

EDITORIAL

A Measure of Credibility?

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I have written before about the potential dangers and difficulties of drafting an Editorial in October which will not be read until the following January, if indeed it is read at all. A week is a long time in church politics, but the landscape has been so markedly changed during the production stage of this issue that my original draft would have been neither timely nor appropriate. I had reflected on the creative force of living in a period of uncertainty while awaiting significant decisions. I had focused on the appointment of the successor to Dr Rowan Williams, with the Crown Nominations Commission deferring its anticipated decision to a later date; on the European Court of Human Rights preparing to deliver its judgment in the conjoined application of *Eweida, Chaplin, Ladele and McFarlane v United Kingdom*¹ following oral argument in Strasbourg in September; and on the (then) forthcoming vote in the General Synod of the Church of England on the ordination of women bishops, which had been due for final approval in July but was adjourned until November. Following the vote, and the loss at final approval stage of the draft Measure, my observations seemed limp and inadequate. The reverberations from the vote, within both the Church and Parliament, have been immense, fuelled by ill-informed speculation in the media. Talk of crisis and disestablishment has dominated the newspapers. The failure of a major development in English ecclesiastical law, particularly one which concerns doctrine and ecclesiology, calls for informed reflection.

Contrary to the inaccurate statements deployed by commentators in the press and in the Palace of Westminster, the General Synod did not vote against the consecration of women as bishops in the Church of England. It merely declined to approve the detailed legislative provisions of the draft Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure. The consensus – and almost universally held view – of the General Synod was that the episcopacy should now be open to women. Equally, and true to the spirit of the Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure 1993, there was widespread – although not universal – agreement to ensure that proper provision be made for those

¹ Application Nos 59842/10, 48420/10, 51671/10 and 36516/10 respectively. For an outline and extra-judicial comment on the cases, see N Bratza, 'The "Precious Asset": Freedom of Religion Under the European Convention on Human Rights', (2012) 14 Ecc LJ 270–271.

who, for reasons of conscience, were unable to accept the priestly and episcopal ministry of women. In July 2008, the General Synod called for legislation to be drafted in line with the motion:

That this Synod:

- (a) affirm that the wish of its majority is for women to be admitted to the episcopate;
- (b) affirm its view that special arrangements be available, within the existing structures of the Church of England, for those who as a matter of theological conviction will not be able to receive the ministry of women as bishops or priests . . .

The vote in November 2012, by the nature of all such votes, was blunt and lacking in nuance. However it decided nothing more than that the specific provisions of the draft Measure failed to satisfy members of the General Synod to the required qualified majorities in all three of its houses that an appropriate balance had been struck in relation to the two clear principles on which there was consensus.

The failure of the draft Measure ought not to have come to as a complete surprise either to the General Synod itself or to any informed commentator. It does not take a professional pollster to discern from the voting patterns of members during earlier stages of the procedural passage of the draft Measure that it was unlikely that the required two-thirds majority would be achieved in the House of Laity. The signals were there to see, and it was doubtless in the knowledge that the emergent proposals did not command sufficient support that the Archbishops of Canterbury and York tabled an amendment for consideration by General Synod in York in July 2010. It was rejected by a narrow majority to the consternation and visible distress of many members. Similarly, a proposed amendment to the Measure put forward by the House of Bishops did not find favour with the General Synod in July 2012, in a vote to adjourn final approval until the hastily convened and ultimately ill-fated session in November. It might be suggested that the Church of England has become a body which is episcopally led but synodically thwarted.

Speaking after the vote, the Archbishop of Canterbury stated that the Church of England 'had lost a measure of credibility' with the public. Others might say that had there been more credibility in the Measure it might not have been lost. The General Synod is both a legislative and a deliberative body. It may well be that there was inadequate deliberation before the process of legislating began. I have tired myself – and doubtless tired audiences – in repeating that ecclesiastical law is the servant of the Church and not its master. Once the will of the Church is discerned, then the law can be framed in such a way as to facilitate and enable that will to be lived out in its public ministrations. It may well be

that the General Synod moved to the detailed legislative process too soon, and in consequence the admittedly difficult task of accommodating differing integrities on doctrine and ecclesiology was compromised.

The process exposed the raw edges of living with difference in a broad church with love, sincerity and graciousness. The confrontational nature of a Westminster-style debating chamber was far from helpful. Things were said on all sides which ought not to have been said; grace yielded to posturing; views became more deeply entrenched; people became immovable. Finding the language of accommodation proved illusory.

A process of healing must begin, restoring relationships that have become strained and broken in the years during which formalized legislative structures have emasculated compassion and mutual concern in consequence of institutionalized confrontation and polarization. The task of rebuilding trust will be the primary concern for the incoming Archbishop of Canterbury. The established Church has not lost credibility: it has merely faltered temporarily in being that gloriously broad church which truly defines Anglicanism. I am in no doubt that Justin Welby has the gifts of wisdom and perseverance to find sufficient common ground upon which to build a more workable solution. He deserves the support of the whole Church and her lawyers in carving out a mediated consensus that will convert the universally held desire for the consecration of women into an ecclesial reality. For it is in reconciling our differences that we can more truly become the Body of Christ.