

NEW COLOURS FOR NEW CLOTH

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TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, the Anglican experience of the ordained ministry would have been very much the same whichever part of the Anglican communion we were to consider. It was very monochrome.

The Anglican Communion is extraordinarily diverse, covering all cultures and all continents. It is a communion that is held together by a primacy of honour, the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury. But despite the decentralized nature of our communion, we do in fact recognize ourselves as part of the same communion of Christian churches who share not only a common history, but considerable similarities of understanding of the faith, of patterns of ministry and of ethos. We see ourselves as comprising one picture, but the garish mismatch of colours has, in recent years, at times, stretched this perception. This has been nowhere more so than in the variety of developments in the ordained ministry.

Allowing for cultural differences, the general pattern a quarter of a century ago was that young men were selected for ordination, preferably after they had completed a good first degree; and then, still unmarried, they went to seminary or theological college for three years to train for the priesthood. During their curacies, generally two, they served their obligatory year in deacon's orders and were also 'expected' to make a suitable marriage. So, in their mid-twenties and newly married, they were launched into the practice of ministry. This was generally, but not solely, stipendiary parish ministry where, with all that training, we expected them to be competent to do the job by themselves.

Today the situation is vastly different. In general this is because the gateway to ordination has been thrown wide open. Not only has the requirement for degree qualifications in theology been challenged as a necessary route, but most candidates for the priesthood are well over thirty; some have reached retirement age. They are not all married; some are gay and living openly in a committed relationship. Many serve in non-stipendiary positions; and, too, some are women. Some still spend a year as a deacon, others much less, others much more; and

many work in teams both with other ordained people and with lay people.

The variety of colours on the Anglican ordination palette do not create the same picture in all parts of our communion. Some of our provinces have difficulty in appreciating the options that are open to them and prefer to work with a limited range of hues. Neither is the range necessarily the same in each part of the same province; colours enjoyed in one diocese will not necessarily be appreciated in another.

So, just as there has been considerable liturgical diversification throughout our church during the last quarter century, there is also considerable diversification amongst our ministry. There is quite a garish picture with little sense of a central theme. This makes generalizations not only dangerous but impossible. It is in this context that the experiences of the ordination of women need to be considered.

Here too our histories of change are very different. The first woman ordained priest within the Anglican Communion was Florence Li Tim-Oi, ordained as an 'emergency measure' in Hong Kong during the Second World War. The pressure from the hierarchy of the Church of England was such that she subsequently suspended her sacramental ministry to protect her ordaining bishop from punitive action. Women in the United States were ordained to the priesthood in 1974, without the benefit of synodical (or conventional) process, in an 'irregular' ordination. This was 'regularized' in 1978. Canada was the first country to reach synodical agreement on the issue and authorized the ordination of women as priests in June 1975. In New Zealand, women were first ordained as priests in 1977. It took a lot longer in Australia, England, Ireland, Scotland and South Africa. And there are a number of provinces, such as Wales, where the issue is still under discussion.

The process was different too: in the United States the question of ordaining women to the priesthood arose on the back of more than forty years' struggle to allow women to take their place as lay members of the house of deputies. So there was considerable mistrust of the workings of the General Convention – hence the decision to hold an 'irregular' ordination. In Canada, the decision was synodically achieved, but a 'conscience clause' held for a number of years until it was finally scrapped. In New Zealand, the decision was reached synodically but was only upheld following a judicial appeal. We have no conscience clause. In Australia and England, the decision was only reached after years of very strong and active campaigning, characterized by the build-up of some very resistant and bitter opposition for whose supporters, in both countries but by different means, regular episcopal oversight is provided.

These diverse histories contribute shades to the canvas on which the detailed living-out of the ministry of women as priests is painted. I will return to this detail now by looking carefully at the part of the picture that I know best, Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The Lambeth Conference of 1988 established a commission to look into the issues that were raised by the impending ordination of women to the episcopate. The Eames Commission outlined a process of reception: a gradual unfolding and discovery by the church of the nature and acceptability of women's ministry as both priests and bishops. While this process of reception was going on, the ministry of ordained women was described as 'provisional',¹ a term that implies that the ordination of women is reversible. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, it is not.

