

# Evangelical opponents of women bishops: What is sought and required?

by Andrew Goddard

## 1. Introduction: Trying to square the circle

The decision of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to offer their own proposal for solving the problem of provision for those opposed to women bishops has, inevitably, caused quite a storm. It seeks to find an original and satisfactory way of squaring the following circle: how can the church give sufficient assurances and space to those who cannot in conscience recognise women as bishops while not undermining the equal standing of female bishops alongside their male counterparts?

Its proposed solution of co-ordinate jurisdiction does not, in law, remove opponents from the jurisdiction of any women bishops. Instead, it establishes nominated bishops alongside the diocesan, hence the name “concurrent” or, the Archbishops’ preference, “co-ordinate” jurisdiction. This “jurisdiction” ([the amendments](#) do not actually use this term but the [Archbishops’ initial statement](#) said “the nominated bishop would have jurisdiction by virtue of the Measure to the extent provided for in the diocesan scheme – in effect holding jurisdiction by the decision of the Church as a whole, as expressed in the Measure”) is not to be granted by delegation from a bishop (as opponents would not recognise a woman bishop as the source of the nominated bishop’s authority). Instead, the jurisdiction is granted by means of the Measure itself.

While some have welcomed this as a creative way forward, others fear it is too clever by half. Is it, they ask, not effectively a form of smoke and mirrors which will end up satisfying nobody? Does it not mean that women bishops will still in practice be required to cede jurisdiction in ways not required of male bishops? On the other hand, even if granted co-jurisdiction, will nominated bishops not still lack the standing, powers and security sought for them by those opposed to women bishops?

The concerns about the proposal (Fulcrum, [supporting the Revision Committee proposal](#), have asked [eight serious questions](#) of the Archbishops’ proposal that “need to be clarified and adequately answered”) highlight one of a number of fundamental oppositions that seem impossible to overcome: can the church both establish women bishops on an equal footing with male bishops and at the same time acknowledge and give sufficient alternative provision to those who, out of theological conviction, will not recognise a woman as a bishop and/or will be unable to accept her episcopal ministry?

As a number of evangelicals have pointed out, a large part of the problem here is related to the insistence on a model of mono-episcopacy in which overall oversight and legal jurisdiction is focussed in one bishop rather than, for example, shared between a number of bishops. This form of church order, though well-established in tradition, is not required by Scripture and is not unchallenged either historically or in the contemporary church. The Archbishops’ proposal, in talking of “concurrent jurisdiction”, begins to challenge the mindset that insists on such mono-episcopacy.

Many hope that introducing women bishops will lead to changing understandings of episcopacy and new patterns of episcopal oversight, including perhaps more collaborative and collegial forms. The

proposal, when originally announced, appeared to me and perhaps others to establish “concurrent jurisdiction” as a means of creating this different form of episcopacy solely for those opposed to women bishops. (Although the statement does say “the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop – *whether male or female* – remains intact; *he or she* would remain the bishop of the whole area of the diocese and would be legally entitled to exercise any episcopal function in any parish of the diocese”). Such an approach would have distinguished female from male bishops in the law of the church and would be seen by many as the church officially accepting that women bishops have a diminished status rather than the church acknowledging there will inevitably be some difference from male bishops as long as some faithful Anglicans cannot accept their ministry on theological grounds and provision is made for them. In fact, by applying the proposal also to dioceses where the bishop will not ordain women (covered in section 2(5) of the proposed Measure), concurrent jurisdiction will likely first have to be experienced in practice not by the first woman bishop but in relation to serving male bishops who declare they will not ordain women as priests.

The proposal is thus addressing not simply opponents but the wider question of “living with two integrities”, including the impact this has on women priests in dioceses such as Chichester. It could thus act as a prototype for rethinking episcopal ministry and jurisdiction more widely and set a pattern for addressing other areas where the church is seriously divided and recognises those with opposing views as authentic Anglicans. It does this without going so far as the creation of alternative structures (such as canonically recognised societies headed by bishops or new dioceses) alongside existing diocesan and provincial ones for those who are opposed. These more radical approaches have been rejected until now as creating “a church within a church” and basically formalising schism and incoherence through establishing by law two distinct ecclesial structures. (Their defenders, however, point out that such schism and incoherence is created as soon as there are women bishops in a church where some parishes and clergy cannot be in communion with them and bishops will likewise not all be in communion with each other as long as some bishops remain theologically opposed to women bishops).

