

Task Force on Women in the Episcopate

Final Report to the GAFCON Primates

The Task Force on Women in the Episcopate was authorized by the Primates in April 2015 “to consider the subject of the consecration of women bishops.” It held a preliminary meeting in October 2015 (Mukono, Uganda) and a subsequent plenary meeting in January 2016 (Charleston, USA). The latest meeting was held at Uganda Christian University in Mukono from 25-27 January of this year. We thank the University for its gracious hospitality.

Following the direction of the Primates in April 2016, the Task Force added two female members: Dr. Ruth Senyonyi, a lay woman, professional counselor, and head of Mother’s Union in Uganda; and the Venerable Kara Hartley, an ordained deacon and Archdeacon of the Diocese of Sydney. Hence the Task Force represented women from all orders: laity, diaconate, and presbyterate, as well as a bishop’s wife. A list of members is attached. We note with regret the untimely death, shortly before our meeting, of one of our members, the Rev. Dr. Mike Ovey. We thank God for Mike's valuable contribution to the Task Force before his death.

Task Force members have read relevant books and articles, and it has produced a number of documents of its own. It sought the advice of its Consultant, Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, in person and via skype. It requested a separate paper on biblical interpretation from Dr. Grant LeMarquand, Bishop of the Horn of Africa. An index of materials written and reviewed is available on request.

The Task Force circulated an extensive questionnaire to its members, seeking the views of the various GAFCON Provinces on the question of women in the episcopate. While the responses to the questionnaires were necessarily “snapshots,” they revealed the diversity present in our movement and the need for further teaching and sharing across our borders.

Above all, the Task Force has sought to be faithful to Scripture, God’s Word written. We recognize that some things in Scripture are hard to understand and require the spiritual virtue of *patience*, “bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2; 2 Peter 3:15-17).

In this spirit, we humbly submit this Report to the Primates’ Council.

Sincerely yours in His Name,

The Rt. Rev. Samson Mwaluda
Chairman

The Rev. Prof. Stephen Noll
Convener

11 February 2017

GAFCON Task Force on Women in the Episcopate - Report to Primates

27th January 2017

SUMMARY: It is our prime recommendation that the provinces of GAFCON should retain the historic practice of the consecration only of men as bishops until and unless a strong consensus to change emerges after prayer, consultation and continued study of Scripture among the GAFCON fellowship.

1. It is clear that several provinces would be alienated by the consecration of women to the episcopate and one would find it difficult if women were permanently precluded from consecration. Other provinces have a variety of views and are content to wait until a consensus is reached.¹
2. Various understandings emerged in our discussion, but we were one in our commitment to the authority and unity of Scripture and the centrality of Christ and the gospel. This common ground was also reflected in the scholarly contributions we had requested on the interpretation of Scripture and how to read Scripture when there is disagreement.
3. In particular, we considered the balance between general principles (for example, Galatians 3:28 about equality in Christ) and specific instructions for church order (for example, 1 Timothy 2:12). The Anglican principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture (Article XX) would lead us to expect a harmonious reading of Scripture.
4. We received a number of reports from Nigeria, Uganda and Sydney about the work of lay women's organisations with structured ministry roles. We praised God for the variety of women's ministry in the Anglican Communion and recognized our often shallow knowledge of such ministry beyond our own provinces. We were encouraged to think that further discussion might lead us to find new and creative forms of ministries by women beyond the traditional orders of bishop, priest and deacon.
5. The household of the Bishop has a defining public role and brings into focus the close relationship between leadership in the human family and leadership in the family of the Church (see Ephesians 5:21-33, 1 Timothy 3:1-5). We heard testimony of the way that the ministry of bishops' wives enriches the Church, in particular the leadership of the Mothers Union, and maintaining this order will strengthen church and family.
6. It also seems appropriate therefore to re-examine the assumption that ordination is a ladder leading from the diaconate through the presbyterate to the episcopate. For instance, we noted the existence of a permanent diaconate where a candidate understood that he or she was being called to one office of ministry. With regard to the episcopate, Bishop Michael Nazir Ali, for instance, has demonstrated that the bishops of the early church were not simply seen as promoted presbyters, but uniquely represented apostolic continuity.

¹ The Task Force circulated comprehensive questionnaires to all of its provincial members and evaluated their responses.

7. The concern for unity arises because a bishop, as the chief minister of the diocese, unlike a presbyter, specifically represents the Church both to the world and also to other Churches. Mutual recognition has been possible within the GAFCON movement so far because all the bishops have been male, despite different 'integrities' at the presbyteral level. And in this context, we note the particular difficulty for those of the Anglo-Catholic tradition who cannot recognise a consecrated woman as a bishop, nor any priests or deacons ordained by her.
8. Having studied the theological positions set out in the Church of England's Rochester Report of 2004, we were distressed to realise that the consecration of women bishops in England had gone forward without proper regard for the biblical and theological views of Conservative Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics, repeating a pattern already evident in The Episcopal Church of the United States. Much of the debate has been dominated by the language of secular rights rather than a theological understanding of Holy Orders as found in the classic Ordinal.
9. The wider context is that the 1988 Lambeth Conference legitimised a flawed process of "open reception" in which the demand for recognition of pre-emptive actions outweighed the authority of Scripture. As one of our number observed, "Yesterday's solutions are today's problems." We now have an opportunity to revisit this too hasty 'reception' process. We recommend that the GAFCON Churches should focus on strengthening ministries by women before pressing forward to consecrate women as bishops.
10. We therefore propose that specific action be taken to help the GAFCON movement to come to a common mind:
 - a) Increased cross-provincial consultation and awareness facilitated by the Task Force
 - b) Collation of the documents we have used as an online resource
 - c) Synodal consideration by the assembled bishops at Jerusalem 2018, including input from the various ministries of women, such as bishops' wives, Mothers Union and ordained women.

In conclusion, we are aware that GAFCON, as 'not just a moment in time, but a movement in the Spirit'², is called to deal with historically unprecedented cultural changes, particularly with regard to human sexuality. There is therefore wisdom and humility in caution about changing practices established for nearly two millennia and it was noted that the Nicene Creed was the product of many years of debate in the Early Church.

It is our prayer that the GAFCON member provinces and dioceses will bear with one another and maintain our God-given unity. We trust that as we come together humbly and patiently to the inspired Scriptures we shall not be conformed to this world but transformed by the renewal of our minds and truly discern what is the will of God (Romans 12:1).

² GAFCON Jerusalem Statement 2008

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³ Dr. Ruth Senyonyi was ably represented at the January 2017 meeting by Mrs. Kedrace Turyagyenda, Commissioner of Education Standards in the Republic of Uganda. Mrs. Turyagyenda is a lay preacher in the Church of Uganda and represented the Church at several GAFCON meetings.

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