



# *The Doctrine Commission Of the Anglican Church of Australia*

## **Report from the Doctrine Commission on *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* *A Report of the House of Bishops' Working Party on Women in the Episcopate* (*'The Rochester Report'*)**

The Doctrine Commission commends 'The Rochester Report' (hereafter 'The Report') as a meticulous, wide-ranging and comprehensive discussion of the women bishops question, related to the specific situation of the Church of England. The Doctrine Commission recommends it as a fine study resource for any Australian Anglicans who wish to investigate this multi-faceted issue-and parts of the report are fine discussions in their own right, such as its treatment of scripture, tradition and reason. The range of views held on the Doctrine Commission were all present in the options canvassed by 'The Report', with arguments on both sides of the women bishops case recognised to be fully, firmly and fairly represented.

Having said that, the Doctrine Commission recognises that our own Australian Working Group on Women in the Episcopate, in its Draft Issues paper, already covers the key issues of 'The Rochester Report' as they apply to the Australian situation. Correspondingly, the Doctrine Commission advises that the significant variance in Anglican polity and structure between England and Australia make for a number of practical differences. So, for instance, the seriously-canvassed English option of creating a third province for 'traditional Anglicans' who oppose women's ordination is not a necessary option in our more decentred Church.

'The Report' does not set out to resolve the women bishops question or to support one or the other 'side'. Rather, it is an even-handed assessment of the issue based on submissions from a wide range of individual clergy and laity, parish and other interested groups, and organisations, including 'Reform' and 'Forward in Faith'. A high-powered group chaired by the Bishop of Rochester, representing the full range of views under discussion, thoroughly examined the question historically, theologically and in terms of the practical way forward. There are conclusions of sorts, about non-negotiable ecclesial principles to be maintained regardless of outcome on this matter, but the main aim of 'The Report' is to encompass the debate and put all the issues before the Church. In this it has succeeded admirably.

### **Summary of 'The Rochester Report'.**

'The Report' is built around four key questions:

- 1) What is the nature of the Episcopate as the Church of England understands it?
- 2) Can it be right in principle for a woman to be a bishop?
- 3) Would this be an appropriate time for the Church of England to move towards appointing women as bishops?
- 4) If it were the appropriate time to appoint women as bishops in the Church of England, how should the Church of England go about implementing this change and what provision, if any, should be made for those who would be unable to accept women bishops?

On the first question, about the nature of the episcopate, it is seen as a sign and instrument of catholicity and apostolicity with New Testament roots, involving doctrinal, sacramental and pastoral oversight carried out in personal, collegial and communal ways with an emphasis on

mission and the ministry of unity. The continuity of this understanding with Christian antiquity is emphasised, and the ancient prerogatives of the bishop are reasserted. 'The Report' is sensitive to questions about the status of assistant bishops *vis a vis* diocesans, who are deemed to be the norm. The emphasis on individual authority with a very attenuated place for the 'bishop in Synod', as is more typical of Australian polity, is one major difference here with our context. Another is the emphasis on episcopal collegiality, with Australian 'diocesanism' meaning that our House of Bishops is less of a college than the English one. Some misgivings were expressed in the Doctrine Commission about aspects of patristic history appearing in 'The Report' but, in all, its discussion of the nature of the episcopate was found to be helpful.

On the second question, about the rightness in principle of women bishops, the meat of 'The Report' is found. There are searching discussions of scripture, tradition and reason, recognising that Anglo Catholic concerns come down mostly on matters of tradition and Evangelical ones on matters of scripture. Like the Australian debate, though unlike the American one, not much weight is given to human rights arguments. Concerning scripture, on which the lack of scholarly consensus is noted, issues of male headship (and Trinitarian subordinationism—also recently debated here in Australia [see *St Mark's Review* 198 (2005)]—are canvassed, but also the texts regarding women's ministry in the New Testament. There is a sophisticated discussion of scriptural authority and hermeneutics as it is variously construed in the debate, with explanations of various positions rendered accessible to an educated general readership (e.g. options in feminist theologies). The tradition section features a thorough overview of how doctrinal development has been understood, incorporating a discussion of the Roman Catholic notion of 'reception'-the process of living with a novel development while *consensus fidelium* takes shape. The possibility that women's ordination may fail to achieve this wider reception and some day be abandoned is actually considered. Issues of reason in conversation with tradition and scripture include questions about the static conception of tradition, how best God might be imaged by gendered ministers, and whether eschatological pressure is driving the uptake of women's ministry.

On the third question, regarding timing, we are helpfully introduced to a range of ecumenical reactions to the prospect of women bishops in England, ranging from the prospect of worsened relations with some (Rome, Orthodoxy) versus improved relations with others (British Methodism, and also those Porvoo Churches with women bishops—e.g Church of Sweden, Church of Norway ). The old point about the Anglican tail wagging the Catholic dog is also made, opposing the argument that Anglicanism must wait for Rome.

On the final, practical question—about how best to proceed, if proceed they do—a veritable morass reveals itself. Here we realise that if the traditionalists might have been able to compose a viable Church including women priests, this seems far less likely to be the case with women bishops. For Evangelical opponents, a woman priest alongside them is less of a problem than a woman bishop in a position of headship over them, while for Anglo Catholic opponents there is the matter of 'tainted hands', leading to all sorts of ordinations being deemed invalid. Practical concerns are raised that the 'flying bishops' option has undermined the authority of diocesans, and that this trend would escalate impossibly with a female diocesan. As for the third province, the widely-recognised neatness of this solution is acknowledged, but also subjected to some close practical scrutiny in 'The Report'. Who would want to pay for it? How extensive would it be? And would there be risks of further division for a province made up largely of strong-minded Anglo Catholics and Evangelicals? The extraordinary expedient of retaining a male-only Primacy, in Canterbury and York, is considered, as a way of having at least two people in England that everyone could still be in

communion with. But at what cost in terms of betrayed principle for those in favour of women bishops?

As mentioned earlier, there are conclusions of sorts in the report about what basic ecclesial principles need to be maintained whatever happens (8.1.18 on pp 233-4), and these are worth setting out to conclude this summary.

- All bishops are to be in communion with Canterbury and York, and with each other
- Diocesans, though sharing oversight where appropriate, retain oversight of the whole of their dioceses
- All clergy and laity are in communion with their bishops
- Those who conscientiously seek a situation in which women can exercise the full range of ministries must have their claims addressed.

Some relief was evident in the Doctrine Commission that the situation in Australia's far more decentralised Church is less complex, and that the practical difficulties here—though not insignificant—appear to be less insurmountable.

By and on behalf of the Doctrine Commission,

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