## **2. Two strands of opposition: Anglo-Catholic and Evangelical**

In the midst of wrestling with these and similar problems, much attention has been focussed on the Anglo-Catholic objections especially since they are the grouping which has made the most of the current institutional form of provision in Provincial Episcopal Visitors (PEVs or ‘flying bishops’). Indeed, this focus on Anglo-Catholic concerns is probably why the “alternative structures” approach has had such prominence. What has perhaps not been sufficiently explored are the differences between evangelical and Anglo-Catholic objections (see 2.1, 2.2 and 3.1 below), the logic of evangelical opposition (see section 3 below), and a recognition of the real concerns that are perhaps driving evangelical pressure for provision under women bishops but may be better met in other ways (see section 4 below).

Before attempting such an exploration I need to acknowledge that I write as an evangelical who was brought up to accept Scripture taught something called “male headship” and so placed limits on women exercising authority within the church. However, I came to the conclusion – nearly twenty five years ago as a student faced with a Christian Union constitution that insisted the CU President must be a man and women be a minority on the Executive Committee - that this was not biblical. In

fact, I believe Scripture teaches and the work of the Spirit today confirms that God calls and gifts people for all ministries irrespective of gender. It follows that the church must therefore remove its traditional barriers to women's ministry. In the following analysis I therefore write as an outsider, particularly to the Anglo-Catholic perspective. As a result I may well have misunderstood and misrepresented their concerns and I am sorry if that is the case. Although I support women bishops I write as someone who knows and respects many within both evangelical and Anglo-Catholic traditions who do believe in divinely ordained limits to women's ministry. I strongly believe that, in the words of Lambeth 1998 Resolution III.2, "those who dissent from, as well as those who assent to, the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate are both loyal Anglicans". I therefore do not want to see them driven out of the Church of England. The challenge is knowing what needs to be done, in the words of the next clause of that resolution, "to make such provision, including appropriate episcopal ministry, as will enable them to live in the highest degree of communion possible, recognising that there is and should be no compulsion on any bishop in matters concerning ordination or licensing".

### *2.1 Discerning the differences*

Although the Anglo-Catholic and evangelical opposition to women bishops shares some common features (notably in its appeal to and understanding of Scripture's teaching about gender and 'headship') there are also fundamental differences. These are particularly important when it comes to discernment about what sort of provision is required for each tradition when the Church of England consecrates women bishops.

One way of capturing these differences is to say that from the Anglo-Catholic perspective women *cannot* be bishops (perhaps absolutely in all circumstances but certainly not simply by decision of that small part of the church catholic which is the Church of England General Synod). In contrast, evangelicals would usually say they *should not* be bishops. This difference arises out of different ecclesiologies and understandings of episcopacy. These differences in turn also mean that the consequences of the Church of England ordaining women as bishops is understood to be significantly different for the two strands of opponents and what is needed for provision is therefore unlikely to be equivalent.

### *2.2 The Anglo-Catholic problem*

Broadly speaking the Anglo-Catholic opponents will have problems because (in marked contrast to evangelical critics) the bishop and their role as the source of ministry has a central place within their whole ecclesiology and sacramental theology. So far, with women priests, there has not been a fundamental breach in communion among the bishops. This is because all bishops – including the PEVs – are in full communion with all other bishops (even those who ordain women) and recognise each other as bishops. Nor has there been a breach of communion between clergy and bishops. Although some parishes will seek episcopal oversight from someone other than their diocesan if the diocesan ordains women priests, they still recognise him as their ordinary, what they receive from others is strictly extended and not alternative episcopal oversight, and - despite their impaired communion - they do not question the orders of the men he ordains alongside women. Once there are women bishops all this will change – Anglo-Catholic opponents, including those among the bishops, will not be able to recognise women bishops as true bishops. Flowing from this, within that

understanding, they will not be able to recognise even male priests ordained by a woman bishop as true priests. That, in turns, means “sacramental assurance” will be lost – “A whole class of male priests would come into existence whose sacramental ministry was held to be at best doubtful by many faithful Anglicans” (*Consecrated Women?*, 8.3.6).

For those working from within this theological perspective what happens is effectively that the church creates a new situation which is one where there is, in terms of orders, a “non-church within the church” ie that part comprising women bishops and those they ordain. The intrusion of disorder and uncertainty this creates has an impact on the whole body. In addition, given the seriousness of this new situation, there may well be further problems in that all bishops who participate in the creation of this anomalous situation by sharing in the consecration of a woman as bishop will in so doing risk even further impairing their communion with those who reject women bishops.