Some new shades

It is common when women begin a new ministry for there to be a pronounced sense of novelty. People simply have not experienced a woman in a liturgical and formal pastoral role before, and they naturally focus on their responses to this novelty. And the women too can find this very exciting to begin with. But novelty, by its very nature, does not last; no woman is wise to base her ministry on novelty value. The challenge for women as well as for men is to form strong relationships that enable the growth of good sound ministry.

Women have done this and done it well.² Because our positions do feel fragile, less secure – because we cannot presume on 'acceptance', or assured social support for our ministry – we have had to delve into the depths of our spiritual being to walk closely with the God who, we are convinced, has called us and who walks with us. This has been necessary but invigorating. There is a firmness, a rigour about women's spirituality and ministry that has planted it on solid ground, and it will not be easily blown away. The colours are indeed strong.

Women are well respected for the service they offer; their style of ministry, when it becomes known, is generally appreciated. People can see its freshness and its ready availability, and are eager to work without judgement. Of course, however, this is a generalization and just as there is variety, there are also exceptions. Women also hold a variety of positions within the church: they are canons, archdeacons, diocesan ministry educators, chaplains in schools, hospitals, prisons and universities, and vicars of parishes, some of which are large. Several have made good running in episcopal elections, but not one holds the position of dean of a cathedral. It is also true to say that while the

number holding these positions is disproportionately lower than the number who are ordained, a position on the clerical ladder is seen as a desirable option by many women, as it is by men.

Women were ordained as priests in this country about the time that other changes were coming into being, and in many ways these have not served the cause of women well. In particular, the church was beginning to consider the possibility of training priests outside of St John's College, which was by that time the only Anglican theological college. Also, at that time, the development of the non-stipendiary ministry had begun to be explored. Over the last twenty or so years the possibilities for theological education have greatly expanded and diversified. For both lay people and those who would be ordained, the development of distance-education techniques and of regional theological training has increased local opportunities for women to become theologically literate. And they have taken to this in substantial numbers, for the practice of moving, often to another town, to attend a residential theological college, was clearly an impossibility for many women – myself included. I studied extramurally for a postgraduate degree in theology from the University of Otago, the university in Dunedin where I am now bishop. The widespread acceptance of non-residential training among women has contributed to the ease with which many adopt non-clerical stances to their ministry.

It is a clear reflection of the fact that we are still a society that is highly structured on gender lines that women find mobility more difficult. So the development of the non-stipendiary ministry enabled many women to enter the ordained ministry without undue family disruption. There is consequently a very high proportion of women who do not receive a stipend, or receive only a part stipend for the ministry they offer. While this may suit the circumstances of many of these women, it is questionable whether we are achieving the equity that is suggested by the relatively high proportion (around 25 per cent) of women in the ordained priesthood. It would seem, however, that a loss of stipendiary equity is the price of a measured detachment from clerical identity.

To be set apart

Inequalities do exist, but it is also true that women are, slowly, having a gentle effect on the character of priesthood – I would say, for the best. When women were first ordained there was, in fact, considerable anxiety about whether this would lead to the further clericalization of the church. People were saying two things. Firstly, if women (and

men) were ordained to the non-stipendiary ministry, the church would effectively be ordaining all their lay people, making all the Indians into chiefs. The second difficulty, it was said, was that strong women and men were needed as lay people to act as a check or corrective on the somewhat isolated autonomy that characterizes clericalism at its worst. While these are both territorial arguments, they do in fact hold more than a grain of truth.

In every province of our church that I have known that has made the move to ordain women, the fear has been articulated that it will increase the clerical over-heaviness of the churches' leadership and make it even harder for lay people to find the place to make their contribution. The question seems to be: can a person be so set 'apart' from the body that he or she is no longer 'a part' of the body? These feelings have been particularly strong in countries where the opposition to women as priests has been particularly strident and lay supporters of women's ordination are fearful that ordaining women will add to their problems rather than begin a process of solving them. They see danger in the need that women in such countries feel to dress in black clerical gear and even to allow themselves to be called 'mother' as a way of asserting and assuring their equality. I have also heard women lament that when their friends, with whom they had been so close in struggle and conflict, were ordained, those 'friends', as women priests, no longer needed their friendship.

