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## Women and the Episcopate in Australia

### Some Reflections on the Future

I have put together the following ideas as a way of stimulating discussion and would welcome any comments, corrections or further thoughts.

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#### The current situation:

- Women may be ordained as deacons in all but two and as priests in all but five of Australia's twenty-three dioceses
- Women make up between one in five and one in six of the clergy (eg. in Melbourne, women now make up 21% of the active clergy list)
- There is as yet no clear determination as to whether or not a diocese, and which dioceses, might lawfully appoint, elect or consecrate women as bishops without General Synod authorisation, however some dioceses are considerably better positioned than others
- The General Synod in 2004 failed to achieve the necessary majorities for a canon to clarify that no law in force would prevent a diocese which passed the canon from consecrating women in the episcopate (62.5% in favour)
- There are fifteen women who are bishops in the Anglican communion (plus one bishop-elect) of whom four are now retired and 14 of 37 provinces permit women to become bishops although only three of these have acted
- The Church of England looks set to consider a Measure for women in the episcopate during the life of its next General Synod and could be placed to appoint women as bishops as early as 2009

#### The problem:

- Women who are deacons and priests are now unquestionably second-class citizens amongst the clergy in Australia even in dioceses which overwhelmingly support the admission of women to the episcopate
- Men bishops in dioceses which support the ordination of women will be less assured of their episcopal vocation: are men appointed solely because they are male, seeing as women who might be called to that office is barred on account of their gender?
- The ordination of women is not received fully as part of our tradition until women are bishops
- A whole new generation of laity and clergy have not heard the full arguments in favour of the ordination of women which have not been rehearsed in many dioceses since the early 1990s – we tend to assume everyone is now in favour
- Women will not inevitably become bishops in Australia – it is foreseeable that the numbers of women offering for ordination might decline, or even that the relevant legislation could be revoked (cf. the Presbyterian church in Australia) – and a huge amount of proactive lobbying was required to achieve the change on women and the priesthood

Possible directions for Australia to ordain women to the episcopate (these are not mutually exclusive options):

1. A diocese simply elects a (arch)bishop who is a woman
2. A bishop simply appoints women as assistant bishops
- 2a. A diocese refuses to appoint anyone as bishop until women can be considered
3. A diocese seeks to pass local legislation allowing any of the above
- 3a. A diocese adopts its own protocol anticipating women in the episcopate
4. Continue to seek a General Synod canon
- 4a. Seek a General Synod resolution (requiring a simple majority)
5. Do nothing
6. Revoke support for the ordination of women as bishops
7. Revoke support for the ordination of women at all

#### Comments

1. This might be possible in some dioceses, but there could be problems with gaining consent for the bishop-elect from other bishops in the province (eg. in Victoria if Melbourne elected a woman, would the other four bishops give their approval? what would happen if Newcastle elected a woman and Sydney refused approval?) Should nomination boards and electoral synods be encouraged to consider women anyway, and what assurances might they have that they are not wasting their time?

2. This option has already been put on the agenda by Perth and Canberra-Goulburn, and seems quite likely as a relatively non-threatening way forward, as assistant bishops do not require provincial consent. But what provision would be made for dissenters within a diocese and what support could be offered to a bishop who went ahead in this way?

2a. Another option would be for supportive synods to ask that no more bishops be appointed until such time as both women and men could be considered.

3. Melbourne attempted to pass local legislation for the ordination of women in 1988. In 1989 the Appellate Tribunal ruled, however, that Melbourne does not have the capacity to pass legislation on this matter without altering the 1854 Church Constitution Act of the State Parliament. Nevertheless, it has never been established that Melbourne or anywhere else in fact needs any local legislation. Is there any law that bars women from the office of bishop in a diocese? If there is, how can it be altered? Perth altered its constitution to remove gender barriers to ordination to all orders in 1990 and this legislation was tested by the Supreme Court of WA in 1992 so Perth could proceed to appointing women as bishops under its own constitution already.

3a. An alternative to passing legislation for women as bishops would be for a diocese to pretend that General Synod had passed the Further Clarification Canon, and to hammer out a set of protocols along the lines suggested by the Working Party on Women in the Episcopate to shape the pastoral issues that would arise from the appointment of women as bishops.

