

Section V: Analysis and Conclusions

Final Summary

This section concludes the formal work of the Theological Task Force on Holy Orders. In it, we review the commission given to us as a Task Force, discuss the wider context of our study, and make recommendations to the College, as it moves forward in addressing the important issue of women in holy orders.

What We Were Asked to Do

When the Task Force was formed in late 2012, Archbishop Robert Duncan charged us “to lead the College of Bishops in a discussion about the issue of women in holy orders.” In light of this commission, we have provided the College with the information which we believe is necessary for an informed theological and scholarly discussion of this issue.

It is important to recognize that it was not our task to provide a solution to this controversy. Those who read our work with such an expectation will be disappointed.

Following the Method of Procedure, outlined in the beginning of our work, we first addressed the hermeneutical and ecclesiological principles which inform any discussion over the ordination of women. Many equally fine and godly scholars have come to differing conclusions, despite looking at the same biblical texts.

We believe that these differences of interpretation derive from differing theological commitments concerning the way in which the church functions as the context for interpreting Scripture and the nature of the ordained ministry. These differences are the particular focus of our study in the third section of our report.

The Task Force is comprised of advocates for and against the ordination of women. Each member has represented his or her convictions with integrity and robust argument. Both perspectives on this issue have been strongly represented; however, we were able to conduct our deliberations in an atmosphere of Christian love and friendship.

What We Have Learned

As the Task Force conducted its work, we not only relied upon the scholarly ability of our members, but also consulted various other scholars, both personally and through their published and unpublished writings. We have been careful to listen to academic voices on both sides of the issue and have endeavored to give balanced consideration to the material that we have received.

The Task Force has recognized that there are two general perspectives on holy orders which inform the discussion of women's ordination. We have adopted the terms "Evangelical" and "Catholic" as a short-hand way of identifying the two groups; but any such nomenclature in this regard can be misleading.

The lines between Evangelical, Catholic, High Church or Low Church perspectives are often more porous now than they were in the nineteenth century, when these terms originated. Nevertheless, we have recognized that those who advocate for the ordination of women do so most often on the basis of characteristically Evangelical values, and those who argue against the ordination of women do so most often on the basis of characteristically Anglo-Catholic values.

That said, it must be recognized that there is a strong voice in the Evangelical and Reformed camp, which is opposed to the ordination of women; and there are some Anglo-Catholics, who argue for the inclusion of women in holy orders. We have attempted to acknowledge this in the essays provided in the previous section.

The reader should therefore bear in mind that these terms are used here for convenience and are not meant to account for everything that they imply in other discussions. It also is possible that identification with Evangelicalism or Anglo-Catholicism, based upon liturgical preferences, may belie a theology that has more in common with the other perspective. Moreover, some individuals may hold eclectic and possibly self-contradictory hermeneutical and ecclesiological commitments, rather than a consistent theological approach.

We recognize that there is a great deal of theological unity within our Province between the other provinces comprising the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON). Our discussion about the ordination of women should not obscure the extent to which we share a common sense of mission and witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, within a common Anglican heritage.

We believe that the shared hermeneutical principles, articulated in the Section II of our work and approved by the College of Bishops, are a valuable contribution to the life of the Church.

Despite this broad agreement, there are differences in hermeneutics and ecclesiology which result in very different views of ordination. These divergent views entail the lack of a common language for discussion ordination: each side has developed its own way of speaking. The Task Force has given a great deal of effort to learn each other's "language," and attempted to provide a guide to each perspective's language in the third section of this report.

In addition, while many ecclesiological values are held in common, the divergent perspectives place those values in differing hierarchies of importance. Thus, as we note in section four, differing weight given to certain values has led to different conclusions with regard to women's ordination. So, for example, the varying importance given to the church fathers, ecumenical concerns (and differing ecumenical partners), and God's continuing correction of the Church will significantly affect an individual's views on this issue.

The Task Force finds arguments on both sides are anchored within accepted Anglican perspectives. Both sides are guarding important biblical truths. The gospel radically changes our understanding of who we are in Christ; nonetheless, God created humanity as male and female, and the New Testament's teaching on marriage reaffirms the goodness of this sexual difference. Each side affirms both propositions; however, a difference in the way each proposition is understood leads to divergent views on the relationship between man and woman in the family and in the church.

What We Recommend

Women's ordination has not been accepted by the whole church, despite its existence for decades. The support for the ordination of women has not dissipated over those decades either. Godly, learned scholars within Anglicanism argue both for and against ordaining women. Both sides must reflect on this reality.

We are mindful of the Christian call to unity. Many in the Church have come to be wary of calls to compromise the truth for the sake of unity. There are indeed times when insurmountable differences as to core principles inevitably lead to division, or when a break in spiritual unity through the violation of trust is reflected in an outward division of the Church.

