

July 2012

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I feel I need to write briefly following the recent General Synod. No doubt many people will have followed what has happened either in the press or via the live stream on the web.

Essentially, it became very clear that the Measure to permit the ordination of women as bishops was not going to pass in its current form, having been amended in the House of Bishops in May. Everyone agreed that the House of Bishops had sought to make an amendment that did nothing more than clarify that those who were in conscience opposed to the Measure were loyal Anglicans and that they would continue to be as valued as anyone else. But it was also abundantly clear that the amendment made by the House of Bishops did not give them sufficient comfort to vote for the Measure and that at the same time the change essentially institutionalised a sense that women bishops (and male bishops who supported women bishops) might be considered in some form less authentic than male bishops opposed to the ordination of women.

The Archbishop of Canterbury and a number of bishops, including me, said openly in the debate that the amendment had not succeeded and was a mistake. Because of it, not only would the Measure fail to achieve the necessary two thirds majority in each of the three houses of Synod, and therefore would fall, but even if it passed, it was clear from the Second Church Estates Commissioner (Sir Tony Baldry MP) that it stood no chance of being passed through parliament, and in its present form would probably provoke parliament to exclude the Church from many areas of life possibly including the House of Lords. The merits of that is a different discussion, and I am not commenting on that here, merely noting Sir Tony Baldry's speech.

If the measure fell, it could not be brought back for at least five years. During this time the dispute within the Church of England would continue, the ministry of women would be seen to have been vastly demeaned, many clergy would be profoundly demoralised, as would huge numbers of congregations. Almost everyone at Synod agreed that the Measure falling would be a disaster.

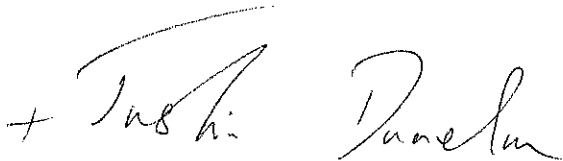
Accordingly, the Steering Group leading the process of bringing the Measure to completion, proposed an adjournment of the debate on final approval. This is a technical procedure which means that it will come back to a special Synod in November, and in the mean time the House of Bishops will meet again to see what they want to say and discussions can be held between different groups in the Synod. The Archbishop of Canterbury made it clear in his speech (a very good one as always) that if this time was given for further consideration, it should not merely be a waiting period but should be used for intensive discussion, and particularly between those who disagree. That will be happening over the next few weeks and months.

As is widely known, I am committed to and believe in the ordination of women as bishops. I hold these views as a result of careful studies of the scriptures, and examination of the tradition and ways in which the Church globally has grown into new forms of ministry over the two thousand years of its existence. They are not views gained simply from a pragmatic following of society around us, but are ones held in all conscience and with deep commitment. At the same time I am passionately committed to an understanding of the Church which is around the idea of fellowship which has the sense of a group brought together by God for his purposes, not a group that self selects. To put it in crude terms, because God has brought us together we are stuck with each other and we had better learn to do it the way God wants us to. That means in practice that we need to learn diversity without enmity, to love not only those with whom we agree but especially those with whom we do not agree.

The practical result of this is that I strongly support, in addition to the ordination of women as bishops, finding ways of ensuring that those who in good conscience and for theological reasons are opposed to the ordination, the proper place, pastoral care and love, which is the command of God and is in my own heart. It is a difficult square to make into a circle or the other way around.

I will be taking a very active part in the discussions between different groups over the next few weeks and months, and that will take up a good deal of my time. I hope you will understand that this is very important for the future of our diocese and for its mission in this area.

With love in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, starting with a cross symbol and the name 'Justin Welby'.

+ Justin Welby
Bishop of Durham