

Women ministering

Change amongst the churches

Jean Mayland

THIS YEAR OF 1998 sees the end of the ecumenical decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. The ten years have certainly not changed the world – not even the world for women – but some steps have been taken for the better. Not all the advances are attributable to the WCC initiative, but there is some evidence that the Decade caught a time of *kairos*, of opportunity, and that the issues at the heart of the Decade were exactly those arising elsewhere in a whole host of other ways.

Within the churches in the United Kingdom, the general opinion seems to be – and I would agree – that they have made some progress over these ten years, but that there is still a long way to go. As Keith Jones, Deputy Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, commented to the *Baptist Times* after the end-of-Decade conference in Durham, April 1998, ‘... it was just the end of the beginning in the face of the issues to which the churches still need to give attention’.¹

The second aim of the Decade was originally stated as ‘affirming – in shared leadership and decision-making, theology and spirituality – the decisive contributions women are making in churches and communities’. It was under this heading that all the activities within the churches in the United Kingdom for developing the ministry of women were approached and assessed. The member churches of the Council of Churches of Britain and Ireland (CCBI) were approached and asked to make their own assessment of the Decade in response to a paper which I wrote and sent to the general secretaries or equivalent. Only six churches replied by the end of January. One response came in later.

The response of the churches

The Church of England pointed out that during the Decade women had been ordained to the priesthood for the first time. A recent report of the National Association of Diocesan Advisers in Women’s Ministry showed that women priests are being deployed

creatively. Three Provincial Episcopal Visitors have been appointed to minister to parishes unwilling to accept the ministry of women priests.

The Methodist Church reported that in 1993 the Division of Ministries had been approached by a group of women presbyters who had asked about the possibility of setting up a Women's Forum. They said that although Methodism had been ordaining women for twenty years it had not taken into consideration the changes and challenges introduced by women presbyters. A commission on women presbyters was set up to study the experiences of women and in 1995 it brought to Conference a report entitled 'Cry of the Beloved'. It made a number of specific recommendations which were not adopted by Conference. The Conference nevertheless received the report and recommended it for discussion. In October 1995 members of the Commission met with the Council, which duly reported to the 1996 Conference on how the recommendations could be implemented.

The Methodist Church in Ireland stated that 'the Church, if it is to be relevant, must accept that the alienation of women from its ministry is contrary to the pattern shown by Jesus Christ. It must also accept that there are some areas of resistance which need to be addressed.'²

The Society of Friends commented that since they do not have an ordained priesthood the issue of women's ordination is not a problem for them. They said that 'the convention that outward sacraments are not needed shifts the emphasis away from liturgies to the home where the ministry of welcome is common to women and men'.³

The response from the Roman Catholic Church states that 'as the Roman Catholic Church holds that women cannot be ordained priests, they cannot therefore share in the "magisterium" of the Church . . . though they can and do contribute views and insights'.⁴ The document also states that the Roman Catholic Church 'respects the position of those churches who ordain women; and asks in return that the position of the Roman Catholic Church should be respected. In doing so we recognize the need to address the question of women's ordination in sister churches in the context of ecumenical dialogue'.⁵ For its own part the Roman Catholic Church seeks to pursue the direction of a 'fuller expression of the baptismal vocation and the mission of all, and the formal recognition of women's exercise of ministries'.

The United Reformed Church in its report pointed out that although it is only 25 years old as a church one of its roots is in Congregationalism, which at union in 1972 had fully accepted women as ministers and as leading figures in the life of the church for some time. Three of twelve provincial moderators are now women and when one of these completes her service in 1998 she will be replaced by another. As yet no ordained woman minister has been elected moderator.

The Baptist Church, which sent in a late reply, pointed out that 'women have been ordained to Baptist Ministry in England since the 1920s'.⁶ The Appointments Committee 'seeks to ensure that women serve on all key decision-making committees of the Union'.⁷ Nevertheless the response also recognized that Baptist women ministers do have 'concerns about their place within our ministry'.

