

The legislation for Women Bishops – General Synod and CEEC

At its 24-hour residential last October, (2009) CEEC passed three resolutions: concerning the Anglican Communion, the forthcoming General Synod elections, and evangelical unity. The last of these bears quoting in full:

CEEC, in the light of its submission to the General Synod Revision Committee in January 2009 (see below), believes:

- *that evangelicals probably hold the key to the debate on Women Bishops by modelling a true unity in diversity on this issue of order,*
- *that evangelicals should be encouraged to express unity and partnership in the gospel as a model for the wider unity and partnership in the Church of England,*
- *and that CEEC is properly and best placed to represent evangelicals across the CofE to contribute to the Synodical process;*
- *and notes that in particular **Awesome** and **Reform** are convening a symposium in the new year on the theological, doctrinal and Biblical dimensions of the issue;*

and, therefore, proposes that

- *in time for the February General Synod and certainly for the major debate anticipated at the July GS, the last of this quinquennium,*
- *CEEC proactively finds time and ways to convene and consult with evangelicals in the CofE in their various societies and networks*
*(*these would include at the least: EGGS and the 1990 group within Synod, the six Anglican theological colleges, CPAS, Church Society, Latimer Trust, the five evangelical Anglican mission agencies, New Wine – the CofE membership, Reform, Fulcrum, Fellowship of Word & Spirit, Awesome, Evangelical Patronage Consultative Council – EPPC, Anglican Mainstream, etc)*
- *and to co-ordinate and articulate an evangelical contribution to the debate on the preparation of legislation for Women Bishops,*
- *with particular reference to the political and pastoral dimensions of this potential development in the Church's order and governance.*

(Submission by CEEC to the General Synod Revision Committee dealing with the Women Bishops legislation – January 2009:

The CofE Evangelical Council represents a range of views on the matter of the ordination of women. It takes the view that both integrities on this matter can and should be represented within authentic Anglicanism in accordance with the assurances made and the undertakings given in 1992/3 and with resolution III.2(c) of the 1998 Lambeth Conference – which reads: “ calls upon the provinces of the Communion to affirm that those who dissent from, as well as those who assent to, the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate are both loyal Anglicans.”

With regard to the Women Bishops legislation currently being considered, CEEC believes that robust safeguards are required if the conscientious objections of many evangelicals and others to the consecration of women as Bishops are to be taken seriously and that these safeguards should be embodied in the legislation itself rather than in the proposed Code of Practice.)

Opportunity came and went

The submission of CEEC in January 2009 came as a result of CEEC's residential of October 2008 which was itself responding to the ugly and militant General Synod of July 2008 when proponents for Women Bishops made it abundantly clear that they did not want any form of structural provision for dissenters and achieved a simple majority for that position. For the next twelve months the Revision Committee had a torrid time trying this way and that to satisfy the different positions in the Church and even within the Committee itself. CEEC's Submission of Jan 2009 was intended to speak for the evangelical constituency – ie a range of views on the substantive issue on whether women could or should be Bishops, but clear that, if Women Bishops *were* to be allowed, then evangelicals would only support it with provision *in the legislation* for conscientious objectors.

By CEEC's residential in October last year, it became evident not only that evangelicals were not preparing to implement such counsel and strategy in any significant way as Synod approached its final two sessions of the quinquennium (ie Feb & July 2010), but that evangelicals were neither planning together nor even talking to each other. A potentially disastrous division of ways was rapidly coming up, with the prospect of an all but inevitable parting of friends. Evangelical Anglicans did not appear to be worried or even aware of this threat to our unity and the catastrophic implications. It was in this light that CEEC once again endeavoured to act to galvanise evangelicals. Our proposal recognised that, while others (ie Awesome and Reform, under the chairing of the Bishop of Birkenhead) were engaging once again in some serious Biblical and theological consultations, the need of the moment was for evangelicals across the board in the CofE needed to wake up to the politics of Synod and the pastoral needs on the ground in parishes.