It is very hard to see how this understanding can be fully accommodated by a church which proceeds to ordain women as bishops without that church creating a clearly established “safe area” or “church within the church”. This is because there is, in this understanding, the need to create a clear barrier to stem the wide-ranging repercussions caused for this tradition by the wider church recognising women bishops when, on this view, they cannot be bishops. The disorder and uncertainty they see this introducing into the church needs to be held at bay by the creation of alternative structures which will be distinct from those they see as disrupted by the acceptance that women can indeed exercise a full sacramental and episcopal ministry. Anything less than that requires *either* major compromises with what is held to be wrong, incoherent and corrosive of good order *or* a major reconfiguration of the whole ecclesiological framework.

It is, however, important to recognise that the seriousness of this problem is not simply due to an objection to women bishops. It is due to the wider ecclesiology, particularly the understanding of episcopacy, the nature of orders and ordination, the importance of the sacraments as a means of grace, and the lack of assurance about such sacramental grace which follows when someone’s orders cannot be recognised as valid. There are, therefore, other objections to women bishops which do not necessarily create the same scale of problem or demand so radical a solution. These objections include those of evangelicals who oppose women bishops.

### **3. Unpacking evangelical opponents’ concerns about women bishops**

#### *3.1 Spot the difference*

Evangelical opponents of women bishops do not have anywhere near the same level of difficulties as their Anglo-Catholic counterparts. This should not be a surprise given the two traditions’ different responses to women priests. For example, some evangelical clergy, despite being labelled “opponents”, have been willing to receive women presbyters as curates to serve in their parishes and for them to preside at Communion and absolve, a pattern which would not be found among Anglo-Catholic opponents.

These differences arise primarily because of evangelicals’ different ecclesiology. In relation to what it might mean faced with women bishops it is important that this ecclesiology does not see episcopacy as essential to the church, has a much more functional understanding of ordination, does not

understand ordination as so closely tied to sacramental grace and is not concerned with sacramental assurance. Rather, based on their interpretation of such passages as Genesis 2, 1Corinthians 10 and 1 Timothy 2, they believe in “male headship” and maintain that women should not exercise authority over men within the life of the church. They therefore believe it is wrong for women to serve as bishops and that the church, if it is to be obedient to God’s revealed will in Scripture, should maintain an all-male episcopacy. However, evangelical opponents will, on the whole, not say that a woman *cannot* be a bishop, just that she and the church which consecrates her to that office is being disobedient and disregarding God’s ordering. As a result, there is not, for them, the same spread of disorder and uncertainty in the life of the wider church when women act as bishops.

So, just as most evangelical opponents are willing to accept certain ministries from women priests, as far as I understand it, the overwhelming majority of evangelical opponents would, for example

- not refuse to recognise a male presbyter who had been ordained by a woman bishop
- have no concerns about sacramental assurance when women are bishops
- remain in communion with bishops involved in the consecration of a woman bishop, just as most have not declared impaired communion or sought extended episcopal oversight when bishops ordain women priests
- recognise many aspects of the legal authority of a woman bishop

It is, therefore, clear that the difficulties raised for evangelical opponents are not as wide-ranging or deep as those whose opposition is tied to an Anglo-Catholic ecclesiology. Indeed, one of the challenges for evangelical opponents is to clarify what exactly the implications are for them and their relationship to the Church of England when the church proceeds to have women bishops. On the whole, although they have frequently articulated their biblical and theological case against women bishops, they have not given as much attention to what follows when the wider church is unpersuaded by that case and proceeds to consecrate women as bishops.

### *3.2 Abandoning a disobedient church?*

It could be held that the church has officially, by synodical decision, departed from the word of God and exceeded its authority (“it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God’s Word written”, Article 20). In such a situation, it might be claimed, faithful Christians – and especially those ordained in the church – must separate from the church. However, as with the decision to ordain women as priests, very few evangelicals appear to be taking this view. This is because – again in contrast to most Anglo-Catholics – they acknowledge this as a matter of order not faith and morals and what they label a “second order” issue. It is, in other words, not central to Christian orthodox faith. Instead of separating off from a disobedient church they are looking for the church – which they believe to be taking a false step - to provide them with freedom to live according to their conscience within the church. Here the question is what is genuinely required for such freedom of conscience. It is important to recognise the complexities of this question within an evangelical understanding.