So the ordination of women to the priesthood poses a marked challenge not only to the church, but to ordained women in particular: that they might have the courage to develop a different model of the relationships between clergy and laity. This is new territory, and not easy; particularly as our prevailing model of ministry is still that of the sole-charge, lonesome cleric, and this is what many ordained women aspire to.

Called through community

In recent years, this diocese, along with others within our church, has developed the concept of local ministry. This is taking place primarily in our isolated rural areas and is designed to develop the concept of a church for the local community, run by the local community. Some of these communities have called women from among their number to be priests, not in the sense of exercising leadership in a sole-charge situation, but by working in a team with lay leadership, so that they are free to exercise the specifics of their priesthood without the burden of being on a pedestal. The challenge is to become a ministering community.

Women take readily to this type of ministry because they are often already deeply rooted in their communities and find team relationships familiar territory. Women working as priests in these communities are beginning to develop new patterns of relating between women and men. One of the most exciting and startling things I have had said to me recently came from a man in one of these communities. He said that having a woman whom he had known for so long taking a leadership role had made him really feel that Christianity was closer, was for him; it was not just for 'the professionals'. Her ordination had made the gospel more accessible. That is cause for giving thanks.

This is not to say that it is easy for such women to take on ordination as a response to a call from their community. There is always a substantial period of discernment during which both they and the church endeavour to test their vocation. It is not uncommon for this time to be marked by considerable unease and even discomfort, for there have been few who have gone this way before. There is also the discomfort arising from the sense of obligation that many women feel to respond to requests with an automatic 'yes'; the instinctive desire to please, even when every ounce of prayer and wisdom points to a 'no'.

A most poignant pain, and one that I personally find it most hard to handle, is rooted in the fear that women have of the damage that ordination might do to their own soul – the spiritual corruption that a sense of apartness might bring, the corroding effects of the dynamics of power within a Christian community. Uncertainty adds to this fear as women try to remodel ordained ministry.

All this is in the context of trying to discern whether the call is of God, whom they have no wish to deny. And even if they can perceive the authenticity of the call, it is common for them not to believe in themselves. I have found that it is best to allow a good length of time to elapse before the point of decision-making is reached. This space can enable a lot of clarification, some of it human, some of it divine. Mixing the colours is not always easy.

Mixing new colours

And in the mixing of the colours, we have not only explored some new combinations, we have blended some new colours. I am often asked if the ordination of women to the priesthood has made any difference to the church in New Zealand. Although it is hard to point to anything that can be uniquely ascribed to women, this is because our ordination, by the very nature of the church, has been intertwined, so to speak, with that of men. We have not sought to separate ourselves out,

to paint an entirely new picture. Although we have not always been treated with equity, we have sought to live together, to serve together, blending into partnership.

Among the fruits of that partnership, I would now want to claim an experienced priesthood of women, one whose maturity was clearly acknowledged by the church in my election to the episcopate. Some women in our country have been ordained for nearly eighteen years and their experience more than matches that of male colleagues. There have been considerable changes over that time in the nature of the women who have sought ordination. The first ones had to be very strong, very competent, and very clear about their vocation. I was ordained towards the end of this period. Those who came later knew little of the struggle, and slipped into ministry as if it were a divine inheritance. It is not.

So the maturity of women's ordination to the priesthood means that there is considerable diversity amongst us. There always has been diversity amongst us in piety, in practice and in personality, but now in addition we have diversity over time. This of course means that, quite apart from the hierarchical structures of the church, which generally speaking we find all too congenial, we have more than begun to form little associations and hierarchies of our own. The old girls' club is every bit as active as the old boys' club. It is nothing like as good at achieving positions of power, but none the less it can be formidably effective. Men do the same, but in their case the consequences are more marked.

But I think all this does mean we are well aware that the critique of hierarchy is not in the least bit simple. In this critique, questions are raised not only about formal hierarchies – that is, ecclesiology, the nature of the church – but also about the informal ones. I think this awareness is healthy.