The Church of Scotland did not send a response to my paper. However, 1998 also marks the thirtieth anniversary of the passing of the act which stated that 'women should be eligible for ordination to the Holy Ministry of Word and Sacraments on the same terms and conditions as are at present applicable to men'. Even after thirty years no ordained woman has been Moderator of the General Assembly. Three women have allowed their name to go forward but so far none has been elected. The last to be nominated was Margaret Forrester but she was faced by a smear campaign in the Scottish press which claimed that she had blessed a lesbian marriage!

The emerging picture

What is the picture of women's ministry which lies behind these formal responses from the churches? First of all, it is clear that during the Decade there has been an increase in the number of ordained women in the member churches of the CCBI. Moreover, there has in fact been an increase in the number of churches in these islands (as indeed throughout the world) which do ordain women. During the Decade, for example, women have been ordained to the priesthood in the Anglican Church in Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales. The struggle for the ordination of women to the priesthood in England was especially bitter and to that I shall return.

The Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches are now the exception in not ordaining women. Although the official Roman Catholic line against the ordination of women to the priesthood has hardened during the Decade, the grass-roots movement in favour has

grown. Campaign groups such as BASIC, in Ireland, and Catholic Women's Ordination (CWO) in England, Wales and Scotland are growing and hold regular vigils and liturgies outside cathedrals. They are linked to a movement for Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW). Moreover opinion polls reported in the *Tablet* have revealed clear majorities in favour of the ordination of women to the priesthood in places such as Spain and Ireland as well as in England.

This issue has not as yet been raised at all strongly in the Orthodox Church even though theologians are to be found in that church who will speak and write in favour of the ordination of women to the priesthood. Some oriental and Orthodox Churches have also begun to consider the ordination of women to the diaconate. A pan-Orthodox Conference in Crete declared this to be consistent with tradition but so far no action has been taken.

Nevertheless, in spite of the situation in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches it is true to say that at the end of the Decade more churches ordain women, many women are in responsible, full-time, stipendiary ministry and they are loved and welcomed by their congregations.

The Methodist Church, for example, reported:

As at September 1997, there were 479 women presbyters, in a total of 2,197 presbyters. Of those women, one was a chair of district, four were synod secretaries and thirty six were superintendent ministers. For the first time, more than 50 percent of the candidates accepted for training in all categories of presbyteral ministry were women.

The Church of England reported:

During the Decade women have been ordained for the first time to the priesthood. As at the end of 1996, there were 340 women incumbents or of incumbent status, 464 in assistant curate posts. . . . Legalisation passed in 1992 and 1995 opened the way for women to be appointed as archdeacons, canons and deans or provosts. There are now ten women residential canons and one female archdeacon.⁸

All this is very pleasing – but behind these rather self-congratulatory comments there lurk serious problems for women. Ten women canons in forty-three cathedrals is not a large number while one

woman archdeacon (soon to retire) is a piece of tokenism. A number of new archdeacons and residentiary canons have been appointed in the last few months and the opportunity to appoint women to these posts has been completely lost. This situation is also reflected in other churches.

In her 1997–1998 Whitley Lecture, Ruth Gouldbourne, a Baptist minister, points out that in 1967 the Baptist Union Council received a report which re-emphasized the Baptist position that ‘there are no grounds of principle or doctrine for debarring women duly qualified from any of the special forms of ministry’.⁹ In 1992, the latest year for which she has figures, there were 102 women out of a total of 2,187 ministers. She continues by saying, ‘We have had no women superintendents, no woman has been head of a department of the Union and only two women have served as president of the Union. In 1995–96, out of 225 members of Council, there are forty-two women.’¹⁰

The picture that emerges is of churches ordaining women in larger numbers and those women finding acceptance, but only a very few of them making it to the ‘higher’ echelons of responsibility in the churches. There often seem to be only ‘token’ women in leadership, for example, only one woman ever President of the Methodist Conference, not one ordained woman national Moderator of the URC or, as noted above, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Moreover, it is often claimed that the women who do get the ‘higher offices’ are ‘safe women’ and not ones who would challenge the system.