4. General Synod is due to meet in 2007 and if it did pass a Further Clarification Canon by a 2/3 majority, it would still need to meet again to ratify it. This might mean no national agreement would be in place until 2010, an 18-year wait from the authorisation of the ordination of women to the priesthood.

Ethically, General Synod authorisation is obviously the most desirable way forward. But is there any chance that the numbers in favour would increase and not decrease by 2007? The numbers were only achieved in 1992 through extensive campaigning by MOW and others across diocesan elections for General Synod representatives, and the will to organise this kind of activity may not be present any longer given the high cost to all involved. Moreover, it is likely that Sydney will have a larger proportion of representatives in 2007, and some dioceses such as Adelaide will have fewer: by 2007 it may require 90% of non-Sydney representatives to vote in favour of a canon just to have it pass by two-thirds. See Appendix 1 for General Synod voting figures on the ordination of women since 1977 which indicate for 27 years voting has been between 60 and 71% in favour, but almost never above 66% in all three houses. It is also worth reflecting that, to date, the five dioceses which voted against the Provisional Canon passed in July 1992 have still not adopted that canon twelve years later.

On the other hand, it is now conceivable that there could be female assistant bishops in the House of Clergy at the 2007 General Synod if Perth, Canberra-Goulburn and other dioceses move forward in this direction in the near future. What could be done to support such moves?

4a. General Synod could be asked to pass a resolution supporting women in the episcopate rather than a canon giving at least a degree of national unity on the issue.

5, 6, 7 No comment necessary, except to continue to point out that the ordination of women is not fully received in our tradition until there are women as bishops, and prior to that point, this innovation could be revoked. What happens when two or three generations of laity and clergy have grown up in a diocese that has women as deacons and priests but not bishops, and when they have never heard arguments in favour of the ordination of women? We need to keep reminding ourselves of why this change is a gospel necessity.

## Appendix 1

### General Synod voting on the ordination of women 1977-2004

*"The voting proportions on the resolutions about priesthood in 1977, and the canons in 1985 and 1987 have been all almost exactly the same ..."*

Archbishop Grindrod, supplementary address to Special General Synod, 26 August 1987

#### 1977

Resolution 23/1977: the theological objections raised did not constitute a barrier to the ordination of women as priests or bishops

	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>% in favour</i>	<i>absent</i>	<i>total members</i>
Laity	44	33	57	13	90
Clergy	50	33	60	7	90
Bishops	13	6	68	2	21
Total	107	72	59.78	22	201

Source: *Proceedings of the Fifth General Synod 1977* (Sydney, 1978), p.35.

#### 1981

Bill 1/1981: Bill to alter the constitution in order to allow a bill for the ordination of women to be brought to a later synod (this move became unnecessary after the Appellate Tribunal declared that the ordination of women was not in conflict with the Fundamental Declarations or section 72/6)

	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>% in favour</i>	<i>absent</i>	<i>total members</i>
Laity	58	32	64	2	94
Clergy	51	42	55	1	94
Bishops	16	5	76	1	22
Total	125	79	61.27	4	210

Source: *Proceedings of the Sixth General Synod 1981* (Sydney, 1982) and *Church Scene*, 4 September 1981, p.7.

#### 1985

Canon 18/1985: Canon for the ordination of women to the diaconate

	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>% in favour</i>	<i>absent</i>	<i>total members</i>
Laity				0	95
Clergy				4	95
Bishops				1	24
Total	over 3/4 in every house			5	214

#### 1985

(Lost) Canon for the ordination of women to the priesthood

	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>% in favour</i>	<i>absent</i>	<i>total members</i>
Laity	68	27	71.5	0	95
Clergy	58	33	64	4	95
Bishops	19	4	83	1	24
Total	145	64	69.37	5	214

Source: *Proceedings of the Seventh General Synod 1985* (Sydney, 1987) and *Church Scene*, 6 September 1985, p.11

#### 1987

(Lost) Canon for the ordination of women to the priesthood

	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>% in favour</i>	<i>absent</i>	<i>total members</i>
Laity	62	30	67	4	96
Clergy	60	36	62.5	0	96
Bishops	17	6	74	0	23
Total	139	72	65.88	4	215

Source: *Proceedings of the Special General Synod 1987* (Sydney, 1987)

### 1989

(Lost) Canon for the ordination of women to the priesthood – vote that this be an ordinary bill (requiring 3/4 majority in each house), lost, and the bill then abandoned altogether

