

On Thursday, July 8th, the Bishop of Birkenhead, Keith Sinclair chaired a third meeting of representatives from AWESOME and Reform, again joined by a number of theological consultants as guests. We first met informally in September 2009 and then full-on in January 2010 as evangelicals to consider again the Biblical texts that lie behind the current debates on gender and roles in the Church of England. The first Statement issued at that time was part of the stimulus for the C of E Evangelical Council (CEEC) to convene a meeting on Monday, June 21st, between some seventeen evangelical Anglican networks, organisations and institutions to consider and coordinate evangelical responses to the issue and contribution to the General Synod debate in July on the legislation for Women Bishops. We believed that, parallel to our Biblical and theological consultation, there needed to be a consultation on the political (ie Synodical) and pastoral (ie ministerial and back in the parishes) dimensions to this debate. Evangelicals need to be engaging with each other, especially if we appear to differ on these issues of the day, to understand each other better and to model to the wider Church how to engage with differences and maintain unity and charity.

In January the texts under discussion were Genesis 2-3 and 1 Timothy 2, with a sweep through Luke 24, John 20 and Acts 18. We found, as did CEEC on June 21st, that we had not heard and engaged with the variety of views for some time and that it was good to meet and listen to the understandings and feelings of others. This third meeting of AWESOME and Reform decided to look again at 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5/1 Corinthians 7 and see what they taught of the Trinity and marriage respectively and what relevance they might have to gender roles in the Church. As in the previous consultation, papers were written and circulated in advance and it is hoped that they may in due course be edited to appear on our two web-sites.

The conversation was extensive, open and honest. It continued to be illuminating for better understanding of each other and a growth in mutual respect. We accepted that our discussions remain incomplete. We need to meet a fourth time to explore the Pastoral letters again for our understanding of order and ordination in the Church, and to grapple with whether there is any relation between this debate on gender and roles and that on issues of human sexuality which continue to convulse the C of E. We honestly recognised that we are still in a position of 'agreeing to disagree' on a number of substantive points and for that reason too needed a fourth meeting if we were to add anything further to our initial Statement. However, we are very clear and grateful for the growth in friendship and respect that we have discovered as we have met to pray and converse.

This next meeting is likely to be after the elections to the next General Synod and, of course, in the light of the decision of the July General Synod, but we intend it to be before the February 2011 GS. Our plan is for the papers eventually to be on our two web-sites. The CEEC consultation dramatically revealed how evangelical Anglicans had stopped meeting to talk these issues through. We, therefore, offer these ongoing discussions between Reform and AWESOME as a model and stimulus to others to engage or re-engage similarly.

Chair: The Bishop of Birkenhead

Awesome: Lis Goddard, Rosie Ward, and Julia Murphy, with Emma Ineson and Andrew Goddard

Reform: David Banting, Carrie Sandom and Nigel Atkinson, with Mike Ovey and Roger Beckwith

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