particular course taken by one Church is comprehensible to the other Churches? The Churches which refuse to admit the question of the ordination of women at all will at first be tempted to say that the Churches which do so are deepening the divisions within Christendom, owing to their arbitrary decisions. But is it permissible for them to pass judgement in this way? They recognise that the Holy Spirit is also at work in other Churches. Must they not therefore consider the possibility that the course taken by another Church may be important for them also? Should they not re-examine their own teaching and approach, in view of the attitude of that other Church?

And are they not obliged to express more clearly in what way they are safeguarding the cooperation of women in the Church? The Churches which are prepared to consider the ordination of women will at first be tempted to regard the other Churches as conservative and traditionalistic. They will tend to think that the refusal to ordination of women is due to lack of respect for women. But is such a view admissible? If these Churches take the ecumenical fellowship seriously, must they not see the importance of continuity in the life of the Church, and what a responsibility it is to introduce a new element at any point? Must they not take serious account of the testimony of the Churches which want to preserve that continuity? And are they not forced by their testimony to express more clearly how they think of preserving it? At any rate it is of great importance that the Churches should not isolate themselves from one another in their attitude.

6. It is essential to say this, ^{it} as becomes still clearer if we take a few examples showing how the question of the ordination of women affects the unity of the Church. We select three examples:

a) In the Lutheran Church of Sweden the introduction of the ordination of women led to serious upheavals, and these differences have given rise to a deep cleavage which has still not been overcome. There were long struggles before the decision was taken (in 1958), and although public discussion ended when the first three women were ordained (in 1960), the tension still continues. It is significant that the request to study the question at the ecumenical level came from Sweden.

b) Not only did the discussion about the ordination of women endanger the unity of the Church of Sweden. It also had certain repercussions upon the relations to other Churches, especially the Church of England. The Church of England has intercommunion with the Church of Sweden. The fact that the Church of Sweden has retained the Apostolic Succession made this intercommunion possible. When the ordination of women was considered in Sweden, the Church of England asked itself whether the same close relations could be maintained in future, and many Anglican theologians expressed their misgivings. Ultimately, however, the relations between the two Churches do not seem to have deteriorated.

c) Differences about the question of the ordination of women naturally constitute a considerable difficulty in some negotiations for union. One example of this is the negotiations between the Congregational Union of Scotland and the Church of Scotland. In one report published by the Congregational Union the question of the ordination of women is mentioned as one of the main obstacles to the union of the two Churches. "If the Congregational Union were to stand fast on the principle of Women in the Ministry then there could be no question of organic union of the two denominations in the immediate future". (Congregational Union of Scotland, Annual Assembly, 7th - 11th May 1962, p. 35). Mention is indeed made of the fact that the question is being discussed in the Church of Scotland, and that it may possibly be taken up again later on. At the same time, however, it is explained that the Congregational Union must try to find a realistic solution in the existing situation.

Another example is the plan for union between North India and Pakistan (1957). It does not actually propose the ordination of women, but a comment reads as follows: "The question of the admission of women to the ordained ministry is left for the consideration of the Synod of the Church" (p. 17). This remark drew the following comment from the Lambeth Conference (1958): "Clearly, any autonomous Church can if it so desires consider this question, and therefore the proposed Churches of North India and of Pakistan would inevitably have freedom to raise the matter in their own Synods if they so desired. The admission of women to an Order of Deaconesses would raise no difficulty. If, however, the Churches of North India and Pakistan were to decide to ordain women to the presbyterate this would raise a grave problem for the Anglican Communion, the constituent Churches of which might well find themselves unable to recognize the ministry of a woman so ordained". (Stephen F. Bayne, Ceylon, North India and Pakistan, 1960, p. 193).

Many more examples could easily be given. But the few examples given above suffice to show how important the question is for the unity of the Church.

7. As we have already seen, the problem of ordination arises in different forms in the different Churches. We must revert to this point, in conclusion. We are not dealing with a question to which some Churches say "No", and others say "Yes". The basic attitude is much more complicated, and many different points of view have to be considered, if one is to understand and appreciate the attitude of the different Churches. How do the Churches understand the nature of the Church? What form does the ministry take? Is it divided into different grades, or is there only one form of ministry? And how is the theological significance of the ministry defined? What is the teaching about ordination? What functions are attached to the different ministries, and what functions are transmitted by ordination? What is the predominant view of the Bible? How are the biblical passages concerning the position of women in the Early Church interpreted? And lastly, what is the prevailing view of the relationship between men and women in the Church, and how is this view expressed in practice? All these factors have a definite influence on the answer which a Church arrives at, and one immediately realises that every Church is bound likely to express the question in a different way, owing to its own Christian convictions.

It is therefore extremely important that in an ecumenical discussion the question should be couched in sufficiently wide terms, from the very outset. We shall achieve no result if we simply ask ourselves whether the office of priest or pastor can be assumed by a woman. We must regard the question in its whole setting, and the conversation must provide occasion for a basic consideration of important ecclesiological, hermeneutic and anthropological questions. If the question is phrased too narrowly, it will be answered by an irreconcilable "Yes" or "No" and the arguments for and against the ordination of women will be fired off like pistol-shots. But if we consider the problem in its broad context, and the factors in every separate Church, solutions may appear in unexpected places. Many Churches which are inclined to reject the idea can be led to a modified attitude by consideration of the anthropological basis. And many Churches which seem to see no difficulties at all about the ordination of women may find themselves obliged to examine the whole question of ecclesiology and of the ministry. When it comes to an exchange of views of this kind, the question of the ordination of women must not be regarded as "a fresh difficulty", to be tackled against one's will. It may rather prove to be a blessing for the ecumenical fellowship of the Churches.