

by Rosie Ward

resource sheet 3

women in ministry

Some thoughts for women considering
authorised ministry

Why a special resource sheet on women's ministry? After all, since the decision of General Synod in 1992, and the first ordinations of women to the priesthood in 1994, women may be curates and vicars, or deans and archdeacons, just as men can. Women are trained and ordained alongside men, for the same ministries. Younger women in the church have grown up with ordained women as role models, and if they feel called to authorised ministry, ordination will seem as natural – and as challenging – as it has always seemed to men.

But the history of women's ordination is still relatively recent. And the controversy around it, while it may be less obvious, is still there. Then there are also many questions which affect women's ministry: how does the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod (which introduced the idea of alternative episcopal oversight and so-called 'flying bishops') affect women's ministry? Do women bring different qualities and styles to

leadership? What will the Church look like when, as many hope, men and women work alongside each other in leadership teams?

Before looking at some of these issues, it may help to look at the history of women's ministry in the Church.

Early opportunities

Women have ministered in the Church since New Testament times, when we see women disciples supporting Jesus' ministry, Mary of Bethany sitting at Jesus' feet, the position of one learning to be a leader, and women such as Phoebe, Priscilla and Junia mentioned in the letters of Paul. Clearly, many of the texts describing these ministries are subject to contested interpretations from within and beyond the evangelical constituency. However, it would be true to say that a growing consensus has developed as to the presence and value of women's leadership in the New Testament. Once ministry became more formalised, women seem gradually to have been excluded from formal ministry positions, but

that never stopped them from ministering! And through 2,000 years of Church history we see both individual women exercising remarkable ministries and revival movements in which women have exercised leadership alongside men.

In the 19th century, women began to move into formal ministry in the Anglican Church in a variety of ways. The Church Missionary Society first sent a woman missionary to Sierra Leone in 1820, and as others followed it was inevitable that questions were raised about how women could be used at home in the UK.

Religious orders for women were revived in the Church of England in 1845 when Edward Pusey founded a sisterhood. Soon there were 20 communities around the country, mostly working with the poor and those on the margins of society. Numbers of women in such communities peaked in the 1960s but numbers of both men and women in the religious communities has dropped significantly since then.

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The 19th century also saw the revival of the *deaconess* movement. Early in the century a Lutheran pastor from Germany visited England to see for himself Elizabeth Fry's prison work. Back in Kaiserwerth in Germany he

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founded an order of deaconesses to do nursing and social work. In England, Elizabeth Ferard pioneered deaconess work, and was ordained deaconess in 1862 by Bishop Tait, the then Bishop of London. By the turn of the century there were 13 diocesan deaconess houses and over 200 women had been ordained and worked as deaconesses. However, the Church of England gave no official recognition to the order; it was recognised by the Lambeth Conference in 1897 and formally restored by the Convocation of Canterbury in 1923.

There was some confusion about the role of the deaconess, but whatever the official line, they came to lead all forms of public worship, except presiding at Holy Communion; preach at all services; and to baptise and conduct funerals. By the time the order was closed to new admissions in 1987, some deaconesses were in charge of parishes – delegating certain functions to local priests.

The 19th century also saw the beginning of a variety of *accredited lay ministries*. In 1857 the first 'Bible woman' was sent out to work among the poor, on the same lines as indigenous women were being used in overseas missions. Many women, worked among the poor in the growing

towns and cities of the industrial revolution, helping hard-pressed clergy. The first licenses for such women were granted in 1887.

The mid-century revival had a great impact on the church, and alongside new movements such as the Salvation Army, a number of Anglican women were active in itinerant preaching ministry, though usually outside church buildings. The Church Army was founded in 1882; Wilson Carlile's sister Marie was involved alongside him, and through her influence women were fully involved. Between 1887 and 1937, 2,000 women were commissioned as Church Army Sisters, and since then women and men have been trained together and commissioned to similar areas of work.