Writing in the May 1998 edition of *Life and Work*, the magazine of the Church of Scotland, Margaret Forrester says that ‘there is no other job in the whole world that I would rather do’.¹¹ Yet she also says ‘Clearly women find it possible to obtain what is popularly called a “first charge”’. It is relatively easy to be called to a rural or isolated charge, to a terminable charge, to an assistantship, to an urban priority area charge, to a difficult inner city charge. But the ‘second charge’ is much harder for a woman. ‘The comfortable suburban charge, the city centre charge, the county town charge, will have very few women, if any.’

So far as the still non-existent first woman moderator is concerned, Margaret comments:

Much has been written about the possible nomination of the first woman Moderator of the General Assembly. To my certain knowl-

edge, three have allowed their names to go forward but, so far, none has been elected. I leave it to others to wonder whether there is the so called 'glass ceiling' which women experience in other professions. There appears to be no barrier. But perhaps there is.¹²

The picture which Margaret paints is one that can be matched in the other churches in these islands. The North West Ecumenical Decade Group held their End of Decade Celebrations in William Temple Church, Wythenshawe, Manchester. It is a huge church designed by the architect George Pace in the 1960s when the enormous overspill and slum clearance estate was being built. The sheer size of the building demonstrates the confidence of the Church of England at the time. It is matched by other very large church buildings put up by the other denominations. Now they are all largely empty on Sunday mornings with small congregations spread out between them, instead of in one ecumenical church. The estate is rife with social problems and the shopping centre is grim. Most of the churches are now staffed by women because men will not go there.

William Temple Church has a single woman priest as the vicar. She was appointed after four men had turned the place down as it 'was not fit to take their families to live there'. The vicar is a former student of mine – a wonderful person. The good news is that she is making a real go of it, obviously loved by all her people and says she would not be anywhere else in the world – even if she has been burgled several times and has to be constantly vigilant about security. There is also an inspiring sense of team spirit and friendship amongst the women ministers of the various churches who serve that area. These are the signs of hope.

Of course, if Ann were married maybe she would not be there either. I don't know. Certainly through the *Living letters*, the summary of the reports of the WCC Team visits at the end of the Decade, the churches are asked,

where they already ordain women, to affirm them by clearly providing vocational opportunities and practical support to help congregations accept women pastors with joy and gratitude, making sure in the case of married women pastors that their placement takes the whole family's situation into account.¹³

The quotations elsewhere in *Living letters* confirm the general position in Britain and Ireland about the difficulty of women obtaining posts of responsibility. One example is the following quotation from the USA:

In one church where women have been ordained since 1970 only four of the sixty ordained clergy are women. In another where women have been ordained for over 120 years, only 30 of the church's 9,000 ordained ministers are senior women pastors.¹⁴

This emphasis on the need for women to be given senior posts would be attacked by some as a search for power. I would deny that charge and maintain that it is about the search to use to the full the gifts that God has given. I would also say that it is – or needs to be – a search to use one's gifts to the full to change the Church.

A new model for ministry?

This brings me back to the bitter struggle for women to be ordained to the priesthood in the Church of England.

When many of the Free Church women struggled to be accepted and ordained as ministers only one skeleton fell out of the cupboard, that of ordination of women. In the extended struggle in the Church of England all the issues came out into the open: priesthood, ordination, inclusive language, motherhood of God, issues of sexuality etc. It made the battle long and bitter but it did enable us to face all the issues together and to have a chance to break masculine moulds of ministry.

Many of the women in the Free Churches were ordained to a masculine model of ministry; indeed many of them claimed – and some still do – that they did not know why women's ministry differed from men's.

Writing in 1994, Janet Wootton, a Congregationalist minister of tremendous gifts, said:

When I was first ordained, I was interviewed by a local newspaper. A woman reporter came and we began commiserating with each other: 'You've been sent to cover me as women's news, haven't you?' – 'Yes' – 'Oh well . . .'

I can remember her asking what qualities I would be bringing to the church as a 'woman minister'. At the time, my answer was that I wasn't a 'woman minister', I was simply a minister and I just

wanted to get on with the job. I knew women as well as men ministers and did not perceive any great difference . . .

