You will all know that earlier this year Bishop Philip North was nominated to be the Bishop of Sheffield. The announcement was made from 10, Downing Street on 31st January. On the 9th March Downing Street announced that Bishop Philip had withdrawn his acceptance of the nomination.

On 23rd March the Archbishops of Canterbury and York wrote to Sir Philip Mawer, the Independent Reviewer, asking him to address certain concerns which had arisen in the Church concerning Bishop Philip’s nomination and subsequent withdrawal. Sir Philip set to work immediately. He held 40 different meetings in Sheffield, York, Oxford, and London, meeting 76 people. In addition he received 48 written submissions. These included one from Forward in Faith, which is published as an appendix to the report.

The report was published in September. It is a thorough and detailed report, running to 74 pages plus 24 long appendices. It can be found on line through links via the Church of England and Forward in Faith websites.

Sir Philip begins by setting out the background to the Sheffield matter – the 2014 Settlement on women bishops, the Five Guiding Principles and Mutual Flourishing, and his role as Independent Reviewer. He then gives a detailed narrative of events from the announcement in April 2016 that Bishop Steven Croft was to leave Sheffield to become Bishop of Oxford. He goes on through the events leading to the nomination of Bishop Philip and the reaction to that announcement and his withdrawal. The narrative ends with the nomination of Dr Peter Wilcox to the See of Sheffield and his subsequent consecration on 22 June 2017.

In their letter to Sir Philip the Archbishops raised five questions to which I now turn.

(a) what has been done in the Church, including in the diocese of Sheffield, to inform and educate clergy and laity about the settlement agreed in 2014, and the effect of the Declaration within that settlement;

Sir Philip concludes that not enough has been done, even in Sheffield where more was done than in some dioceses. He found anecdotal evidence that in Sheffield more attention had been paid to explaining the 2014 Settlement in those parishes which dissented from women’s ordination than in those which accepted it. He recommends that the House of Bishops commissions a group with balanced membership to review what has been done; distil examples of good practice within
dioceses; and provide resources to help dioceses, deaneries and parishes, and theological training institutions to engage in further consideration of the issues.

He says that this process will require attention to two key issues.

One relates to the theology underlying the Settlement and the need to address criticisms of it by Professor Martin Percy, the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford and others. Professor Percy argues that a man who will not ordain women priests and who cannot accept their sacramental ministry cannot be a diocesan bishop. Sir Philip responds (and I quote) ‘I fully respect Professor Percy’s right to hold and express these views. I do not, however, believe his view of what constitutes ‘mutual flourishing’ is consistent with what the House and the Synod had in mind in espousing the Declaration and the Five Guiding Principles. Rather the mutual flourishing referred to in the fifth Guiding Principle was and is about remaining in the highest possible degree of communion in spite of difference for as long as the Church continues to be in dialogue, in a process of ‘reception’, on the subject of women’s role in ministry. During that period there are – as the Declaration makes clear – to be no limits on the offices in the Church which are open to those of differing views on the issue (paragraph 13). All are to be treated equally (paragraph 15).’ End of Quote

The second key issue is the challenge, as much pastoral as theological, posed by women clergy and lay ministers in the diocese of Sheffield as to what the nomination of a non-ordaining bishop as a diocesan implies for their ministry including what it means for the expression of that ministry in practice.

(b) the process leading to the nomination of Bishop Philip North to the See of Sheffield;

Sir Philip finds that the process was conducted entirely in accordance with agreed procedures.

He goes on to recommend that certain issues should be considered by the current review into the operation of the Crown Nomination Commission (which nominates names of diocesan bishops to the Prime Minister). These should include the issue of the extent to which the cloak of confidentiality currently surrounding the work of the Commission can be relaxed in order to ensure the degree of preparation for the announcement of a nomination commensurate with the controversy it is likely to arouse.

