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Reviewing the Reception – Five Years of Women Priests

This year marks the fifth anniversary of the first ordinations of women as priests in the Church of England. The benefits of these ordinations, to the whole Church and for the women concerned, far outweigh the on-going problems. The legacy of the legislation which opened the way for the ordinations has resulted in a Church which is often structurally and pastorally divided, setting precedents for further divisions into the future. Although much is hoped for through the influence and ministry of women priests, empirical research does not yet show any renewal of either Church structures or theological understandings of ministry because of these ordinations.

I was ordained priest in the spring of 1994 along with over thirty other women deacons in Rochester diocese. I presided at communion for the first time on the following Sunday morning choosing to begin at the 8.00 am service, not exactly a big affair. Mid-way through the eucharistic prayer, as I was looking out at the people, one lady lifted her eyes from her book and smiled at me. 'I heard the prayer today in my own voice', she told me later. That day salvation history had included her, and me, in a new way.

More recently, nearly five years on from that first service, I was leading an adult learning event which included Holy Communion. Present in the group was one woman who had never seen a woman priest¹ preside before. The service was simple, and as the people were singing I made the preparations. The woman was watching my hands intently as I spread a cloth and laid the table. As I moved from making preparations to presiding something significant was happening inside my observer; a possibility was dawning, a different future being imagined. In the church where this woman worships more than half of the congregation are women, many of them actively involved in the diaconal ministries of the church. Theology and culture have together discouraged an exploration of the possibility of presidency and leadership in the community. My presidency at this simple service opened the door to exploring a vocation to the ordained ministry for this woman.

Following the passing of the Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure (1993)² and the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod (1993)³, the Church of England began to

1 In this article I will use the terms 'women priest' or 'male priest', so that the term 'priest' means any priest, male or female.

2 The Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure (1993) is commonly called 'the Measure'.

3 The General Synod Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod (1993) is commonly called 'the Act of Synod'.

ordain women as priests in 1994. 1500 women were ordained priest in the spring/summer of that year, around another 600 have been ordained since then. Over half of these ordained women serve as non-stipendiary ministers, and it is interesting to note that 75% of ordained local ministers are women. The Church of England may have been changed radically by these ordinations, but we will have to wait some time before we can assess whether all that was hoped for in ordaining women really is appearing in the life of the Church. However, those of us who were ordained then, as well as women ordained more recently, have stories to tell of significant moments when we knew that something new had come and that God had really given us as a gift to his Church.

In this article I want to reflect on the stories and experiences of women ordained priest in these last five years. Many of these experiences are positive, and there is much to be thankful for, which the Church needs to affirm. In some places however, those opposed to the existence of women priests, through formal and informal actions, add to the burdens of ministry carried by women who are priests. The pastoral, theological and institutional outcomes of the legislation, especially the Act of Synod, are becoming clear, and as a result open for debate.⁴ Many who worked for the passing of the Measure hoped that among the benefits resulting from the ordination of women as priests would be a reshaping of the role of the clergy, particularly in parish ministry. Are women being priests in the same way as men; are they using the same models of leadership or are they finding new ones? An inclusive priesthood, that is a single order made up of men and women, also provides the Church with an opportunity to reflect afresh on the relationship between gender and ministry. What are the similarities and what are the differences between women who are priests and men who are priests, and what does this tell us about the imaging of God by the priesthood?

Therefore with angels and archangels...

Many women had worked in parishes for years before priesthood, sometimes as ministers-in-charge or running parishes during a vacancy in the benefice. The women ordained priests in 1994 brought with them into the priesthood a huge amount of experience of ministry, even so priesthood brought a new and different dimension. The new ministry was marked by liberation after years of waiting, a release of energy which had been suppressed. There was a great sense of acceptance by the majority of people, whether inside or outside of the Church. Many spoke of a sense of change in their inner being – of becoming who they were meant to be through ordination.⁵

Nearly all of the women priests I know can tell stories about parishioners who were adamant that they would not be receiving priestly ministry from a woman. It is their common experience that many of these parishioners have now changed their minds. For these people theological or cultural objections have been overturned because of personal relationship. The change begins with some expression like, 'I don't approve of women priests, but I don't mind *you* at all!'