However, the intense discussion arising out of the Church of England's debate has raised the question of women's specific contribution, and I have been forced to consider what it means for me, a woman, to be a minister, and, what is more, what it means for me to stand in solidarity with women of other denominations in their struggle.¹⁵

In 1993 the Methodist Conference established a Commission on 'Women Presbyters in the Church' to study the experience of women presbyters in the Methodist Church and the response of the church to that experience. A year later, the Methodist Conference shared in an act of worship to celebrate twenty years of ordination of women as presbyters. I heard a critical account of that service given by a male minister at the Darlington Methodist Synod because it raised sharp issues and did not just give thanks! A Methodist lay woman friend of mine had the same experience at the Newcastle District Synod. Some people just wanted to believe that everything in the garden was lovely.

In 1995 the Report of the Commission on Women Presbyters, *A cry of the beloved*, was brought back to Conference and made specific recommendations. These were not adopted but the Conference did receive the report and commend it for study and action and since then some of the recommendations have been implemented. The report made it clear that not all Methodist women ministers shared the concerns: 'I am deeply disturbed to realize that the Church has found it necessary to set up a Commission on Women Presbyters, or even need for a Women's Forum'.¹⁶ Nevertheless other women have recognized the need for that Forum, which includes amongst its aims 'to be part of the process of the regeneration of the Church by offering an alternative perspective'. This is stated as to 'offer alternatives, ways, patterns, models, thinking . . . in the development of liturgy, spirituality, pastoral care, ministry, and structures, all characterised by inclusiveness, collaborative methods and the creation of community'.

Women ministers of the Baptist Church have expressed some concerns similar to those of the Methodist women. The Revd Keith Jones, the Deputy General Secretary of the Baptist Union, wrote in the *Baptist Times* in 1996:

I regret that we have not had the deep debate some other traditions have had about the place of leadership of women. Baptists in England 'slid' into ordaining women in ministry early this century, but if we are honest there are still far too many no-go areas for women, and we are impoverished, I believe, by not having the insights of some of our very gifted women ministers on the Board of the General Superintendents, more frequent women presidents and more women in senior staff positions within our associations and Union.¹⁷

What difference will it make?

What about the Church of England? In the struggle for ordination to the priesthood all the issues of language, theology and new visions for the Church were able to come into the open. How far are they being taken up by women to try to model a new inclusive Church? The picture varies enormously from place to place and woman to woman.

I had the great privilege of being ordained priest by Bishop David Jenkins in Durham Cathedral. We were lucky as women in the Diocese of Durham. In the time of preparation for the priesthood the Bishop made money available to us to thrash out the issues. He encouraged us to be adventurous; he supported, loved and challenged. At a special residential meeting at Minsteracres Monastery in Northumberland – in the snow – we wrestled with questions. What difference will our priesting make to us? To the church? To concepts of God? For light relief we made a snow-woman and cheered Bishop David when he battled through the snow to join us. When we returned to Minsteracres for our pre-ordination retreat Bishop David gave two addresses, one entitled 'Why the ordination of women is the most wonderful thing which has happened since Creation' and the other entitled 'Why the ordination of women does not matter a damn!' In other words, to ordain women is to affirm that women are truly made fully in the image of God – but don't you women dare get clericalized, for ordination is to service and not to power.

In the four years since the ordination of women four issues have arisen in the Church of England, three of which parallel developments in the other churches. It is as if our debate fuelled their debate and then in turn their debate raised issues for us.

The issue peculiar to the Church of England is the existence of so-called 'flying bishops'. The General Synod of the Church of

England voted for the measure to ordain women to the priesthood after many years of debate. In 1993, after a short debate, the Synod was persuaded by the House of Bishops to pass an 'Act of Synod' which gave parishes the right to refuse to accept the ministry of their own bishop if he had ordained women, and to ask to have the services of a provincial episcopal visitor instead. These so-called 'flying bishops' were specially consecrated to minister to such parishes. Many individual clergy claim that these 'flying bishops' are their fathers in God, rather than their diocesan bishops. The priesthood of women is described as invalid and the eucharists at which women preside are not recognized.

In some places a 'theology of taint' is peddled. Women priests have been subjected to harassment and sexual innuendo. Some have received very objectionable letters. In a recent exhibition of his work in Dover Street, John Pelling, who is both artist and priest opposed to the ordination of women, expressed his views on women's ordination using fetishistic images, details of women's genitalia and swastikas.

