

The need for secure and adequate provision for conservatives

Our consultations began and end with much the same practical needs or desires for Reform and Awesome – for Awesome, the desire to be recognised as authentically evangelical, and for Reform, the need for legal and structural alternative ecclesial provision if Women are to become Bishops. As the one who, for better or worse, has convened the group representing Reform or more precisely conservative evangelicals, it falls to me to try and outline the reasons why we need such alternative provision,. That is to say, provision that is altogether more robust and lasting than the present legislation “with attached Code of Practice”.

Negatively, such a provision is inadequate – and has consistently from the start been rejected by conservatives as inadequate – because it is not yet written and each diocese will have the responsibility for shaping and administering it in their own way. At bottom, it is still an extension offered by a Diocesan Bishop and not alternative and independent provision and as such is still dependent on the particular Bishop and not the legislation itself. It will, therefore, be difficult for conservatives to be or to feel secure into the future. Previous examples of the handling of Codes of Practice and Guidelines (eg in Matters of Patronage and appointments, or even The 1993 Act of Synod itself) do not inspire confidence – at times they have been honoured more in the breach than in the keeping or even referring to them.

The positive reasons could be grouped under five headings: theological, political, pastoral, missionary, and strategic.

Theological

The conservative position has been for many years variously affirmed as one of two “integrities”, as being “loyal Anglicanism”, and as possessing theological “conviction and coherence”. It has been assured and promised a secure and honoured place in the CofE by the General Synod and by the House of Bishops (and, in effect, by requirement of Parliament, if the background to The Act of Synod in 1993 in anything to go by). It has been expected by The 1993 Act of Synod and by the Pilling Report (of 2006/7?) to be represented in the most senior posts in the Church.

From the 1992 vote to allow the ordination of women to the presbyterate, the language was of the need for Reception. Part of the acceptance of any new theological stance or position is that it needs to be received by the Church – in other words to be acknowledged by the *consensus fidelium*. However, apart from a monograph by the late Peter Toon, there has been no mention, let alone monitoring or examination of whether the Church has been receiving this innovation. In fact seventeen years later, there remains about a third of the Church unable or unwilling to receive this new teaching or practice.

The theological foundation of this difficulty is that conservatives would argue that the order and pattern that is seen perfectly within the Godhead, within the Trinity, is somehow to be reflected in the human spheres of marriage and ministry, within the family and the Church. Our discussions in the third consultation precisely on the Trinity and marriage (principally from 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5) revealed that we were significantly at odds with our understanding of the place and virtue of submission. The representatives for Reform have to be honest and admit to deep concerns at the way our friends across the table were handling the doctrines of the Trinity and of marriage. As humans, we are all too imperfect, but we are nonetheless called to reflect something of the Godhead in the” little

church” of the family and in the universal Church as the community of the redeemed looking forward to the perfecting of God’s work of grace among us. The redeemed are to model a proper restored partnership, indeed unity, among men and women, both in general and especially in the unique bond of affection that is marriage, and at the same time honour the principle (that tracks back to the Trinity) of equal, but different. It is striking that, having mentioned equality and mutuality in Ephesians 5, Paul does go on to talk of the differences in role or *persona* that remain, not only in marriage with husband and wife, but also in the family with parents and children and in the work-place with masters and slaves. Each relationship is preserved, but at the same time renewed in Christ. Each is renewed in Christ, but maintained this side of heaven.

Bishops are overseers, charged to teach the faith and to refute error, to fashion their household after the way of Christ, and to be gate-keepers for the faith and doctrine of the gospel and its ministry (what the Ordinal calls watchmen and stewards). Conservatives, like all others, need Bishops they can respect and trust as those who are faithful *ex animo* to this charge. We have by and large not found Bishops that honour and support us or who have been appointed from our constituency in the last seventeen years.

Political

In offering only a Code of Practice, the General Synod can hardly be expected by conservatives to be thought to take both integrities seriously. The inadequacies of a Code have been alluded to briefly earlier. Synod and the House of Bishops have gone back on their solemn word to what is now called the traditionalist constituency. That is having its own consequences now.

By political I largely mean Synodical. Most members of Synod in effect choose to pitch this as an issue of social justice, as though it was largely a matter of equal opportunities. Arguments have all too often swirled around doctrinaire questions of power and jurisdiction as they are perceived today. However, such an understanding is relatively recent. The existence of Episcopal peculiars two hundred years ago and overlapping “jurisdictions” even today in Europe suggest that episcopacy was not always seen as supremely a matter of territorial authority. The proposals three years ago for Transferred Episcopal Arrangements (TEA) were torpedoed by the House of Bishops, while Synod itself was prepared to turn down the recent unprecedented, but humble, compassionate and bold suggestion of the two Archbishops for some kind of concurrent episcopacy.

It seems clear from different scenarios around the country that in many quarters conservatives are not popular. We are used to the culture at large thinking that we get in the way or pull things back, but it is uncomfortable to think that an increasing number of Anglicans act or think that way too. The cross-roads we may be at now presents itself as an opportunity for a whole new sort of Bishop – who is perhaps still parish-based, more network-serving than territorially focussed, content to be historically orthodox teaching the faith and defending it rather than “doing theology at the margins”(as one recent Diocesan put it). This older model of a Bishop teaching, pastoring, involved in discipline when needed, altogether a light touch in comparison to today’s management and jurisdiction, is perhaps now the radical way forward for the future. The issue of difference over Women Bishops may be the presenting issue for a quite new future. Genuinely alternative and separate provision may be a good, as well as a necessary, thing for the health and vitality of our Church.