4 For example, see the correspondence in *The Church Times* in March 1999.

5 *The Journey Continues*, Windsor Consultation, 1995.

The bottom line for them is that they did experience forgiveness, or the presence of God, or the Lord's blessing through the ministry of a woman. They recognise this experience as having the same content or qualities as that which they have always described as the work of God. They are reminded that at the end of the day this is about God, not the vessel he chooses to use.

It has not always been so easy however. I had the experience of moving parish two months before ordination. The church to which I was licensed had been used to the ministry (over the past thirty-odd years) of a vicar and two male readers. I was greeted warmly on the whole, but I could understand why it was difficult for some to adjust to me becoming a priest within weeks of my arrival. It was painful for me to see people leave and go to worship elsewhere. I imagine it was more painful still for them, as they were leaving their parish church, their place of worship for over thirty years. Most priests have had the experience of having members of the congregation disapprove of something they do or believe. Behaviour can be adjusted, beliefs debated, but being both a woman and a priest are now givens – they are not negotiable.

Most women priests I know speak with sadness about those who cannot receive their ministry in the parish. There are parishioners who second guess preaching and presidency rotas to avoid women priests, jostling in the queue for communion so that a woman's hand is not laid on them to bless them. More difficult still are the slights at chapter meetings or deanery synods. It is still the case that in meetings of clergy, women are in the minority; it is a common experience to be the only woman present. Although many of those who are opposed to women being priests, whether they are members of Reform or Forward in Faith, are courteous and Christian in their behaviour, there are many who are not. When women priests are present male priests walk out of meetings, refuse to acknowledge their presence, engage in 'locker room' conversations or are just down right rude. Lay people can be similarly behaved. Most disturbing of all are the no-go areas which are developing around the country, where bishops and archdeacons are opposed to women priests, and a cross-tradition closing of ranks makes it very difficult for women to fill vacancies. In any other profession this behaviour would be designated as sexual harassment or a breach of equal opportunities legislation, and be accompanied by disciplinary action. However, the Measure and the Act of Synod together give validity to much of this behaviour.

Unite us in the body of your Son

We need to remember that the Measure, which was passed by the required two-thirds majority in General Synod in November 1992, had been worked for by men and women, clergy and laity, Evangelicals, Catholics and Middle-Church people for over twenty years. The Measure contained a great deal of compromise, which was accepted by those supporting the priesting of women as necessary if the legislation was to be passed. Although the Measure describes the order of priests as a single whole in which women share equally with men, it at the same time allowed for women priests to be treated differently from male priests. In particular it made provision for PCCs to pass resolutions to refuse the ministry of a woman

as priest (Resolution A) or as incumbent or equivalent (Resolution B) – a negatively discriminatory act, Parishes are not able to request a woman rather than a man. It is this Measure that made financial provision for those who through conscience felt obliged to leave the Church, and provides protection for bishops so that they are not forced to ordain women. Even though 38 out of the 44 diocesan synods had agreed to the ordination of women, it was a surprise for many when the legislation was passed in Synod. Those who supported the ordinations stopped holding their breath, and as those in Dean's Yard sang the Jubilate, women deacons and ordinands all over the country were telephoned by friends – inside of the Church and outside it – joyful in their support.

If it was a joyful surprise to us that ordination was going to be possible at last, it was disastrous news for those opposed. Throughout the years running up to the vote women who supported the legislation had been encouraged to be theological and not emotional about our case (as though these two things can ever be divided!). It was also preferred if we were quiet and passive, rather than militant. Implicit in this was the suggestion that the last thing the Church would vote for would be the ordination of loud, emotional and militant women. This led to the development of a deep spirituality of waiting, which sustained and informed us. Once the Measure had passed through Synod, and the painful (and emotional!) cry of the opposition heard, we were again encouraged to be courteous and consider the feelings of those who were being hurt by the decision. 'There will be no unseemly rush to ordinations' one bishop said to me, with the demeanour of one about to attend a funeral. It was as though the Church was shocked by what it had done, and the bishops taken by surprise. The will of Synod could not be ignored – but how was the Church, and maybe more importantly for them, the House of Bishops, going to be held together?