### *3.3 The problem of authority: headship and oaths*

At the heart of the evangelical objection seems to be the problem of a man putting himself under the authority of a woman in the life of the church. The most obvious place where this occurs in the life of the church is in relation to the oaths (or affirmations) required of clergy. One area that is therefore sometimes raised as a problem in relation to women bishops is that of the oath of canonical obedience. So Roger Beckwith has [stated](#) – “If St Paul teaches that women ought not to exercise authority over men in the congregation, then they ought not to be bishops; and if they are, we ought not to make an oath of canonical obedience to them”. It is on this basis that he argues for the same sort of solution it was argued above is probably required to respond to the Anglo-Catholic objections – “if women are to be diocesan bishops, the only remedy is to have completely independent flying bishops; and that would involve separate dioceses and a separate province, overlapping with the existing dioceses and provinces”.

The *first* difficulty here is that, as soon as women can become bishops in the Church of England, everyone making the oath does so potentially in relation to a woman bishop. This is because the oath is to “pay true and canonical obedience to the Lord Bishop of C and his successors in all things lawful and honest”. In other words, an oath to any male bishop includes an oath to “his successors”. That, of course, is why there is no need to make the oath on the appointment of a new bishop.

This means there are basically three options if women become bishops: (1) the oath needs to be revised in some form, (2) opponents of women bishops cannot make any oath to any bishop or (3) opponents must recognise that any oath one makes – or has already made – now binds the speaker to obey a future woman bishop of that see. The first of these has, as far as I know, not been seriously sought or considered and would be hard to achieve in a coherent form. The second approach seemingly requires departure from ordained ministry in the Church of England as once legislation has been passed every clergyperson owes, on the basis of their prior oath, obedience to any woman bishop appointed to their diocese. The third way - by acknowledging the future element in the oath - makes it very difficult to justify only refusing to take an oath when the serving bishop is a woman (as [Reform](#) has recently suggested will be their response: “we cannot take an oath of canonical obedience to a female bishop”).

This same line of argument also applies to the other oath in canon C14 – that of bishops to the Archbishop. All bishops are required to “take the oath of due obedience to the archbishop and to the metropolitan Church of the Province where he is to exercise the episcopal office” and so “profess and promise all due reverence and obedience to the Archbishop and to the Metropolitan Church of N, and to their Successors”. On the surface this oath might suggest that as long as the Archbishop of the province is a man, male headship is being acknowledged in the church and submission to the authority of a woman bishop who is herself obedient to a male Archbishop is therefore not a violation of God’s ordering of male and female (just as evangelicals accept women as assistant clergy under the authority of an incumbent). Although there may be some pragmatic mileage in this argument for some time, the fact that the bishop promises obedience to the Archbishop’s successors again means that as soon as women can become bishops, all serving bishops have effectively promised in principle to obey a woman Archbishop.

Related to this area of recognition of authority through oaths is the *second* difficulty which arises because of the place of the sovereign – a woman for more than a half a century. Clergy committed

to male headship have been happy to take the other required oath – the oath of allegiance – in which they swear that they will “be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, her heirs and successors, according to law” . There needs, therefore to be a clearer explanation why another oath – that of canonical obedience – cannot be made to a female bishop.

This question of women exercising authority is made even more complicated due to the *third* area: the established nature of the Church of England. This is of importance, for example, in relation to questions of whether or not delegation of episcopal functions from a woman bishop – rather than transfer or vesting - in some sense compromises evangelical opponents by implicitly recognising a woman’s authority in the church. This is, in part, what the Archbishops’ amendment seems to be seeking to resolve. The difficulty here is that a diocesan bishop cannot be enthroned or installed in the diocese until he has had an audience with the monarch where he pays homage and makes the statutory oath of allegiance. In this he acknowledges that “Your Majesty is the only supreme governor of this your realm *in spiritual and ecclesiastical things* as well as in temporal” (italics added) and that he holds “the said bishopric *as well the spiritualities* as the temporalities thereof only of Your Majesty” (italics added). In short, the Church of England has a female supreme governor and every male bishop only has the authority they have as bishop from her and must acknowledge that in an oath of allegiance. In such a situation there needs to be a clearer articulation of the logic and theology behind the claim that a male nominated bishop receiving their authority to minister to opponents of women bishops by delegation from a female diocesan is an impossible position to live with because of Christian conscience.