Pastoral

In the end a parting of the ways need not be a parting of friends. But new structures will be needed to ensure that at least neighbours can co-exist, whether individual incumbents or parishes. If we remain in the same sack with our differences, we may end up unable to work together. Certainly that has already begun to be my experience on the ground in my Deanery – for many, the issue is sorted and our parish is just awkward and out of step, and they have made it clear that they will not receive our ministry or partnership. So be it. At least allow us and enable us to have an alternative Anglican structure that will allow us to remain in some kind of communion, if not particularly close. At least it will be in the same broad Church that the comprehensive CofE has always been.

The ethos of a parish and its ministry is always important. In recent years many have found their own networks and supports (New Wine, Reform, Inclusive Church, etc), while remaining nominally in the same denominational structure. Pastorally it might be better if the CofE could accept that something new is needed ecclesiastically for Anglicans to stay together as Anglicans, that is in the same Church with Bishops who can and will serve and represent them.

If the local church is a ship in a fleet, perhaps the image of a convoy is helpful. A convoy is still together, but not as close as a fleet.

Missionary (or evangelistic)

Most people recognise that the Church has struggled to reach, win and keep men for the gospel and for the fellowship and service of the Church. If the “leadership” of the Church becomes more obviously female, then, whether it is liked or not, there will be an image problem. Just as a family needs a marriage where the husband and wife are playing their parts effectively and essentially, so the family of the Church needs the right partnership between men and women. Since in reality most parishes have one clergy person and not an obvious team in leadership, whether the incumbent is male or female will influence things. Those in favour of women as incumbents (presumably *a fortiori* as Bishops) will see one sort of influence, those in favour of men will see another. For the sake of evangelism (and I would claim among men and women), there needs to be space for churches where male incumbency is the secure norm.

It is a question of image or dynamic. If men do not feel the Church is for men by what they see in certain key presentations of leadership or atmosphere, then the impact may be seen not only in evangelism, but in finance, service, and lay leadership. There need to be churches where the senior pastor-teacher is a man modelling what godly manhood looks like in the Church family and in the human family.

Strategic

At present, there are said to be two integrities that have a valid and honoured place in the CofE. Among evangelicals, the language is more likely to be that there are first and second order issues and that this (ie women’s ministry) is a second order issue over which Biblically faithful believers may disagree – for example, some might suggest, like over baptism or charismatic gifts. (However, these latter suggestions ignore the fact that, when it comes to the macro-issues of understanding of ministry and ordination and of church governance, these are not good examples, since they have both issued in separate denominations!).

If seen as a second order issue, then Romans 14 is often looked to as a good Biblical quarry to visit to consider how believers may handle differences at this level. The summary has often been described as: in essentials, unity; in secondaries, freedom; in everything, charity. If Romans 14 is good territory (and it was used extensively by Bishop Tom Wright, though in a rather different conflict, in the early stages of The Windsor Report in his discussion of *adiaphora*, where this Greek word means non-essentials, secondary issues), then it draws attention to the responses that “the strong” (strong enough to be free in grace from old situations and teaching) and “the weak” (weak in the sense of still having old scruples about earlier teaching and applications) should make to each other.

In this analysis, I would see the conservatives as “the weak”, ie as those who cannot see or relax into a new freedom in grace which others see and accept more easily and with relief. The difficulty for the conservatives is that, if “the strong” do not recognise and somehow sympathise/support conservatives and their “scruples” by some self-restraint or even forgoing their new freedom, the conservatives will feel and believe that the innovators have turned a second order issue into something more like a first order issue, ie one over which there is to be no alternative or argument and certainly no provision. This casts conservatives in the position of no longer simply the minority of two integrities, but of being in error and in need of change. That is what inadequate provision feels like – the marginalisation and eventual exclusion of conservatives as holding a position not accepted and honoured in the Church.

The CofE needs evangelicals and it needs conservatives evangelicals like never before. There are, of course, some angularities among some conservatives, but overall they bring a robust strength of faith and vision, a vitality in mission and pioneering, a continuing stream of ordinands and considerable resources in finance and facilities, which the CofE would be ill-advised to lose, or simply lose their good will. The proximity and ease of independence is surprisingly appealing.

There is one other area of strategic impact – that is in marriage and its perception. Conservatives believe that God’s order in marriage and ministry are related since they reflect the order within God himself. To innovate with “headship” in ministry will at best be confusing for marriage and at worst long-term undermine its health, strength and appeal. Marriage is already beleaguered enough in our culture that sees it as one of a range of possibilities for relationships and fairly narrow and outdated at that. The Church is one of the few places where a good model of men and women being equal but different can be maintained and made intelligible and attractive. Relationships are intended in Biblical teaching to “adorn doctrine”.

For these reasons – theological, political, pastoral, evangelistic and strategic – (however poorly described here), conservatives ask for full structural provision for their conviction and conscience in the patterns and order of ministry of the Church. To be enabled to flourish, they request Episcopal arrangements which understand and embody these understandings to be brought into being in a way that affirms them and in the end develops parallel structures as a better way of co-existing with those of a different persuasion.

(29.12.10, for our consultation on 6.1.11)