The ordination of women to the priesthood has also had, I believe, an impact on our use of liturgical language. The last decade or so has seen a marked sharpening in our clarity over the use of language in liturgy, and the role language plays in shaping the life of the Church.

In these days there is much talk about inclusiveness, mainly about inclusive language. Indeed; for the ordination of women is itself a step towards inclusiveness. Theologically, this move towards inclusiveness is sound: God is utterly indiscriminating, and although our prejudices always get in our way and limit our response, we can do no less than be constantly ready and willing to stretch ourselves to include all of God's people. It is clearly very significant that our language should both

enable and reflect this. Our new New Zealand Prayer Book, which was published in 1989, has made significant advances in that respect, and it very largely took shape out of the partnership of men and women in ministry. But I would also have to add that, for the most part, our hymnody is woefully retarded.

We do well, however, to remember that while gender is a power symbol of inclusivity, the issue itself is much wider. There are still many people, identified perhaps by race or by class, to name just two possible parameters, who do not find a ready place in our worship. From where I stand the primary issue is that of an inclusivity of the heart, an embrace that seeks ever to be wider, that is constantly willing to be stretched, that does not hide behind dogma, whether new or old, but that knows the joy and the demand of love. Inclusivity of language, yes, but also of liturgy and life.

The ordination of women, and the consequent increase of the voice of women in the decision-making forums of the church, has undoubtedly sharpened our sense of justice in cases of sexual abuse and sexual harassment by clergy. We have become aware that this is essentially an abuse of clerical power and so constitutes professional misconduct and is a fundamental contradiction to the priestly calling. It is clear that the incidence of such happenings is not new for the church, but the manner in which the church deals with such issues is new. No longer can they be kept quiet and the problem sorted out by a gentle move sideways. This is irresponsible, and fails as well to offer any justice to the victim. We have developed principles and procedures for the handling of complaints and a code of ethics which makes these clear, so that everyone may know what they can expect from all who hold a bishop's licence for ministry, both lay and ordained. Dealing with these issues has been a most painful process. They always draw out latent hostility between men and women, and any resolution or reconciliation needs to name this hostility; but we have learnt a very great deal from our pain, and we need to if the partnership between men and women in ministry is not to be seriously flawed.

Ambivalences of power

There are many questions raised by the ordination of women; they are often profound, and at times troubling for Christian women who are called to exercise leadership. At root they are spiritual issues: what happens to the conscience of the woman who dares to be different, who dares to stand for justice in a way that seriously challenges the church's own conventions? As a bishop, I have been no more immune from

these ambivalences than has any other ordained woman, but I have observed both as a bishop and a spiritual director that women ordained into a church that is both accustomed to and accepting of the ministry of women have a much simpler time of it. Some things do get easier.

Many women do have a very profound ambivalence about the power that goes with the exercise of Christian leadership through the ordained ministry, but nonetheless women are not immune to the enticements of power. There are particular fascinations and entanglements where the exercise of power by women within the Christian community is in question. The Christian gospel places firm emphasis on the redemptive value of suffering and of taking the 'lower place'. When genderized, as it has been for so long, this becomes an argument that has both supported the subordination of women and has also, by the none-too-subtle predisposition that God has to the 'lowly', increased the spiritual power that women bear.

I think that one of the major tasks of women in Christian leadership is to develop an authentic spirituality of strength. Clearly what is taken as 'strong', as 'tough', is primarily defended by our normatively male heritage, and in such a way that few women can measure up. The need is to change stereotypes and develop new norms. The challenge to women in Christian leadership is not to eschew strength, but to reorient and redefine it authentically and appropriately with a firm foundation in Christian tradition and spirituality. At the very least this involves, quite literally, learning to place our trust in God, a spiritual process much talked about, but one which tends to be less practised by people who are well supported by the structures of the institution. So I am sure that when we do this we will find that the promised 'new cloth' is not so new at all, but has rather been obscured by centuries of unchallenged definition.

NOTES

¹ *The Eames Commission: the official reports* (Toronto: Anglican Consultative Council, 1994), p 25.

² *The journey and the vision: a report on ordained Anglican women in the Church of the Province of New Zealand* (Auckland: Women's Resource Centre, 1990).