Ordination as deacons and priests

Meanwhile, there was debate through most of the 20th century about the ordination of women. In 1987 women were admitted into holy orders as deacons, and 745 deaconesses, some religious and a number of Church Army sisters took this step. This meant they were now clergy, but it made little difference to their practice of ministry apart from conducting marriage services. But the effect in the church meant that the role of women was taken much more seriously. Most of these deacons saw themselves as called to be priests, and looked ahead to the next step.

On 12 March 1994 the first women were ordained priest in Bristol Cathedral, followed in the next few months by about 1,500 others in cathedrals throughout the country. Women priests are thus able to fill any appointment other than those requiring episcopal orders. While controversy

continues, the Church is at the time of writing turning to look at the admission of women to the episcopate.

While there is wide acceptance of women priests, there are also significant numbers who disagreed with the 1992 Synod decision. Opposition came and continues to come from some Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals; some churches will not allow a woman to preside at Holy Communion and these churches and some others are not willing to have a woman in charge. The Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod means that there are now two so-called 'integrities' in the Church of England, and provision has been made for the pastoral care and oversight in those parishes who disagree with their bishop on this issue (i.e. Extended Episcopal Care, using so-called 'flying bishops').

In this strange situation, women's experience varies. Most feel totally affirmed in their ministry as priests, while some are made to feel that their priesthood is somehow provisional when those who oppose it talk of an ongoing period of 'reception'.

Women's ministry now

Lay ministry and the diaconate

For women with a call to evangelism, the Church Army may be the main option (see Resource Sheet 8), though you may be attracted to training and deployment as an 'ordained pioneer minister'. OPMs are part of the wider initiatives in mission growing out of the 2004 report, *Mission-Shaped Church*. Besides this there are still a few women who have opted for accredited lay ministry, though they are finding that there are increasingly limited opportunities, given the number of ordained women and the recent explosion of other kinds of authorised lay ministry within dioceses, such as Reader, pastoral assistant and evangelist.

Some women who were ordained deacon prior to 1994 did not want to be considered for priesthood, and a few ordained since then have opted to remain deacons rather than being priested after their first year. Recent attempts to revive the 'permanent diaconate' as a distinctive order for men and women have not been successful.

The priesthood/presbyterate

The priesthood opened up to women the opportunity to bless, absolve and to preside at the Communion Service. This in turn enabled women to move into incumbent posts. While at first there were some churches which agreed in theory with women's ordination but did not want a woman vicar yet, gradually expectations are changing. The generation of women following behind the pioneers are moving into a more equal world.

However, when it comes to stipends, some women are finding that life is not so equal. Women thinking about ordination no longer have to choose either stipendiary or non-stipendiary – though for many that is a question considered with the DDO or bishop. Some women plan to continue in their secular job and will be happy to be self-supporting ministers. Others find that the options for a woman needing time for childcare, or helping her vicar husband, or tied to an area where a paid post is not readily available, are limited. Women who want to be stipendiary may have to be prepared to challenge the system, which in some places can assume that if a husband is in paid secular work, his ordained wife can live on his earnings and does not need a stipend. The assumption is seldom made the other way round, despite the fact that many wives of clergy who are in secular employment earn far more than their husbands!

Two-clergy couples now make up a significant number of clergy in the

Church of England (over 300 couples). There are many issues facing clergy couples, often disproportionately negative for the woman involved. These include: levels of stipend; posts of responsibility; arrangements for childcare; ministry career development and the availability of job-share arrangements. Many have only one stipend, and in most cases it is the man, with his wife as SSM. This is a cause for concern. Up to now there has been little job-sharing – though with imagination this could be used creatively. As the secular world introduces more flexible working patterns, it is to be hoped the Church will become more flexible too, for example with part-time posts, or by changing the expectation that vicars will work excessive hours leaving someone else to run their home life.

Other current concerns include: gender difference in training (more women on courses, few women in some colleges); an uneven spread in the number of women of incumbent status in each diocese; relative lack of women in more senior posts and the perception that the preferment process is still strongly male-dominated; and lack of women's voices being heard in places of decision making such as bishop's staff meetings and bishop's councils.