The three issues which have arisen in the Church of England and which find certain parallels in the debate in other churches are:

- the use of the full gifts of women in positions of responsibility, including as bishops;
- how we can be *women* priests and not imitation male priests;
- how women priests can work with male priests and lay people to build up an inclusive church.

The desire for these led in 1997 to the setting up of WATCH (Women and the Church) a successor movement (though broader) to MOW (Movement for the Ordination of Women).

WATCH has a vision of the Church of England as a community of God's people where (regardless of their gender) justice and equality prevail. WATCH believes that this vision is rooted in the scriptures and enfolds God's will for the whole world.

Aims 7 and 8 are as follows:

- 7 A positive attitude to issues such as a renewed concept of God, collaborative working, inclusive language, questions of sexuality, and education in these matters inside and outside of the Church.

8 An understanding of a collaborative Church as an opportunity for growth and change for God's people rather than as an occasion for fear.¹⁸

WATCH is growing slowly – but only slowly. There seem to be two sets of reasons for this. Some people think that its brief is too wide and unfocused and would prefer a single-issue movement about women bishops. Other people think that it is too strident or belligerent, or even dangerous, because its statement mentions sexuality.

An inclusive Church

Somehow all the issues have to be kept together. In the Church of England we want women as bishops but as bishops of an inclusive church in which all are welcome and the ministry of all is affirmed. I recognize that some women priests are not 'boat-rockers'. They just want to get their heads down and get on with the job. I recognize this, but I also want them to get on with the job in a renewed, inclusive way and not just imitate models of an oppressive or disabling male priesthood. I also want them to realize that a few of us feel we have to be boat-rockers for the sake of the kingdom, even if secretly some of us – at least at times – would like to be able to be moored in some quiet stream and worship and serve God in tranquillity! There needs to be mutual support and mutual understanding of different roles – and no calumny.

At a conference held at St George's, Windsor, in September 1997, to reflect theologically on the experience of women priests in England, I tried to raise the kind of issues we had discussed so freely in Durham: namely, how women priests should help people to grasp more easily feminine concepts of God and how we could be women priests and not just imitation men. These points were not well received even in that gathering. At least in part this was due to a fear that we would rock the boat by talking of feminine images of God. So far as being priests who are women is concerned, the issues are more complex. It is not easy to define what differentiates us as women without getting into stereotypes. The concept of 'equal but different' has been used in the past to oppress women. To take this out of the Anglican court for a moment, Ruth Gouldbourne comments:

I am rather suspicious of the 'different but equal' description. It seems to me that it has been used to define, or rather to limit, what

is appropriate or possible for women – that is, for women as a class, not individual women – while not creating a corresponding definition for men.¹⁹

She also goes on to say that ‘equal but different’ has been used to mean different and so (for women) inferior.

The most commonly quoted ‘differences’ in women’s ministry are those of being concerned about feelings and about relationships and collaborative working. Although these characteristics are often shown by women, yet it is also true that men possess them as well. Perhaps at this stage, at the end of the Decade, what we should be pressing for is more human and more participatory ways of exercising ministry by both men and women, urging those who feel this way to have more courage in putting this model into practice throughout the churches. In this way the Church would become not only more participatory but also a clearer model of a true community of women and men.

Being on the edge

Ruth Gouldbourne thinks that women do bring something particular to ministry. She believes that what women can bring supremely at the moment is the experience of being outsiders, on the edge. Working from this standpoint will constantly involve women in criticizing the current mode of the Church and striving to establish new models. It is not a comfortable position and this is why some women ministers just want to be ‘one of the boys’ and get their heads down and get on with ministry in the traditional way. If the Decade is to have any lasting effect and if the Church is ever to be changed we must hang on to our sense of being on the edge even when fully engaged in the middle.

During the Decade the Anglican Church worldwide has seen the advent of women bishops even though not in the UK. One of them, Bishop Penny Jamieson of Dunedin in New Zealand, has wrestled with these issues as she has tried to work out her style of episcopal ministry as the only woman bishop in New Zealand. She has written about this in her book entitled *Living at the edge: sacrament and solidarity in leadership*.