	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>% in favour</i>	<i>absent</i>	<i>total members</i>
Laity	57	34	63	6	97
Clergy	52	38	58	7	97
Bishops	14	5	74	4	23
Total	123	77	61.5	17	217

Source: *Proceedings of the Eighth General Synod 1989* (Sydney, 1990) and *Church Scene*, 1 September 1989, p.5

### 1992a

P1/1992: Provisional canon clarifying that any inherited law from the Church of England preventing the ordination of women ceased to have effect in a diocese which adopted it

	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>% in favour</i>	<i>absent</i>	<i>total members</i>
Laity	69	29	70	1	99
Clergy	68	30	69	1	99
Bishops	19	5	79	0	24
Total	156	64	70.9		222

### 1992b

Canon 18/1992: Second vote in November 1992 to ratify Canon P1/1992. Note that 2 bishops present in July 1992 had retired, and 2 further bishops abstained from the vote.

	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>% in favour</i>	<i>absent</i>	<i>total members</i>
Laity	69	30	70	0	99
Clergy	67	32	68	0	99
Bishops (2 abstained)	16	4	73	0	22
Total	152	66 (+2)	69.1	0	222

Source: *Proceedings of the Ninth General Synod 1992* (Sydney, 1993) and *Church Scene*, 17 July 1992, p.18 and 27 November 1992, p.13.

### 2001

(Lost) Further clarification canon on women and the episcopate. The bill was abandoned before a final vote owing to the debate about protocols and fears of a very low vote, however the in-principle vote that the bill be debated was 135:95 with 2 absences and 2 abstentions.

	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>% in favour</i>	<i>absent</i>	<i>total members</i>
Laity	n/a			?	106
Clergy	n/a			?	106
Bishops	n/a			?	22
Total (2 abstentions)	135	95	58	2	234

Source: *Proceedings of the Twelfth General Synod 2001* (Sydney, 2001).

### 2004

(Lost) Further clarification canon on women and the episcopate

	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>% in favour</i>	<i>absent</i>	<i>total members</i>
Laity	67	39	63	2	108
Clergy	63	43	59	2	108
Bishops	17	6	74	0	23
Total	147	88	62.55	4	239

Source: <http://www.anglican.org.au>

## Summary

	<i>% in favour</i>	
1977	60	resolution (50% - passed)
1981	61	bill to alter constitution (50% - passed)
1985	69	canon (66% in 3 houses – lost)
		but canon for deacons achieved 75% – passed
1987	66	canon (66% in 3 houses – lost)
1989	61.5	<i>to be ordinary canon (75% in 3 houses – lost)</i>
1992a	71	canon (66% in 3 houses – passed)
1992b	69	ratify canon (66% in 3 houses – passed)
2001	58	<i>in principle vote 135 to 95</i>
2004	62.5	canon (66% in 3 houses – lost)

## Sydney as a proportion of General Synod members

Year	Laity	Total		Laity	Sydney		Rest		X
		Clergy	Bishops		Clergy	%	%		
1977	90	90	21	18	18	20	80	83.3	
1981	94	94	22	19	19	20.2	79.8	83.5	
1985	95	95	24	19	19	20	80	83.3	
1987	96	96	23	20	20	20.8	79.2	83.8	
1989	97	97	23	20	20	20.6	79.4	84	
1992	99	99	22	21	21	21.2	78.8	84.6	
...									
2001	106	106	22	24	24	22.6	77.4	86.1	
2004	108	108	23	26	26	24.1	75.9	87.8	

X = the percentage of the non-Sydney laity and clergy General Synod members who would have to vote in favour of a bill for it to gain a 2/3 majority without any support from Sydney members

For example: assuming that all 53 Sydney representatives voted against the Further Clarification Canon at the 2004 General Synod, then 87.8% of the remaining General Synod members in the houses of clergy and laity would have had to vote in its favour for it to pass. Assuming that representatives from Armidale, Northwest Australia, Ballarat and The Murray voted against, this would leave almost no margin for representatives from other dioceses voting against.

The point I take from this is that Sydney has control of 2.9% more votes than it did in 1992 which makes it very difficult to achieve a 2/3 majority without two or three of the smaller dioceses changing their minds. Would the 1992 canon be able to achieve a 2/3 majority if it were put to General Synod again?