(c) the consistency of that nomination with the Declaration;

Sir Philip concludes that the nomination of Bishop North to the vacancy in the See of Sheffield was entirely consistent with the House of Bishops’ Declaration. He recommends that the House invites the Faith and Order Commission to examine the theological challenge which has been posed to the 2014 Settlement and that the results of this work, together with the House’s response to the pastoral challenge of
what a non-ordaining bishop means for women clergy, be used to inform the ongoing process of discussion and education about the Settlement for which he has also called.

(d) the reactions to the nomination in the Church and beyond;
(e) the response of the institutional Church to the nomination and the reactions to it.

Sir Philip found that there was a failure of all concerned to anticipate the likely reaction in the diocese of Sheffield to the news of Bishop North’s nomination and to make preparations accordingly. ‘With the benefit of hindsight, it is odd that no one person or institution either clearly saw the need to have a clear strategy in place as to how this was going to work or was in a position to make this happen’.

He found that this was caused by the different responsibilities of various bodies. The Crown Nominations Commission was responsible for nominating the bishop, but once it had done that the responsibility for making the announcement passed to the Crown. The emphasis on confidentiality meant that even those members of the Commission, such as the Bishop of Doncaster, who were concerned about the likely reception of the announcement felt inhibited in taking others into their confidence in order to pursue preparations. Whatever the reasons, Bishop North’s nomination revealed a lacuna as to who sees it as their responsibility to co-ordinate the handling of the announcement of a new diocesan bishop in circumstances where, like Bishop North’s, it might raise high profile issues.

Sir Philip considered whether there was a ‘campaign’ against Bishop Philip but concluded that the strength of the reaction immediately following the announcement could be more readily attributed to the failure of anyone to identify in advance the possibility of a non-ordaining bishop being appointed than to the effects of a well organised ‘campaign’.

He recommended that, together with his colleagues in the National Church Institutions, and those involved in the dioceses of Sheffield and Blackburn, the Secretary General reviews the lessons to be learned from what happened in order to avoid a similar lacuna occurring in future.

Concluding Remarks

In concluding Sir Philip said firstly, that we should be wary of drawing the conclusions that Bishop Philip’s withdrawal from Sheffield represents a failure of the 2014 settlement.

Secondly, the story of what happened in respect of the Sheffield nomination is not populated by villains but by people who were simply seeking to do their best according to their own understanding of their responsibilities and in the light of their Christian convictions, so he refrained from criticising anyone.

Finally, he says ‘But at the end of the day, the choice facing the Church is a simple one – whether to continue on the path it has been treading since women were first
ordained priests in the early 1990s or whether to say to those who, on theological grounds, cannot accept the ministry of women ‘the conversation is over; the Church has decided; the place allotted to you in the Church is an honoured but a more limited one than the 2014 Settlement envisaged. In short, the choice for the Church is whether to continue wrestling with the issues I have identified, for the sake of the Gospel, or whether to abandon the Settlement. If those who take the majority view in the Church are to retain credibility in the eyes of the minority, there is only one choice which I believe they can make’. Equally if those in the minority wish to continue as honoured and full members of the Church of England, they need to ensure that they act and speak in ways which show understanding of the position of ordained women, which emphasise their commitment to the corporate life of the Church and which encourage the majority to remain unequivocally committed to the success of that Settlement, “that they may all be one ..... so that the world may believe.....”

Up to now I have tried to give a factual summary of the main points in the report. I now turn to offer some observations. I should emphasise that these are my personal comments and not necessarily the official view of Forward in Faith – its officers. Executive or Council.

1. Confidentiality

Sir Philip said in 2015 that in conducting reviews he would expect to publish an agreed record of all meetings and conversations held during his enquiries and publish all submissions made to him. In conducting this review he found that some of those concerned were happy to write or speak to him on the record. However, many others involved in those events felt understandably nervous about speaking frankly to him of their actions and their concerns except on a confidential basis. He therefore decided not to append any of the detailed submissions he received or notes of the many conversations he had with individuals involved in the work of the CNC or in the diocese of Sheffield.

