

**WOMEN IN THE EPISCOPATE:
A REPORT FROM THE HOUSE OF BISHOPS**

1. *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* was published on 2 November on the authority of the House of Bishops and commended to dioceses for study. The House also authorised the sending of the report to our sister churches in the Anglican Communion and to other Churches for their views.
2. The report results from the General Synod motion of July 2000 which asked the House ‘to initiate further theological study on the episcopate, focusing on the issues that need to be addressed in preparation for the debate on women in the episcopate...’. The House is grateful to the Bishop of Rochester and his colleagues for the great care with which they have prepared it.
3. The House has proposed, and the Business Committee has agreed, that time should be made available at the February Synod for a major debate of the report, on a take note motion moved by the Bishop of Rochester. This will be an important contribution to the period of study and reflection which the House believes to be essential in preparation for decisions which are bound to have a major impact on the future life and ministry of our Church. Companion study material is being made available and the House hopes that dioceses, deaneries and parishes will find this helpful as they ponder the issues raised by the report.
4. After the take note debate on the report from the Bishop of Rochester’s Group, I intend to move a motion, which will give the Synod the opportunity to debate this short report from the House setting out our thinking on what the process should be from here.

5. Having considered the matter carefully, the House has concluded that to attempt to reach substantive decisions in February, only three months after the publication of such a substantial report, would be premature. Equally, it acknowledges, as the five Diocesan Synod Motions indicate, that there is a wish in many quarters to test the mind of the Synod at an early opportunity on whether the Church of England should embark on the legislative process necessary for the admission of women to the episcopate. The House is agreed that such an opportunity should be provided in July.
6. If the vote then were to move towards legislation, it would fall to the next Synod to consider the legislation itself. Consideration might also be needed for codes of practice. Decisions as between the various options would, therefore, best be taken early in the life of the new Synod in the light of a considered assessment by the House of what, in practice, the consequences of each of them would be.
7. Against that background the House thought that it would be helpful to set out now for the Synod in some detail, the process which we propose to help the Church to discern the will of God in this matter. First, the House at its January meeting had an opportunity for a substantial discussion of matters of principle and began to consider the implications of the options set out in the Report. Further discussion, taking account of the February Synod debate, will be needed when the House meets again in May. It is important that the House itself have time to explore carefully the issues both of principle and implementation before decisions are taken.
8. A member of the House will then move a substantive motion for debate at the July Synod. The text of the motion will be settled nearer the time, but the intention of the House is that it should test the mind of Synod on whether it wants to set in train the process for removing the legal obstacles to the ordination of women to the episcopate.

9. If Synod were to vote in favour, the House would also want Synod to have the opportunity in July to determine what the next steps should be. Given the imminent end of the quinquennium, a possible option would be to invite the House of Bishops, in consultation with the Archbishops' Council, to report to the Synod by January 2006, the assessment which it is making of the various options relating to the admission of women to the episcopate.

10. This would pave the way for a debate, perhaps in the February 2006 group of sessions when the Synod would be able to reach its own view as between the options and thus determine the basis on which it wanted the necessary legislation prepared. This would also be the moment to establish the necessary drafting group. The legislation would be prepared to reflect the decisions already taken by Synod. There would, of course, be the usual opportunity for amendments to be moved during the subsequent synodical consideration of the draft Measure etc.

11. If the motion this July were to be carried and the necessary decisions taken in February 2006, the steps thereafter would be likely to be as follows (on the assumption that the legislation represented both Article 7 business and Article 8 business):
 - i) Drafting Group appointed. Oversees preparation of draft Measure and Canon for introduction to the Synod ;
 - ii) Draft Measure and Canon introduced, given First Consideration by Synod and referred to Revision Committee to consider proposals for amendment;
 - iii) Report from Revision Committee considered by Synod, followed by the Revision Stage;

- iv) Reference of draft Measure and Canon, as amended, to diocesan synods under Article 8. The approval of a majority of the synods is required for the legislation to proceed further;
- v) Report back to Synod from the Business Committee on the diocesan reference. Possible references to the Convocations and House of Laity under Article 7;
- vi) Final approval by Synod. A two-thirds majority in each House is required at this point;
- vii) Parliamentary scrutiny of Measure, including by the Ecclesiastical Committee;
- viii) Royal Assent for Measure and Promulgating of Canon by Synod.

12. Any timescale is necessarily speculative at this stage. A reference to diocesan synods requires around eighteen months and that means that the synodical process from establishing the drafting group through to Final Approval cannot realistically take less than about four years.

(On behalf of the House of Bishops)

+ROWAN CANTUAR:

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