### *3.4 What is the precise problem?*

There are, undoubtedly, areas where those evangelicals who believe it is wrong for a woman to exercise authority over a man will have genuine theological problems with receiving the ministry of a woman bishop. The challenge is to work out what these areas are, why those aspects of her ministry are a problem and others are not, and how the inability to accept such ministries can be overcome given the simple fact that within the Church of England women will be exercising episcopal authority and ministry.

In addressing these questions there needs to be a realism that women exercise authority in all sorts of ways already within the church and that those who believe in “male headship” have been able to live with this without demanding alternative arrangements. This is not only in relation to the national church and the role of the Queen (and, of course, a female Prime Minister who in the 1980s apparently exercised authority by rejecting the church’s preferred nominee for bishop on more than one occasion). Women exercise authority in various forms at every level from churchwardens in every parish and parish reps during a vacancy, female lay chairs of synods, rural/area deans and – arguably most significantly in practice - Archdeacons whose authority in relation to parish churches and clergy is often much more obviously exercised than the authority of the bishop. Do all such forms of female authority ultimately depend for their legitimacy on there being a male bishop and thus disappear as soon as there is a female bishop? Or is this a sign that women can legitimately have significant authority in the church without making life impossible for evangelical adherents of “male headship”?

As noted above, evangelical opponents of women priests are in many ways still wrestling with some of these questions. It is therefore unsurprising if what conscience demands in relation to women bishops remains unclear. Some, for example, will receive communion from a presiding woman priest but only if her presiding is under the authority of a male incumbent. Others, however, will not even be ordained physically alongside women candidates for priesthood even though they are willing to be ordained by the same bishop in a “male only” ordination. The question of which demands for “respect of conscience” are theologically legitimate and need to be granted and which are not is therefore hard to answer in the face of a diversity of approaches. For example, in seeking to respect differences on women, evangelical colleges which support women’s ordination but seek to uphold the two integrities often welcome opponents as students but on certain conditions in relation to the common life of the college. These might include the condition that they cannot remove themselves from chapel attendance on the grounds that a woman is preaching or presiding. What is unclear is on what basis it is decided this is where recognised freedom to dissent and express opposition ends. Is such a policy an intolerable imposition that violates the conscience of evangelicals who uphold male headship by requiring them to receive such ministry and thereby unjustly excluding them from the college? Or is it a reasonable requirement that respects and gives space to that integrity but with due recognition of the position of the college and church as a whole? It is this sort of question which is being asked now in relation to provision and for which a clearer answer is needed from evangelical opponents.

Given the complexities sketched above in relation to other aspects of women exercising authority in the church, the key question in relation to evangelical opponents of women’s ministry is therefore *“what are the forms of episcopal ministry that, for good biblical and theological reasons, some evangelicals believe it wrong for a woman to exercise and furthermore they cannot themselves then in good conscience accept when they are offered by a woman?”*.

### *3.5 How widespread is the “problem” going to be?*

A further fact that cannot be ignored is that of the scope of the “problem”. Of course from the perspective of opponents any woman exercising authority as a bishop is a problem as it is a matter of principle. However, in working out a proportionate response in terms of church provision a realistic assessment also needs to be made of how many people are going to face this problem in practice. Even in those countries which have allowed women bishops for some time and are fully committed to this course the number of women bishops remains relatively small. While it may be that the Church of England is different, the reality is that for at least the next ten years it is likely that there will be relatively few women bishops, particularly diocesan bishops with jurisdiction.

Although a single woman bishop creates problems throughout the church for the Anglo-Catholic critics, it is far from clear that this is also the case for evangelicals. The reality is therefore that very few evangelicals are going to find themselves in the short term facing the struggle of what in conscience they should do because they are placed under the authority of a woman bishop. The sort of provisions being sought and offered are therefore not going to be needed immediately by most evangelical opponents who will be able to carry on their ministries within the Church of England without having to consider how they are going to respond to a woman bishop. That is not to say the

provisions are irrelevant but that, once again, there is a difference between evangelical and Anglo-Catholic perspectives.

#### **4. Deeper evangelical concerns**

If, then, the “problem” of women bishops is in various ways less widespread and deep for evangelicals than for Anglo-Catholics why are evangelicals so concerned about this development and so determined to ensure adequate alternative provision?