The theological and Biblical conversation between representatives of Awesome and Reform has now spread over three day-long meetings and envisages a fourth and final one before the General Synod of Feb 2011. Their second Statement is issued with this paper. However, the more political and pastoral work that CEEC urgently called for was given scant attention initially by the various evangelical societies, institutions and networks. It was deemed unnecessary, either because people "had already made their minds up" or because they thought it would be best or at least helpful to wait for the Revision Committee's actual proposals. Valuable time was lost for getting to know each other across the networks and for even beginning to engage with the issue. CEEC did try to precipitate the first meeting before Christmas 2009 on the assumption that it would be the Feb 2010 Synod that would debate the Revision Committee's proposals. In fact, the Revision Committee was unable to complete its work in time for February, so evangelicals had a little more time. But even so it was only in June, less than a month before the July Synod, when eventually the consultation was able to be held. Even then, the day was potentially thrown by the announcement of the almost unprecedented intervention of the two Archbishops in tabling at the last minute a pastorally brave amendment for co-ordinate jurisdiction.

At the consultation, it was clear that some had little regard for the content or ethos of what CEEC had already agreed, namely that the current proposals with only a Code of Practice were insufficient to hold both integrities, and sounded quite hostile to the conservative position. The overall perception was that many had never heard, let alone engaged with, evangelical positions different from their own and that, therefore, this was almost a first for some seriously to understand the issue. As a result, the organisers felt (even in advance, it has sadly to be said) that it was not going to be possible or desirable to issue any Statement at all after the consultation. The day had been too preliminary, too open-ended, too late to articulate anything in time for Synod. In the event, then,

the purpose of last year's Resolution that evangelicals actually meet and work together as to how they were going to present a united approach and strategy for all evangelicals to understand and collaborate at General Synod was not fulfilled. As the Resolution itself hinted, it was the lack of any united purpose among evangelicals at Synod, especially in the House of Clergy, that has left the Church with no adequate provision for many conservatives.

Evangelical unity and strategy

If this is the second order issue that so many say it is (and, therefore, one on which we may disagree), then it must also be the sort of issue that evangelicals in particular will find ways (in the light of Scripture, eg Romans 14) for the strong to stand with and support the weak. The "weak" in this case are those who remain with scruples or a conscience about the proposed change and new freedom, that is the Biblically conservative or traditionalist. Actually, the Church has said that in this matter they are not simply conservative, but that they have equal integrity, loyalty and theological conviction.

The plea of this paper is that evangelicals in the CofE wake up to the threat to our unity in the gospel and in Christ if we do not learn how to stand and work together on this one – to repeat, not so much on the substantive issue of simply whether Women Bishops or not (pragmatically many of us have agreed to disagree), but on the nakedly political issue at this precise moment of the grounds and provisions on which it should go forward. Because we are an Episcopal Church, changes in our order and governance are structural in nature and, therefore, will divide us, unless we get the structures right or at least tolerable to all parties. This is what evangelicals ought to be able to model to the Church – that unity is in Christ and the gospel, in the faith, and not grounded necessarily in order and the same structures, and, therefore, if necessary, structures for governance and – yes – jurisdiction could be quite varied and alternate, even co-ordinate.

Put rather crudely, if evangelicals on Synod could be persuaded truly to work together politically, then they could shape the debate decisively and enable *both* this development to happen if that is what the majority continue Biblically to want *and* genuinely secure Episcopal provision and future for the resulting conscientious minority. It would be messy, but that's politics. And, if the greatest Briton is to be believed about democracy, it's an untidy form of government, but it's the fairest.

This paper would urge CEEC to maintain its confidence to represent evangelicals and, if anything, to get stronger in almost insisting that evangelicals get together to face this one together. There may be now two years before this returns to General Synod (July 2012?), but the debates in Diocesan and even Deanery Synods are most likely to take place in the next six to nine months. Will evangelicals plan to work together this time? CEEC should call a second consultation as soon as possible with a clear intention to achieve the outcome of a united political strategy for a combined evangelical contribution and influence as this debate climaxes.

David Banting – for CEEC (Oct 13-14, 2010)

PS In Chelmsford (through our DEA, and also through Chelmsford Anglican Mainstream/Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans bringing charismatic and conservative evangelicals and orthodox Catholics together) we have statements of the intent stated above. At CDEA, Bishop Wallace Benn and the Revd Lis Goddard both agreed on *"the need for statutory provision for those opposed"*. At CAM/CFCA, Paul Harcourt, a national New Wine leader, wrote: *"Personally I am in favour of the ordination of women and of the consecration of women as Bishops. I have the same reservations about the orthodoxy of candidates for either order of ministry as I would have for men though. More importantly in the present debate it seems to me that having allowed for two integrities for the past 15 years we cannot move forward on this matter without adequate provision for those who in*

conscience take a different view for Scriptural reasons. As someone who values the full range of orthodox traditions in the CofE I would not want to see the Church lose vital parts of the Anglican economy.”

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