

Pray for the General Synod of the Church of England as it meets in York from 11-15 July. Those of us who yearn for the time when, at last, the Church of England can ordain women as bishops have much to pray and hope for. Synod members will be voting again on a new simplified motion - the result of a period of reflection and reconciliation among groups for and against, over the last 20 months - to approve the ordination of women in the episcopate in the Church of England. It is a momentous decision, and hopes are high that this time synod will say 'Yes'. Though, because it has to pass by a two thirds majority in all three houses, of laity, clergy and bishops, it is still possible that it will fail, and particularly in the house of laity. Here a number of conservative evangelicals hold, it seems to me, two main objections. Firstly, following certain passages of scripture they declare that men and women have different roles and that women must not hold authority over men. Secondly, they declare that, as Jesus Christ was a man, so those in a position of leadership within the church should also be male. The outcome depends upon how much they believe that they, as holding this view, are still loved and valued within the Church of England and can do so without their principles being compromised.

Since Archbishop Justin has become Archbishop of Canterbury he has drawn strongly on the experience he has had of being a reconciler. He worked in the ministry of reconciliation which is so much a part of our neighbouring Diocese of Coventry, and he has worked in Nigeria, negotiating at some risk to his own life with dangerous military rebels. Archbishop Justin shows that the central message of Christianity is one of reconciliation: *'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and has entrusted us with a message of reconciliation.'* 2 Corinthians 5.19. So, he is fond of asking: 'Can we disagree well?'

I sincerely hope that we can. For if we can model a ministry of reconciliation within the church, then we can begin to help the world with that message; so badly needed in a time of many horrific conflicts. It does, of course, mean that we will have to accept that we are going to disagree with people - the very people with whom we must be reconciled. The two issues of the age that threaten to divide the church are these: the ordination of women as bishops and the challenge presented by a modern understanding of same sex relationships, and the possibility of gay marriage. The latter of these two is so profound because it affects our identity as human beings. It will be the subject of a series of shared conversations over the next two years. There are three stages to the plan which is being put together by David Porter and his team. David is based at Coventry and leads the Archbishops' reconciliation ministry.

The first stage is that some professional facilitators will work later this year with the House of Bishops to enable bishops of differing views on this question to listen to one another. There will then, in 2015, be a number of regional meetings, also facilitated by professionals. These will be attended by 12 clergy and 12 laity from each diocese, representing the spectrum of views. So, in 2016, and only after these conversations, will the matter come back to General Synod.

In a meeting I attended in May David Porter made it quite clear that, if we fail to get this right, the breakdown of relationships within the worldwide church could be as great as any since the Reformation. However it turns out, there will inevitably be an element of living with brokenness.

As I write, the desperate needs for reconciliation, for conversations, become terribly clear on a range of situations which are descending into unimaginable horror and violence: northern Iraq is under the control of militants, Syria rages in violence and suffering, Boko Haram carries out its murderous purposes. At the same time, Southern Sudan is moving

again tentatively towards a fragile peace and in all this, and more, women are subjected to rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war. Praise should therefore be given to our government which has recently hosted an international conference to seek a resolution to outlaw sexual violence as a weapon of war. William Haig had been deeply moved by Angelina Jolie and her campaign to highlight the suffering of women in this way.

The time for the church to demonstrate a ministry of reconciliation has never been more important. Pray that our church, and those with whom we share our faith, find ways to live out that call, so inspiringly put for us by St Paul:

'So if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation...All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.' 2 Corinthians 5.17-19

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