Another issue is personal safety. This is an issue for both men and women, especially highlighted by recent cases of attack, and some female clergy, particularly those on their own, feel vulnerable. There is usually a policy in dioceses to fit alarm systems, which may include panic buttons; good practice in dioceses should involve women (and men) making their own proper risk assessment. Another area is harassment; little is known about this sensitive area, but complaints of harassment by other clergy or parishioners are taken increasingly seriously.

Women's ministry: the future

It's a good time for women to enter the priesthood. Many women have gone before and led the way, pioneering the acceptance of women. Others have been the first female incumbent in a parish, the first area dean, the first canon at the cathedral, the first archdeacon. The debate about women's admission to the episcopate is being spoken of as 'when and how', rather than 'if'.

Many people, both men and women, are excited by the changing shape of the Church, in which both men's and women's gifts are valued. There is debate about whether women bring a distinctive set of gifts to ministry, but there is no doubt that we bring different experience, and often different ways of seeing situations because of it. Male clergy talk of how women have 'humanised' clergy chapters since they have been present. Women seem to lead in more collaborative ways, enabling others to share in ministry – which is after all what the pattern of New Testament ministry is all about.

Change comes slowly in the Church of England, and for many who lived through it, the struggle for women's ordination to the priesthood took far too long. But the changes in the years since 1994 have been quite dramatic. Women now take their place alongside men in bringing the good news of Christ through the occasional offices, we minister to people in the mundane as well as times of tragedy and festivity. Women are at the forefront of initiatives such as 'Fresh Expressions', and attempts to reach people who are 'spiritual' but not religious. If you feel God is calling you to step out into an unknown future, trusting God as you seek to serve his people, then ask yourself the following questions (some of which are also appropriate for men).

Are you a pioneer? There is plenty of pioneering to be done. This may be in

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developing fresh expressions of church to suit our fast-changing context – and in 2005 the Church developed a set of guidelines for the identification, training and deployment of Ordained Pioneer Ministers. Or it may be in blazing a new trail for women, going where ordained women have not been before. Still, we are often judged not only on how well we do the job, but how we do as a representative of all women.

Can you cope with opposition? This will come to those in ministry, in both the reality of spiritual warfare and the more human tendency to sin within relationships. It can be most hurtful when coming from within the Church – for many women in the form of those who don't agree with the ordination of women. There may be members of our clergy chapter who won't attend meetings because we do, or other ways in which our ministry is undermined.

What about your family? If you have children your care of them will come under close scrutiny, as you will be expected to be an excellent mum as well as a brilliant vicar. Do your family understand the pressures of ministry? And will they ensure that you take

your day off and other time for them? If you are not married, have you got good support structures? Ministry can be lonely at times, especially if good friends are far away. On the other hand, you may have more flexibility than those who have to work around the demands of spouses and the school run!

Are you glad to be a woman? The church needs ministers who can rejoice in all that God has made them – including their gender – and want to serve as they are, rather than how they have seen others go about the task.

Contemporary biblical scholars point increasingly to the fact that the criterion for ministry in the Church is not gender but Spirit-gifting. So the question for a woman considering authorised ministry is the same as it is for a man: has God gifted me? Is God calling me? (the subject of another CPAS resource sheet). The Church needs those who can serve and lead God's people, and reach out to the world in creative ways. If you find yourself encouraged by others and impelled by your own growing sense of call, then perhaps authorised ministry is for you.

Further reading

Growing Women Leaders, (BRF/CPAS, 2008). An exploration of theological issues surrounding women's leadership, and practical advice for women in leadership roles in the Church.

Women and Priesthood in the Church of England: Ten Years On, Ian Jones, (CHP, 2004). A study exploring the Church's experience of the first decade of women's priestly ministry.

Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy, RW Pierce and RM Groothuis (editors), (IVP, 2005). A collection of articles by evangelical scholars, including discussion of key biblical texts and issues of ministry and priesthood.

Evangelicalism and Biblical Truth, Wayne Grudem, (IVP British edition 2005). A complementarian view.

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This resource sheet incorporates material from a previous version by the Rev Di Lammas.

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