

ANNE DYER

---

# Almost Evangelical

**Anne Dyer looks at the difficulties in being an ordained evangelical woman within the church today. She considers choices about visibility and what one wears, motherhood and ministry, theological formation, and finally the possibilities and challenges for the evangelical constituency were it able to be truly hospitable to women's ministry and leadership.**

This article is a short reflection on being female and ordained and evangelical in the Church of England. Throughout 2003 evangelical identity has been much discussed. When I have wondered out loud about my identity and how evangelical I am, some colleagues have been quick to comment that they never think of me as evangelical. Why is this? Should I be concerned? I realise that what follows is personal and anecdotal. This article is a reflection on my experiences, and in some small degree those shared with me by ordained women friends, who rarely use 'evangelical' to describe their identity but whose spiritual formation took place in evangelical contexts and who trained for ordained ministry in evangelical colleges.

Female, ordained and evangelical – I hope that it is possible to be all three, yet quite often I seem to manage two but be on the edge of the evangelical constituency. There are a number of reasons for this relating to my person, the way I take up ministerial roles, and the process and content of my theology. None of these are gender specific, and yet their number taken together seem to place me on the edge of things.

## Personal Development

I did not grow up either Christian or evangelical. Although it does seem to me a wonderful thing to be formed within a Christian home, my development away from the church was not without advantages. One thing I notice is that I have no internalised fear of either 'the slippery slope' or 'the world'. I enjoy reading, films, music, art galleries and television. I view none of these with suspicion or anxiety, rather I welcome the arts as a primary way of interpreting the world and asking questions. This does not mean that I am not concerned about discernment or truth, but believe that the ability to form sound judgements has to be grown in a person. A Protestant mistrust of the human imagination, together with a shunning of the arts, has never been part of my experience. I know I hold these views in common with many male, ordained and evangelical Anglicans, but wonder if there is a greater imperative for ordained women to recover this ground. In many places the exploration of creative ways of reading the Bible, of praying, and a recognition of the variety of ways women do theology, has been led or affirmed by ordained

women. The spiritual heritage of women is found to some degree in quilts, embroidery, floral arts and song. Among my ordained women friends are dancers and artists, musicians and craftswomen. These women have not shunned traditional theological method, but for many the arts play an important role in their theological lives alongside preaching and writing, reading and research.

In addition, in my education I was first a scientist. Part of the way I view the world – numbers, physics, the universe, the atom – was formed before my conversion. It was not possible for me to throw away this view of the world at conversion. Rather the task was one of integrating my education with a number of views of matter, the universe, God and creation shown in the Bible.

So the arts and sciences together lead to biblical hermeneutics that are not conservative but contextual, where the context is not only culturally geographical or intellectual for the sake of mission, but personal and intimately related to a gender agenda. My understanding of the importance of this places me in the category of 'open' evangelical at the very least.

## **Roles and ministry**

I am very conscious of being among the first generation of ordained women; ordained deacon in 1987 and then priest in 1994. Ten years on from my ordination as priest I still regularly have the experience of being the first woman in this role that people experience. There is a constant pressure in this, especially in knowing that one is being watched and judged as a representative, for good or ill, of all ordained women. I have to hold together, in balance, a desire to bring something different and so to subvert the hierarchical patterns of ministry that prevail, but also to be recognisably of the same order as the (male) ministers that have gone before.

Through the last ten years, for example, there has been an increasing move away from robe wearing among many ordained evangelicals. This was not a good option for me at a time when I was trying to find what it means to be a leader and president of a community as a woman. And for others too, those present worshipping, I think that they have been helped to accept women as priests by seeing them robed and fulfilling the role in a way which is recognisable visually as well as in other ways. Where many male friends have abandoned robes believing that this will enable mission and the ministries of all of the people of God, women in my part of the country usually robe. Whether evangelical or not, women commonly choose to wear alb and stole, rather than choir habit, and so in their dress present as 'catholic' or 'liberal' priests might. Again, in the decoration of stoles, as in the wearing of clerical shirts in a wide variety of styles and colours, there has been a broadening of what was traditionally accepted, and not just for evangelicals. What began for many of us as an anxious seeking of the right thing to wear (!), has been part of a growing understanding of the demands of leadership and presidency in today's church. There are many still not entirely convinced that ordained women are a good, or indeed God's, thing. Robing helps us to take up our roles firmly, to be clearly present, to be seen as what we are without ambiguity. It seems to me that the people of God are helped by this in return, to know who they are and understand their own purposes.

Ordained and lay men are easily visible across the Church. Women are still journeying to visibility. Again, it is a too common experience for me to have to point out that the language of a hymn or liturgy is not inclusive, or that no women's voices can be heard, or that no ordained women can be seen in the choreography of large, set piece diocesan services. At Rochester Cathedral, for example, for an ordained woman to be seen or heard usually means that I have to be present. As Cathedral services are not generally a natural home for evangelicals, I am often both the only woman and the only evangelical ordained minister present. Sometimes the weight of representing two constituencies at the same time is too much for me. I have no choice about being an ordained woman, I do have a choice about whether or not to argue about the content of the sermon, or a hymn, or the prayers. This is when I feel, and present, least like an evangelical.

