

From fourteen concerned Bishops

To the signatories of the open letter from 1,400 clergy to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York concerning the ordination of women to the episcopate

The Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 2008

Dear colleagues,

We share the shock and disappointment you must be feeling following the recent debate and decision of the General Synod on provision for those opposed to the ordination of women to the episcopate in the Church of England.

The Lambeth Conference has given us good opportunities to meet together to talk and support one another. We want to share with you the experience that through our time together we have discovered a new sense of unity among us as bishops, and indeed our need of one another. In conversation we have become increasingly aware of the many priests and deacons, as well as other faithful, who are looking to us for a lead at the moment. It is particularly to you, the 1,400 clergy who signed the open letter to the Archbishops, that we are writing, but we hope you will share this letter, as we shall, with others, both clergy and parish members, who share our concerns.

We write to assure you that we understand the difficulties we are all facing in the light of the instruction by General Synod to the Legislative Drafting Group (“The Manchester Group”) to prepare legislation with only a statutory code of practice for those unable for reasons of theological conviction to recognise or accept the ordination of women to the episcopate in the absence of wider Catholic consensus.

We identify with your difficult and painful feelings because they are ours too.

It is now clear that the majority in this General Synod, and probably in the Church of England at large, believes it is right to admit women to the episcopate. If that is so, it is vital for the most catholic of reasons that there must be no qualifications or restrictions to their ministry. That means however that proper ecclesial provision must be made for those who cannot accept this innovation.

A code of practice in any form cannot deliver such ecclesial provision, and we want the Manchester Group and the House of Bishops to be in no doubt about the seriousness of the situation. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the General Synod vote was merely an instruction to the Legislative Drafting Group, and it is by no means clear that the House of Laity would support legislation whose inevitable consequence would be the exclusion of substantial numbers of faithful Anglicans from the Church of England. The patterns of voting in the General Synod, not least on the amendment proposed by the Bishop of Ripon and Leeds (seeking to keep open the option of “statutory transfer of specified responsibilities”), may also give the House of Bishops pause for thought, and everyone should remember that the House of Bishops has determined that it wishes to remain “in the driving seat” in this process. We shall be encouraging the House of Bishops to recognise that proper ecclesial provision would enable the Church of England both to honour the wish of the majority for women to be admitted to the episcopate and also create a space in which the theological convictions of others are respected in fact as well as in words. In this way both groups would have the opportunity to flourish in as high a degree of fellowship as possible while the “open process of reception” continues.

This is a complex situation and we acknowledge that people and groups will react differently. Different decisions should be respected and supported, including that of those who have come to believe that fidelity to the faith we have received means that they can no longer remain within the communion of the Church of England. As bishops, however, we want to say that this is not a necessary conclusion. We are being encouraged by friends in the other historic churches to continue to struggle for the catholic identity of the

Church of England. The legislative and synodical process will be long and we have time to reflect and pray before any final decisions are taken.

Many matters will become clearer during the next few months - critical moments will be the House of Bishops meetings in October and December and the General Synod in February 2009. We are not saying, "We are bishops, trust us", but we are assuring you that we are doing what we can to ensure that the Church of England at the very least honours the solemn assurances of an honoured and permanent place given by undertakings it made in the early 1990s. We are also determined to remain faithful to the ARCIC vision of full visible unity which has been an Anglican commitment for forty years and is the context in which we have consistently understood our Anglican ecclesiology.

At the same time as we are feeling bewilderment and disappointment, others in the Church of England are rejoicing. However hard it is, it is essential that we behave with grace and charity towards everyone. We are faced with apparently irreconcilable differences in matters of faith and order, and it is important to try to conduct all conversations and debates in a spirit of generosity even when church-dividing issues are at stake.

Remember too that some speeches in the General Synod and reactions since have shown that there are many people, including bishops, who do not agree with us about women bishops but do not want to see the marginalisation or exclusion of our contribution from the ongoing life of the Church of England. We hope that everyone will remain in close touch with their own bishops. This is both for the sake of catholic principle and so that they are aware of your determination to continue to strive for Gospel truth and unity in the Church of England.

We want you to know that we are committed to praying for each other and for you. We want to thank you for your faithfulness in difficult days and invite anyone who wants to speak or write to any of us to do so.

In one of his meditations, the great John Henry Newman reminds himself of his calling, "I have a part in a great work. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good." Twice Newman consoles himself in the same meditation with the words, "He knows what he is about ... Still, he knows what he is about."

Therefore, comfort one another with these words.

Your friends and fellow servants in Christ,

✠John Hind
Bishop of Chichester

✠Nicholas Reade
Bishop of Blackburn

✠Geoffrey Rowell
Bishop of Gibraltar in Europe

✠John Broadhurst
Bishop of Fulham

✠Andrew Burnham
Bishop of Ebbsfleet

✠John Ford
Bishop of Plymouth

✠John Goddard
Bishop of Burnley

✠Martyn Jarrett
Bishop of Beverley

✠Robert Ladds
Bishop of Whitby

✠Keith Newton
Bishop of Richborough

✠Paul Richardson
Assistant Bishop of Newcastle

✠Tony Robinson
Bishop of Pontefract

✠Lindsay Urwin
Bishop of Horsham

✠Peter Wheatley
Bishop of Edmonton