In one sense of course the answer is clear – although the problems are different they are still there and they are important problems. Evangelical opponents believe the step being taken is unbiblical. They need to bear witness to the truth as they understand it, oppose error and ensure their own ministries are not compromised. If, however, the ecclesiological difficulties and problems of conscience are not as severe as for the Anglo-Catholics then why is there such insistence that more substantial provisions are needed for evangelicals?

Some of this may be solidarity with the Anglo-Catholics who share their opposition to women bishops, albeit on significantly different grounds. Some of it may be simply a negotiating ploy to get as much as they can by piggy-backing off the Anglo-Catholic requirement for a more fundamental and structural response. However, I think there are two wider and deeper and more serious issues which are at play. These need to be addressed head-on by the wider church – especially fellow evangelicals. At present, however, evangelicals opposed to women bishops are trying to address these concerns primarily through means of seeking greater alternative provision under the proposed legislation. That way of addressing them is seriously flawed for various reasons. First, few evangelicals are going to have recourse to provisions for those related to women bishops because few will be under female bishops. Second, in addressing wider concerns by this means they appear to be seeking more severe restrictions on women’s episcopal ministries than evangelical theology and ecclesiology requires. Third, the negative effect of this stance on ordained women often leads to other evangelicals simply opposing what they are seeking in relation to women bishops rather than engaging with their real concerns.

The two more fundamental concerns are to do with (1) the long-term place of evangelicals – particularly more conservative evangelicals - within the Church of England and (2) the perceived hegemony of a liberal/ liberal catholic ethos in the church structures and hierarchy which is not sufficiently biblical, swayed by secular society, often hostile to evangelicals, and so damaging to the church. Given evangelicals who oppose women bishops see the “liberal establishment” strongly supporting them, it is not surprising that this debate has got sucked into these wider concerns. However, these two areas need to be distinguished from the specific question of the problem created for some evangelicals by women bishops and ultimately it is the wider concerns, not women bishops *per se*, that need addressing.

##### *4.1 Securing a Church of England future for all evangelicals*

In contrast to Anglo-Catholic opponents, when I ask most evangelicals with concerns over provision for women bishops what concerns them they do not give carefully thought through theological reasons about how the development is ecclesologically incoherent and damaging and makes their

life impossible once women are bishops. Rather they express deep concerns that their tradition is under serious threat and will be extinguished from the Church of England unless something is done to protect them. This is backed up by testimonies of fellow Anglicans – including senior figures, male and female, lay and ordained - expressing antipathy to them and much of what they stand for and making clear they do not want people with their views to have a significant – perhaps *any* - place in the church’s future. As a result there is genuine and serious concern that ordinands from their tradition are already discriminated against and will be increasingly rejected in selection processes or simply cease to offer themselves for ordained ministry. In addition, it is feared that parishes of this tradition will not be able to make appointments to maintain conservative evangelical forms of ministry. As shown by Reform’s recent open letters, the prospect of women bishops increases these fears, in part because it adds a further litmus test by which to test (or stick with which to beat) those from this part of the evangelical tradition.

If this is the fundamental evangelical problem then the question of what provision is to be made for those few clergy and parishes who find themselves with a woman bishop and theological objections to receiving her ministry, though important, is not the really significant challenge. Solving that particular problem is not going to get anywhere in addressing these more fundamental questions of preserving certain forms of evangelical teaching and ministry into the future within the Church of England. Seeking to widen the “problem” of women bishops in order to secure through it some significant structural change in the church that might also help address these deeper concerns is understandable, especially if this is the only way of drawing attention to these issues. However, it is ultimately an unconvincing and damaging path to follow. It is perceived by the wider church – including many evangelicals - to be making demands in relation to women bishops that are difficult to justify in terms of evangelical theology and to make women clergy the presenting issue for wider and deeper concerns.

What is needed here is the development of broad representative structures and networks among evangelicals that will support those who most experience these problems and do this in a way that is not simply critically reactive and keeps them constructively engaged with and committed to both wider evangelicalism and the Church of England as a whole. Serious thought must also be given as to how to challenge discrimination against certain evangelicals and ensure that their position as faithful Anglicans is recognised and supported by the wider church.