The response from the bishops was to propose an additional synodical act to the Measure, the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod, supported by an accompanying document *The Bonds of Peace*. The reports of the bishops' meeting in January 1993, where these documents were put together, describe the bishops being so convinced of the work of the Spirit in their business that they were filled with joy and sang the Te Deum together.⁶ *The Bonds of Peace* sets out the legitimacy of both positions, for and against the ordinations, the so called 'two integrities'. The Act of Synod, which was never debated in the dioceses, made even greater protection for the minority opposed to the ordinations, it suggested a system through which neighbouring bishops of differing views could assist each other in providing pastoral care for the Measure's opponents and it created provincial episcopal visitors (PEVs or 'flying bishops') who could be requested by any parish passing a third resolution (Resolution C). This additional resolution allowed it to request pastoral care and sacramental duties from a PEV rather than the diocesan bishop; it is this option which has been taken up more often than the option for neighbouring bishops to work together. The Act of Synod was seen to provide for the period of reception of women priests, in 'a Church which is waiting on God's guidance'.⁷

6 J. Mayland, 'An Act of Betrayal', in M. Furlong ed., *Act of Synod – Act of Folly?*, SCM, London 1998, p 68.

7 Lord Hapgood, in a letter to *The Church Times*, 19 March 1999.

Objectors say that because of the ordinations the Church of England has forfeited the right to be called catholic. Empowered by the Act of Synod they can now boycott diocesan services (e.g. the blessing of oils and renewal of vows on Maundy Thursday) set up their own clergy chapters and appoint their own deans, and are able to request their own bishops, have separate ordination services and demand their own 'virtual' diocese. The Act has created two episcopates and two orders of priesthood, neither in communion with the other. The Act undermines the understanding that the Church of England is episcopally led and synodically governed. It was supposed to be about bringing order and maintaining the unity of the Church, actually it has caused disorder and disunity. The cost of this is born by the whole Church, and is especially felt by bishops and senior clergy who have to manage the Act.

There are two outworkings of the Act of Synod which are particularly troubling. The first is the development of a 'theology of taint', that those who have laid their hands upon a woman to ordain her are themselves tainted by this act. This was seen recently at Southwark Cathedral, where many people present for a service of consecration (of a PEV) felt themselves unable to receive communion from the Archbishop of Canterbury. Judith Maltby has described it as 'modern Donatism'⁸ when the Bishop of Richborough refers to traditionalists wanting to have places where they can be sure of 'the valid orders of the celebrants'. She rightly criticises this as being an approach to orders and sacraments which is far from catholic. The second outworking of the Act of Synod is the setting of the precedent of being able to request alternative episcopal oversight because of individual conscience. Already there has been a request for alternative oversight because of different views on the ordination of gay and lesbian Christians. These requests are likely to increase, as might others if women were to be consecrated bishops, or the Church of England united with the Methodist Church, where the 'soundness' of a diocesan bishop is evaluated before episcopal oversight is accepted.

We pray you to accept this our duty and service

Because women are now priests, they are able to take up roles and leadership responsibilities previously closed to them. Although many have remained in assistant roles, others are now priests-in-charge, vicars or rectors; chaplains in hospitals, educational establishments and prisons. Women priests serve as sector ministers, are residential canons in cathedrals and work in theological education. A few are team rectors, fewer still rural deans or training incumbents, and one is an archdeacon. Although some were in these posts prior to their ordination as priests, they now are able to exercise leadership without deferring to a male priest outside of their context to whom they had been licensed and there is now no longer the need to be carrying reserved sacrament around in their handbags.