Whilst this decision is perhaps understandable it does weaken the report for those reading it. The lawyer in me wants to see the actual evidence not just Sir Philip’s conclusions from it. This leads me to my second observation

2. Criticisms of Sheffield Catholic Clergy

Sir Philip says (and I quote from para 168) During my conversations with ordained women in Sheffield, I was given examples of language used of them by some male clergy holding traditionalist views which were wholly unacceptable. Any use of language by anyone in this debate (whatever position they hold) which is hurtful or demeaning is utterly to be condemned. No toleration of it should be shown by anyone, especially anyone in a position of authority in the Church.’

He does not say what the unacceptable language was, who used it or to whom it was said or when. Furthermore, in his meetings with Catholic clergy in Sheffield these
criticism were never put to them so that they could answer them. We know that in the past there have been instances of improper conduct and language by those on both sides of the argument over women’s ordination, but are the matters he has heard about going right back to the 1990s or are they more recent, since the 2014 settlement?

It seems to me to be profoundly unfair and a breach of natural justice to make serious criticisms of Catholic clergy in Sheffield without telling them exactly what they are accused of and giving them an opportunity of commenting. On a practical note since the report does not say who has behaved improperly, it is impossible for bishops and others in authority to do anything about it if there has been improper conduct.

3. Criticisms of Forward in Faith

Sir Philip criticises those in the Church (including Forward in Faith) for the quasi-legalistic way in which they have interpreted the Five Guiding Principles. He seems to imply that since they are just Guiding Principles they can just be read in a general way and are not the last word on the matter. But in fact they are quasi-legalistic. They are part of the House of Bishops’ Declaration, which cannot be changed except by a two-thirds majority in each house of General Synod. The Declaration and the Five Guiding Principles are subject to a resolution of disputes procedure which exists under regulations made under canon law. They are thus what is sometimes called ‘soft-law’ ‘rules that are neither strictly binding in nature nor completely lacking legal significance’.

I served on the Steering Committee which drafted the House of Bishops Declaration incorporating the Five Guiding Principles and we sent many hours considering them. If the Principles cannot be interpreted in a reasonably strict way then it seems to me that they serve little or purpose.

Sir Philip also criticises Forward in Faith and The Society for its use of language which he says emphasises its separation from the rest of the Church. This despite the fact the Forward in Faith has constantly urged its members to play a full part in the life of the whole Church of England. Where some separation does come about it is as a result of impaired communion, which is the inevitable consequence of a church allowing two views on the ordination of women to be held by its members.

I have made various criticisms of the report and I can only think that these weaknesses in it have come about because of the immense pressure of time under which Sir Philip was working. His report was needed urgently as the process to fill other vacant sees was underway— not least London – and if there were lessons to be learned and applied to those vacancies those lessons needed to be in the public domain quickly. Perhaps if Sir Philip had had more time he would have gone back to those whom he was criticising – the Catholic clergy in Sheffield and Forward in Faith - and invited them to comment.
Nevertheless, the report as a whole is to be welcomed. We need to remember that when the controversy over Bishop North’s appointment was raging some were saying that the steering Committee which drafted the settlement had not considered the possibility of a non-ordaining diocesan bishop and that, therefore, the settlement need to be re-opened. Sir Philip found this to be untrue – the steering committee had considered the possibility of a non-ordaining bishop. The nomination of Bishop Philip was entirely consistent with the Declaration and the Settlement and it came about after all the correct procedures had been followed.

The conclusion is that either everyone accepts the Settlement and makes it work – which includes accepting that the appointment of a traditionalist diocesan bishop is possible. Or, in effect, we tear up the Settlement and start again. But as Sir Philip says, the Settlement was a package. The Measure and Canon which permit the ordination of women to the episcopate form part of that package. He comments: ‘Try to unpick the package and the basis for the settlement is immediately called into question.

All of us, individually, and not just Forward in Faith itself, if we wish to continue as honoured and full members of the Church of England, need to ensure that we continue to act and speak in ways which emphasise our commitment to the corporate life of the Church and which encourage the majority to remain unequivocally committed to the success of that Settlement.