Finally in this section, the greatest grief concerning the role of ordained women comes with the critique of the way we take up our roles as mothers with regard to our children. In the evangelical constituency it seems to be more acceptable to be ordained and a woman if one is single of any age, or married and without children or with children who have grown. Those of us with school age children, especially in the key stage one or two age groups, have to manage the comments of those who believe that it is not possible to be a mother and a stipendiary priest. The common critique is that we are either neglecting our children or have in some way emasculated our husbands so that they take on an inappropriate portion of the duties of care. Some of my friends found the worst time for this was actually at evangelical theological colleges, where fellow ordinands were those most openly critical. I think that this is the most difficult issue because there seems to be within most evangelical women an internalised pattern of appropriate roles and relationships. We ourselves might wonder whether or not this is God given. This internalised brake has to be overcome in order to test vocation to ordination, but it never completely goes away, and it is an easy button to push and get a response. Ordained ministers, male and female, in other parts of the church are generally more understanding and supportive in this regard than evangelicals. This contributes to the sense of distance from the evangelical constituency.

## **The process and content of theology**

Clearly it would be very difficult for a woman to be ordained priest today if she reads the Bible conservatively. It is implicit when meeting an ordained woman who is evangelical that she must have found a way of reading the key New Testament texts so that they include and not exclude her from ministry which involves preaching and teaching, leadership and presidency. This must be the case for any woman who is exercising stipendiary ministry as a priest. So if you are female and wearing a clerical collar assumptions can be made about your approach to Scripture, in a way that they cannot be made about an ordained man. For some in the evangelical world this will be enough to place a woman outside of the camp. Ordained women who are evangelical are most likely then to class themselves as 'open' in their hermeneutics.

Women ordinands are more likely than men to be training on a course than at a college. This is true for evangelical women. Those who train on courses, certainly in the south of England, experience a greater breadth of theological diversity in the ordinand groups than found at a residential college. For many this means that although truth is important, it has to be worked out in relationship and friendship with others who hold to very different views. In addition, there is a strong likelihood that a theological educator or a student might be open about an aspect of life experience, such as divorce, homosexuality, or abortion of which they have personal experience. Issues which seem, wrongly as it turns out, to be outside of some evangelical contexts are brought very close through personal relationship. It is not that evangelicals, men or women, who train on courses will necessarily become more liberal, but that they are more likely to know themselves to be travelling with questions, and a readiness to re-examine long held evangelical views.

Both the process and the content of theology for ordained and evangelical women is likely then to be open. This may explain why ordained women evangelicals are rarely key note speakers at events where the theological agenda is clearly defined. In other cases women are absent as speakers from conferences and network events because some or all of the organisers are unhappy with women teaching and leading. There is nothing more depressing for me than receiving a conference mailing and seeing that all the speakers are male (or all male but for the one woman speaking on some aspect of family life!). As their faces smile out of the leaflets at me, my heart sinks – this conference cannot be for me.

## **Finally Evangelical?**

So, having considered some of the things that place me at the edge of the constituency, is it fair to say that I am evangelical at all? Well, I think so. Although I am uncomfortable with much of the evangelical culture as an ordained woman, I have not found a home anywhere else. More than this though I notice that there are key differences between myself and good friends who might describe themselves as 'liberal' or 'catholic'.

The first thing is my relationship to the Bible. My adult formation as a Christian was rooted in the Word, and involved learning Scripture by heart. The Bible has a place within me that gives it an authoritative voice. It is *the* primary authority for me, and the text resonates with and questions the world I inhabit. I have supreme confidence in God's ability to speak through the Bible, especially when read by groups of enquirers or believers together.

The second thing is that I do not think that people catch Christianity just by hanging around Christians or churches, not that many do this today. I profoundly believe in evangelism. There is something in my Christian DNA that means when I see a new housing estate I see a new congregation. I understand that this will only come about with evangelistic endeavour, and the need present around me makes my soul itch.

It is the priority of these two, the Bible and evangelism, and my passion for them that mark me as evangelical. I think what I long for is an evangelical constituency where ordained women like myself are more welcome, and where

ordained women are befriended, supported and enabled as we are by other sections of the church today. Then I would know I was at home.

So what will hospitality require of the constituency? Maybe working with a conscious understanding that ordained women generally, and those who are evangelical in particular, are travelling with a number of unresolved questions. The answers to these will only be found in community with others, who with us will question and explore not only the Bible, but our tradition and the questions raised by ministering in contemporary contexts. It will mean actively looking to include and encourage ordained women so that they can grow into all that God has called them to, and this is an inclusion that requires more than just one or two token women to be present. It will mean the seeking out of women for boards and councils, conference speakers and network committees. We are some way off gender parity, but this should be the goal. The *Anvil* Editorial Board has some work to do here: look inside the front cover!

Hospitality to women will release some of the preaching and teaching, evangelism and pastoral gifts that the churches need. To receive these gifts, though, the evangelical constituency will have to face some of the costs. It will be costly because a significant portion will not be able to tolerate women bringing these gifts in leadership roles. It will also be costly because the very presence of women in leadership roles provokes a deep reaction in some evangelical males, which is quite possibly not just related to understandings of truth but to psychopathology. When women and men work and serve closely together as equals, especially in leadership in the church, the presence of women can disturb men. Women can mirror that which is denied, they can be the other that is feared, they can represent that which is repressed. One response is to control and diminish women, in order to retain or regain superiority. The existence or presence of ordained women does not just challenge the theology of some, the response is not just about expressing truth but exerting power and control. A hospitable response might include recognising that we all, men and women in the church, have some way to go in understanding each other and ourselves. Evangelical men and women, lay and ordained, could have the resources to make a significant contribution to the life of the church in this area. The result could be a church where many diverse people – not just ordained women – find a home.

**The Revd Canon Anne Dyer** is Ministry Development Officer in the Diocese of Rochester and a member of the Chapter of Rochester Cathedral.