However, the unity of the Church, rightly understood, is in fact a guardian of truth: both because it requires a discipline of love and self-denial, which leads to the "holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14; 1 Cor 13:5); and because it is the united Church which shares in the mind of Christ and testifies to the truth of the Gospel (Phil 2:2-5; Acts 15:24-28; John 17:21, 23). We encourage the College to remember the Christian call to unity.

We also encourage the members of the College of Bishops to commit to one another in patience, love, honesty and integrity, as this discussion moves forward. In this respect, we must learn from the past. The Episcopal Church's discussion of women's ordination was superficially structured in the right way. Anglicans approach controversies in a conciliar manner and emphasize the importance of dialogue, and the discussion seemed to be guided by these principles. Sadly, there was a great deal of disconnect between words and actions. Many believed that the actions taken by church leaders were duplicitous and promises were not kept.¹

There is a great temptation to be so committed to the "rightness" of one's own position, that forbearance, love and mutual submission are lost. However, failure to maintain trust and integrity with one another will destroy Godly unity. Any structure for dialogue will only be as good as the level of trust that is maintained between the people involved in that process.

The Task Force is aware that there is a great deal of anxiety for many in our Province on both sides, who hold this issue to be of great importance. Some may be tempted to act on this anxiety, if their desired outcome is not realized in this report or in the College's use

¹ This is chronicled in Marjorie W. Avery, Peggy Bruce and Cris Fouse, eds. *Small Steps Down a Slippery Slope: A Capsule of Recent Events in the Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (Moline, IL: Forward in Faith, 2007).

of it. We encourage the College of Bishops to be aware of the extent to which anxiety can be a powerful motivator toward detrimental, reactionary behavior and to be a model of peace and stability to each other and the dioceses we serve.

We encourage the College in its discussions, to be conscious of the language used in discussion and the definition of terms, as highlighted in Section II.4 of this report.

Many on both sides of this issue believe that ordaining women to the priesthood implies, logically and theologically, the consecration of women to the episcopate. In the third section of this report, however, we observed that one characteristic of the episcopate is its role as a sign of the church's unity.

Because the ordination of women remains a hotly contested issue among orthodox Anglicans, it would appear that ordaining a woman to the episcopate is itself a controversial action that would result in disunity among the College of Bishops and GAFCON. The constitution of our Province does not permit the consecration of women to the episcopate, and recognizing this aspect of episcopacy provides a theological rationale for our constitutional provision.

The center of gravity in the Christian world generally, and in the Anglican Communion specifically, is shifting to the global south. Our decisions must be made in concert with our GAFCON partners, which may not look at this issue through western eyes and with western theological baggage.

The Method of Procedure detailed in this report and adopted by the College of Bishops makes provision for interaction with the GAFCON primates, so we remind the College that our Province needs to work in concert with our GAFCON partners in addressing this issue.

Because our province includes both those who ordain women and those who reject this practice, the Task Force urges the College of Bishop to draft principles of conduct, which will guide the Province in a common understanding of how we relate to one another, while maintaining our differences. Guidance from the bishops will help minimize misunderstanding and hurtful offenses, while allowing for the maintenance of integrity and conscience among our people.

While the Task Force acknowledges that both perspectives on the issue of women's ordination have anchored their opinions in accepted principles within the Anglican tradition, we advocate continued efforts toward closer unity on this issue. To be content with the current situation would be in violation of our Lord's desire and prayer that his people be one.

While Anglicans may disagree on a number of matters, the divisive nature of this particular issue, even in the best of circumstances, is an impediment to a unified sacramental ministry of our province. However, a precipitous decision, simply for the sake moving past this issue, would not reflect the love that is required by God's people. Both positions on this issue cannot be right, but both positions are held by good and godly people. Work toward a resolution of this issue must move forward, but it should be done with patience and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Task Force encourages the College of Bishops to adopt a schedule of discussion that allows for sufficient time for study, prayer and interaction.

Conclusion

Over the course of our study, we have found that no single argument, either way, that clearly settles this controversy to the satisfaction of all. Anglicans on both sides hold their opinion with a sincere wish to serve God and uphold the gospel.

The obligation for those engaged in this discussion, as it continues, is not simply to consider individual needs and opinions, or to defer to the judgments of the society around us, but to consider this decision in the context of Scripture and the implications it will have for the future of the Church.

It is our prayer that the work produced by the Task Force will provide our bishops and province with the grounds for a respectful and informed understanding of why we come to differing conclusions about ordination of women. Too often, fruitful discussion of this controversy is impeded by misunderstanding and ill-founded assumptions about why someone may hold a particular theological position. Any hope of making progress toward a common mind must begin with mutual understanding and respect. We offer our work to the College of Bishops in this spirit.