#### *4.2 Resisting a liberal drift*

Alongside the concern to find a secure place for all evangelicals to flourish in the Church of England there is the related concern to secure a means of faithful and distinctive witness in the face of wider worries about the direction of the Church of England. Women bishops are the current presenting issue here but the issue of same-sex relationships is not far behind, especially given the connection made between these two by many such as Inclusive Church and increasingly WATCH. For many there are other even more serious issues relating to the uniqueness of Christ, evangelism in a pluralist society and resistance to secularism. More conservative evangelicals – but hopefully also many others – are concerned that they have ways to protest and distance themselves from any bishops who depart from mainstream Christian doctrine and practice in such areas. It is these other potential areas of “impaired communion” and having possible structural responses to these which I believe in

many ways are the motor that is driving the narrower concerns about substantial provision in response to women bishops.

Again the rationale for focussing this concern on women bishops is in one sense obvious – this issue may give the opportunity to achieve changes which will be of value in relation to other areas in the future. As yet, however, this appears to demand more in relation to provision for *evangelical* opponents of women’s bishops than appears strictly necessary on grounds of their theology. It thus makes the debate over the issue of such provision carry much more symbolic and ecclesial weight than it deserves. How the church allows opponents to respond to women bishops is being made to answer the wider, harder and quite different question of how the church responds to those who cannot accept the ministry of bishops they believe to be unorthodox. One of the ironies of various proposals in relation to provision for opponents of women bishops is that some conservative evangelicals may seek to use this to escape the oversight of a basically orthodox bishop on the grounds she is a woman but find themselves instead under the oversight of a less orthodox male bishop! That such a paradox might arise highlights that addressing the wider problem of unorthodoxy through the narrower issue of gender is a fundamentally flawed strategy.

## **5. Conclusion: Addressing evangelical concerns**

These two areas of concern among evangelicals are, I believe, in need of serious attention. They are not only important in principle. Nor are they important only because importing them into debates about women bishops is distorting and damaging that development in the church’s life. They are important also because there is little doubt that if the Church of England – and particularly evangelical Anglicans within it – do not address these concerns and seek a way forward then bishops elsewhere in the Communion will do so through GAFCON and the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans, perhaps being wrongly persuaded that the way the church’s insufficient provision over women bishops provides justification for such a development.

In giving serious attention to these matters the same principles apply as over women bishops. A group of evangelicals stating that “X is the reality in the church, this creates the problem Y for us, and the only adequate response to Y is solution Z” is not sufficient grounds for all evangelicals to join them in demanding Z. This has sometimes appeared to be the strategy over women bishops: only a policy of transfer/vesting or a third province will suffice for us so all evangelicals – even if they support women bishops – must support this. Instead there needs to be careful assessment of whether and to what extent X is the reality and not a distorted perception of reality. Then there must be scrutiny as to whether the problems created really do amount to Y or whether these claims are exaggerated. Finally, in the light of that shared discernment, there needs to be consideration as to whether there are a range of solutions to the real problems and not simply solution Z.

In applying this process to evangelical opposition to women bishops it has been argued that although there are clearly real problems for evangelical opponents it is far from clear what the specific problems are for them as evangelicals. As a result it is not clear to me that a suitable code of practice is incapable of addressing these (although that way forward does create major problems for those committed to an Anglo-Catholic ecclesiology who seem to require effectively separate structures which amount to a “church within a church”). It is, however, undeniably the case that the current Revision Committee proposal is felt to be insufficient by evangelical opponents. This,

however, may be due more to wider and deeper problems which are shaping the response to women bishops and certainly erode trust and foment fear (thus undermining a code of practice solution) rather than inadequacy on fundamental theological grounds.

What, then can be done? First, evangelical opponents of women bishops have clearly and often articulated their grounds for opposing this development. Evangelicals committed to women bishops know these well but have not been convinced. What they have not done to the same extent and would help us now is if an evangelical account could be given of the nature of the problems they will face when the church has women bishops and why, theologically, current proposals are not sufficient. Second, evangelical supporters of women bishops need to engage more sympathetically with such an explanation and with the broader range of conservative evangelical concerns that are perhaps driving their demands for more provision in response to women bishops. If both of these can be done then perhaps a more creative way forward could be developed that can draw support from across a wide range of the evangelical spectrum in relation to this whole nexus of issues, including that of provision for opponents of women bishops which is facing Synod in this next week.

The Revd Dr Andrew Goddard is Tutor in Christian Ethics at Trinity College, Bristol, editor of *Anvil*, and on the Leadership Team of Fulcrum. This article appears on the Fulcrum website at

<http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=547>