

‘Transformations – Theology and Experience of Women’s Ministry’

Executive Summary Report

Introduction

A day conference entitled ‘**Transformations - Theology and Experience of Women’s Ministry**’ was held at the invitation of Archbishop Rowan Williams at Lambeth Palace on 19th Sept 2011. The day was intended to allow the opportunity for honest reflection on the experience of 17 years of women’s ordained ministry and to celebrate all that this ministry has brought to the Church of England.

The conference was addressed by a number of speakers: Dr Paula Gooder, Rev’d Lucy Winkett, Rev’d Professor Sarah Coakley, Bishop Mary Gray-Reeves (who gave the keynote address), Bishop Kay Goldsworthy and Archbishop Rowan. In the afternoon the conference split into discussion groups and fed back to plenary. The Archbishop closed the day with some concluding reflections.

This summary report seeks to

- signpost the key messages of the conference speakers
- highlight the feed back to the House of Bishops from the group discussions
- draw out the themes that recur throughout the full report and make recommendations

The Key Messages of the Conference Speakers

Dr Paula Gooder presented a Bible study on Romans 12:1-2 drawing out the importance of embodiment (minds and bodies interwoven) in our self offering to God, the gendered nature of our life in Christ and the ongoing nature of our transformation towards becoming people of ‘the New Creation’.

The Rev’d Canon Lucy Winkett observed how often our conversations about women priests centre on whether someone ‘has a problem’ with it – mostly people don’t. The majority reaction is acceptance and even celebration. Lucy offered two concepts she finds helpful in inhabiting her priesthood: Holy Wisdom and faithful imagination. Ultimately our confidence rests in our identity as those made in the image of God.

The Rev’d Prof Sarah Coakley spoke of the expectations of transformation attached to the ordination of women in the 1980s and three problems that have hindered those expectations for women’s ministry from becoming a reality: the open sore of theological and legal incoherence surrounding the ordination of women; the secular bureaucratisation of the priesthood and theoretical confusions about gender. She argues that In order to move forward we must heal the ‘deep suppurating wound’ of theological incoherence.

The Archbishop spoke of the two principal models of expectation that have existed around ordained women’s ministry: ‘co-option’ (women fit into male patterns) and ‘messianism’ (predicting complete change via a ‘uniquely female’ contribution). Both are inadequate. Instead our theology of priesthood should grow out of our theology of humanity. The full acceptance of women’s ministry provides an opportunity to re-think models of ministry for all.

The Rt Rev’d Mary Gray-Reeves spoke in her Keynote about power and how we share it. She gave two models: unilateral (power over -a server and a served) and relational (negotiated power -mutual servant-hood). We need both. She spoke of her experience of handling a parish opposed to her episcopal ministry - how insisting on building relationship rather than relying on ‘the canons’ was central to healing and growth. She counseled the CofE to avoid legislating as a means to resolve the conflict over the ordination of women to the episcopate as that will prevent reconciliation.

The Discussion Groups – Feedback for the House of Bishops

Archbishop Rowan asked the discussion groups to return to plenary with a short message ‘for the bishops, for the culture and for the Church’. These are recorded at the end of each discussion group in the full report. The messages for the bishops are summarised here for ease of reference:

- **Scripture and attitudes to women**

The Church of England needs to come to a common mind on what scripture says about the ministry of women. Ways should be found to assist the present House of Bishops to read scripture from a female (as well as a male) perspective.

- **The Ordinal: the bishop’s calling and its impact on women**

Strategic thought needs to be given to the way in which women bishops are introduced so that the weight of being the first female bishop does not fall on one woman alone.

- **The shape of the Church and synodical processes**

Do not amend the draft legislation for women in the episcopate any further. This would completely undermine the Church of England’s theological and ecclesiological integrity.

- **Liturgy and language**

Support and encourage the use of more expansive language and imagery about God wherever possible and hold the Liturgical Commission to account when they prepare new liturgy. Keep a gender-aware theology of worship in mind when visiting parishes and at clergy gatherings.

- **Different patterns of ministry available to ordained women**

We are losing gifted and skilled women who are not coming forward or are giving up because they cannot fit the model of full-time stipendiary ministry on offer. There need to be different models of ministry available that are not simply ‘non stipendiary’. The Church needs to monitor the deployment of all women clergy so as to steward their gifts.

- **Issues for clergy couples**

Clergy couples are totally reliant on the Church financially; celebrate their commitment and look for ways to support them. Parity and consistency of practice across dioceses is important.

- **Patterns of appointment and statistical insights**

Be adventurous in the people you appoint to senior roles and as bishops.

Key Messages of the Conference - with recommendations from the Steering Group

Certain key themes recurred with striking regularity throughout the course of the conference and in the material circulated beforehand. These are summarised below with **recommendations to the House of Bishops from the Steering Group** as to how to take the conversation forward.

- 1. Celebrate the presence of women as ordained ministers of the Church and use the opportunity given by the full acceptance of women's ministry at all levels to rethink models of ministry so that priests and bishops are enabled more fully to incarnate 'the new humanity'.**
- 2. Engage institutional levers in Ministry Division and Synod to change the dominant 'male' pattern and culture of ordained ministry and to resist the creeping bureaucratisation of the priesthood (with its idolatry of busyness and toxic culture of overwork).**
- 3. Monitor and encourage research into the continuing integration of ordained women into the life of the Church via the establishment of a Women's Desk in Ministry Division.**

- 4. Acknowledge and address issues of gender exclusion and marginalisation of women priests paying particular attention to ways of increasing flexibility in patterns of stipendiary ministry and the needs of clergy couples. Establish a working party to develop national guidelines.**
- 5. Acknowledge and address the theological incoherence that feeds discriminatory culture and practices. Invite The Rev'd Professor Sarah Coakley and others to address the House of Bishops on this issue.**
- 6. Acknowledge and address the need for a prophetic theology of gender, grounded in scripture, that values the gifts that priests, whether male or female, bring. Invite the Faith and Order Commission to work on this with a view to producing study materials for use at all levels in the Church.**
- 7. Encourage the Liturgical Commission in the use of a broader and more inclusive range of metaphors for God in worship and in an examination of the latent masculinity of our inherited patterns of worship.**
- 8. Prepare to welcome women to the House of Bishops by initiating and embracing a change of culture that avoids simplistic notions of 'co-option' or 'messianism'. Invite women bishops from other provinces to facilitate House of Bishops' meetings before the first consecrations here.**