In most dioceses now the percentage of women full-time stipendiary priests is between 9-15% of all full-time stipendiary clergy. There are a few notable

8 J. Maltby, 'One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, but Two Integrities?', in M. Furlong ed., *Act of Synod*, pp 52-56.

exceptions, for example, Truro and Chichester 2%, Sodor & Man 0%. Of these full-time stipendiary women, half are incumbents or in senior posts. For many Evangelicals the issues raised by priesting women are not primarily to do with catholicity but leadership. In the debates leading up to the passing of the Measure questions were asked about whether women were able to lead, and even if they were, was it right that they should do so. For those who are working with some model of male headship there are varying responses to women in leadership roles. Some see male headship as being an issue located entirely within a marriage relationship. It follows then that there will be no problem with women leading churches as long as they are single, but that it is seen as inappropriate for a married woman to be leading a church of which her own husband is a member. Where male headship is understood as applying to all contexts of church life, then women leaders can be understood as being under the headship of the male bishop. Thus taking the next step to consecrate women as bishops will be the one which is balked at. I myself work in sector ministry, and a member of Reform has explained to me that he is happy for me to be responsible for the training of his curate as the head of my department is a man. All of this contorted logic dodges the issue that women as priests now exercise real authority and are sharing in the oversight (*episcopate*) of the Church. There are still a considerable number of conservative Evangelicals who believe that this is completely wrong, based on their understanding of key biblical texts, so that women priests have to live with varying degrees of courtesy or discourtesy shown from this constituency as well.

Now women are in leadership roles, are they any good in them? Of course the answer to this question depends on the criteria we use to make a judgement. Anecdotal evidence suggests that on average women are as effective as leaders as men, there just has not been enough time to tell as yet. In the Diocese of Rochester for example, the churches led by men and women of similar tradition are growing numerically at the same slow rate or else numbers have stayed the same, similar numbers of authorised ministers are emerging, giving of money and service are maintained at similar levels. However, among those who actively supported women's ordination there were high expectations of the impact on the ordained ministry. The ordination of women as priests was seen as a gospel act which had the potential to reshape the role of the clergy, and could lead to an extensive exploration of different models of leadership, not just in theory but in practice. The first women ordained had spent years as assistants, and in common with most assistant clergy, had discovered the value of collaborative ministry as the only way to get things done if you have no real authority in a church. It is not clear that women are necessarily more collaborative than men, it may be that their long-term roles as assistants may have made them appear so. We wait to see if women lose their ability to work in teams in the same way as many men lost theirs once they moved into a first sole-responsibility post. However, there are both men and women for whom collaborative styles of ministry are held in high value, who have managed to maintain these patterns of ministry through the transition from assistant clergy to incumbent. But we need to note that research shows that roles shape personality and values more than personal dispositions influence how a given role will be

played.⁹ A conscious reshaping of the role of clergy, if this is desired, will require considerable effort from men and women, priests and laity, working together in theological reflection upon the shape of ministry the Church needs at this time and into the future.

We will be able to make a more informed judgement about the quality of women's leadership when women are deployed in the same posts as men across the board. Women priests tend not to be appointed to the really well resourced churches, for example to large and 'successful' evangelical churches or to churches playing important civic roles. Resistance to these appointments is as much cultural as theological. For example, a very able and experienced woman priest applied to be vicar in a large evangelical church. Although following the interview she was told she was clearly the best candidate, the interviewers said they could not bring themselves to appoint her. At some gut level appointing a woman was seen as a risk, with the interviewers not able to see fully the experience and competence she would have brought to the post. Churches will need to identify new ways of assessing equivalent experience, especially through this period when women will always have been in priest's orders for a shorter time than men applying for the same posts.

If deployment is not complicated enough through this period, women priests are asking for a greater flexibility than has been requested by men. Younger women especially are asking for part-time working, job-sharing, just and fair maternity packages, and ministry breaks – all of which would make it easier to be not just a woman and a priest, but also a mother of young children or the one caring for an infirm relative. Clergy couples in particular (where both wife and husband are priests) require the Church to be offering sympathetic support as they seek to be obedient to the vocations which the Church has affirmed through their ordinations. It is common for the Church to steward and support the vocation of the male priest in preference to that of the woman, so that the costs – emotional and otherwise – of managing the complexities brought by two vocations to the ordained ministry are born mostly by the couple themselves.