She confesses that:

In my best moments I have a strong sense of the completeness that comes when we follow where God calls; but there is also a sense

of divine discomfort as I seek to work out the way of authenticity for the church which has called me at this time, and for myself as the one who is called.²⁰

She also says:

I have found that some women are particularly skilled at exercising a relational style of leadership. I have observed women, through the quality of these relationships, giving a church a strong sense of its worth and strong affirmation of its being. In so doing they impart a vision of a community that is generous hearted, because the God they know and love, and who they know loves them, is so generous hearted. They are inclusive and open in their relations, and find it a privilege to welcome into their number people who are misfits elsewhere in society . . . At its best, such leadership is an enormously satisfying calling. It is a style that is not and need not be confined to women; it is a model for all of us.

This model of leadership works well in parish life; I have found it more difficult to put into practice as a bishop . . . primarily, the style of leadership that I am exploring and suggesting relies on modelling for the communication of its essence. It self-destructs with an excessively authoritarian style, and it often depends on hints and humour for its effectiveness. It is essentially about the nature of the Christian community, about its culture; and it relies on a measure of personal closeness.²¹

When WATCH had its inaugural eucharist in St Martin-in-the-Fields in May 1997, the president and her assistant ministers stood, not at the high altar, but at a round table in front of the altar. On the cover of the service booklet were extracts from a poem from WCC resources entitled 'In search of a round table'. The kind of ministry that one prays will result from the ordination of women is a ministry of leadership and reconciliation that enables the people of God to meet around a table to welcome Christ into their midst and to be equipped in this way to minister to a broken, suffering and divided world. It will be a long, slow and painful process to remodel the Church and her ministry in this way but I believe that in this Ecumenical Decade we have taken some steps in the right direction.

Concerning the why and how and what
and who of ministry,
one image keeps surfacing:
a table that is round.

It will take some sawing
 to be roundtabled,
 some re-defining
 and re-designing.
 Such re-doing and re-birthing
 of narrow Churching
 can painful be
 for people and tables.

But so was the cross a table too painful
 of giving and yes

And from such death comes life,
 and from such dying comes rising.²²

Jean Mayland, mother, grandmother, sometime magistrate and active in the ecumenical movement for many years, was ordained priest in 1994. She has been Associate Secretary for the Community of Women and Men in the Church at the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland since April 1996.

NOTES

1 Keith Jones, comment reported in the *Baptist Times* (23 April 1998).

2 Report on Implementation of *Report on role of women in the church* (Ireland: Methodist Church, 1995).

3 *Responses to the Decade*, a Report by the Associate Secretary for the Community of Women and Men at the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (March 1998), p 9.

4 *Ibid.*, p 6.

5 *Ibid.*, p 10.

6 Letter from the Deputy General Secretary of the Baptist Union (3 March 1998).

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Responses to the Decade*, p 8.

9 Ruth M. B. Gouldbourne, *Reinventing the wheel: women and ministry in English Baptist life* (The Whitley Lecture 1997–1998), p 29.

10 *Ibid.*, p 29.

11 Margaret Forrester in *Life and Work* (Church of Scotland, May 1998), p 20.

12 *Ibid.*, p 19.

13 *Living letters: a report of the visits to the Churches during the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in solidarity with women* (WCC, 1997), p 49.

14 *Ibid.*, p 34.

15 Janet Wootton in Newsletter no 70 of the Society for the Ministry of Women in the Church (Spring 1994), p 13.

16 The Commission on Women Presbyters and the Church, *A cry of the beloved*, Report to Conference, 1995, p 9.

17 Keith Jones, ‘What shape the Union?’, *Baptist Times* (4 July 1996).

- 18 Extract from the flyer for WATCH (Women and the Church).
- 19 Ruth M. B. Gouldbourne, *Reinventing the wheel*, p 31.
- 20 Penny Jamieson, *Living on the edge: sacrament and solidarity in leadership* (Mowbray, 1997), p 20.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp 145–146.
- 22 WCC Resources: extract from an original longer poem by Church Lathrop (USA) (Appalachian Documentation, Washington).