Through him you have formed us in your own image

Which brings us to a reflection on the sex-role differences between women priests and male priests. Sexual (or gender) difference theory has been developed through the last two centuries. Differences between men and women are either seen to put the sexes into a hierarchical order (usually with women as an inferior version of man) or as complimentary to each other. Although both of these views have been sustained by both scripture and tradition,¹⁰ the complementarity of men and women was often mentioned in the debates prior to the passing of the Measure. Male and female image God, and so a whole priesthood includes both men and women. However, there are only a few definable and measurable gender differences, and most of the research on difference and ministry has been carried out in North

9 F. L. Geis, 'Self-fulfilling Prophecies: A Social Psychological view of Gender', in A. E. Ball & R. J. Sternberg, *The Psychology of Gender*, Guildford Press, New York 1993, p 26.

10 J. Shaw, 'Gender and the Act of Synod', in M. Furlong ed, *Act of Synod*, p 14.

America in a cultural context which varies from our own. Even when differences are identified these are on-the-average differences which individuals can experience as oppressive when applied to them. The point is that a particular woman priest and a male priest may be more alike than two women priests. Even so there are some useful insights from empirical theology research which we can note.

Leslie Francis and his colleagues have researched male and female clergy in England in the 1990s.¹¹ Their results point to a gender difference of a particular kind. Male clergy appear to exhibit personality characteristics commonly associated with female sexual stereotypes, while female clergy exhibit characteristics which are stereotypically male. In this reverse link, women clergy are found to be more tough minded, more extroverted and more out-going than male clergy. Women clergy (on average) have personality profiles closer to the profiles of men in the population than do male clergy. This is interesting to reflect upon. In psychological measures religious feeling is labelled as 'feminine', and it must be noted that under the leadership of men more women attend church than men. It was wondered whether ordaining women as priests would make the church more feminine still. This research suggests the opposite. What we cannot say yet is whether this will be maintained long term; it may be that women who have entered the ordained ministry in recent times have had to be tough minded to persevere with their sense of vocation to the priesthood.

Research in America has shown a higher level of psychological androgyny (where there is a combining of high levels of so-called 'masculine' and 'feminine' personality traits) amongst men and women entering the ordained ministry than other professions. If the priestly role continues to demand this high level of androgyny, because it enables individuals to act appropriately in a wide variety of situations, then this will increase the stress experienced by those entering the priesthood. This stress is experienced at a higher level by women when they have to work without sufficient successful role models.¹² I see this reflected in a greater degree of expressed anxiety amongst women curates than men curates, particularly in their hesitancy in applying for posts of responsibility. I work with a group of 35 curates, men and women, and it is the women who are regularly asking questions about the relationship between gender and ministry. Yet gender is as much about men as it is about women, and real insights will emerge when we make it a priority to reflect on these matters together.

Looking for the coming of his kingdom

It is important five years on from the first ordinations on to be continually affirming the ministries of women priests, recognising that although life for some is easy, for many it is not. The Church as a whole, as well as individuals within it, needs to be saying that this was and is the will of God, and be thankful for the continually emerging benefits for the women themselves and for their congregations.

11 L. Francis, 'Male and female clergy in England: their personality differences, gender reversal?', *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 1992, 5, pp 31-38.

12 W. M. Goldsmith & B. N. Ekhardt, 'Personality factors of men and women pastoral candidates: sex-role preferences', in L. J. Francis & S. H. Jones eds, *Psychological Perspectives on Christian Ministry*, Gracewing, Leominster 1996, p 254.

One of the disappointments for me has been the reluctance of some ordained women to engage in theological reflection on the nature of ministry either in groups of ordained women, or in groups where men and women are present together. I think that for those who have found fulfilment in ministry and have been overwhelmingly welcomed in the place that they serve it is easy to say 'lets just get on with what we were ordained for'. I am concerned that this moving on will result in ordained women forgetting all that was learned through the waiting and struggle involved in passing the legislation. I am also concerned that women engage in partnership with men in looking at the second-order issues – deployment, models of ministry and leadership, understanding the relationship between gender and ministry. Without this theological reflection, critiquing the ministries of ordained women and men, the whole Church is denied growth and renewal. We require more than just the reflection that might happen around this fifth anniversary, but on-going reflection by the whole church as we struggle to become the community of the baptised we were called to be.

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