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PAMPHLET

THE CHUNG HUA SHENG KUNG HUI AND THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN

By E. LOUIE ACRES

IT is sometimes said that the 'mission field' is the best place for the Church to make experiments; that the Church in the West is too set in its ways for drastic changes, but that in the freer air of the Church overseas experiments may be made with advantage.

Changes imposed from without will rarely survive, but those which result from the needs of a people or have come about through a greater realization of the implications of the Gospel message, being of natural growth, bring new life and inspiration. In this latter category would seem to be included the extension of the ordained ministry to women.

Deaconesses have been ordained, but the ordination of women to the priesthood has not yet been tried in any branch of the Anglican Church; but might one not be justified in believing that it could be tried in some areas of the 'mission field,' notably in China? Justification for holding this view may be found in the experience of some of the women missionaries working in the Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui (the Holy Catholic Church in China in communion with the Anglican Church). Such opinions are expressed not by newcomers with more zeal than wisdom but by women deaconesses and lay workers, some of whom have had twenty or thirty years' experience of work overseas.

This collection of opinions is the outcome of an enquiry initiated by the Anglican Group for the Ordination of Women to the Historic Ministry of the Church. The enquiry arose out of a conference called to consider the ministry of women, with special reference to the report of the archbishops' commission.

The discussion was introduced by two speakers: one a deaconess of the Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui, the other a lay-woman, formerly a headmistress in India. (Both were English.)

The deaconess said that on her ordination she had automatically become a member of the diocesan synod and of all local councils, with power to vote with the clergy on every question. She had authority to do everything a deacon might do except to administer the chalice. The bishop who ordained her said that he looked forward to the time when permission to do this would also be granted, and it was withheld at present only because it was not yet allowed to deaconesses in England. When visiting Chinese Christian communities, she found that they had expected to receive Holy Communion from her and had been astonished and disappointed when they found she was unable to administer it. From her experience she felt that there would be little, if any, opposition to women priests in China.

The second speaker gave a summary of answers received from one hundred and seven women missionaries to a questionnaire on the ministry of women. Of these none expressed any wish for ordination to the priesthood. The speaker went on to say:

If, as I believe to be the case, you are taking a wider view which includes the good of the Church Catholic, then you are in duty bound if you value truth to make it your next business, before you go another step, to make an adequate, comprehensive survey as to whether there is any real need or desire for the priesthood of women in the Church overseas, whether the shortage of priests cannot be met in some other way, and what the repercussions would be.

The Anglican group thereupon set out to obtain further information, and with this purpose in view letters were sent to more than eleven hundred women working overseas, inviting them to answer the following questions:

Do you consider that the work in the mission field would benefit or be hindered if the full ministry of the Church were open to women?

What effect do you think the admission of women to full Orders would have on the understanding of the Christian message with regard to the equality of the sexes?

Have you any evidence as to the opinion of the people of the country in which you are working with regard to the desirability of the ministry of women?

The replies, which came from many parts of the world, reflected a great variety of opinions. In those from China there was a preponderance in favour of the admission of women to full

Orders. Extracts are here given from these letters. The replies cannot be conveniently docketed under the three headings of the above questions, but they have been grouped where possible.

Some years ago Chinese women were regarded as the greatest of China's undeveloped resources. Since then they have made great progress in the world of education, the professions and in industry. In modern China the equality of the sexes is stressed—it is one of the communist slogans—and the message of a church that does not recognize this will not attract the youth of China. This is the general theme of the extracts that follow:

It is a great opportunity for the Church in this land to proclaim the truth of the equality of men and women in the sight of God, and one not to be missed now, for these questions are being approached by young fresh minds, untrammelled by the prejudices or indifference of the West. I believe this, therefore, to be a more urgent matter here than at home. The progress of the kingdom of God will be checked in this land unless the Church is fearless and unprejudiced in the day of opportunity. But I would make it clear that I stress this not merely because of the need—a mere desire to meet that may lead us into wrong paths—nor because of competition with modern and not necessarily Christian ways of thinking, but because I believe the best interests of the kingdom of God would be thus served in this land to God's greater glory.

God does not put a difference between the spiritual capacities of men and women; why should we teach the young churches that He does? Just now when they are in process of building is the time to give the very best in standard and in our own attainment. . . . Old churches holding back must not impose their bonds on the young growing ones.

It would be a great help in a country like China to admit women to full Orders. In all departments of life, social and political, the women are treated on an equality with men. For the Christian Church alone to refuse such equality would throw a strange light on the freedom that there is in Christ and the understanding of His life and message.

In the letters there are obvious differences of opinion as to the best way of witnessing within the Church that in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female. One correspondent writes:

I frankly consider that the work in the China field would be hindered by the admission of women to the full ministry of the Church. I feel that men and women have different contributions to make to the life of the Church, and if both are to work through the same channels something of the women's contribu-

tion would be lost. As to 'getting across' the Christian message with regard to the equality of the sexes, I incline to think that to keep the priesthood exclusively for men is one of the best ways of doing it. Because the pastor is a man, and leads services and heads various organizations, the women in his congregation are gradually having their attitude changed. They realize that they can talk with a Christian man and work with him for the bringing in of the kingdom, and that Christianity knows and needs no false modesty or artificial restrictions with regard to the relationship of the two sexes.

Others are of the opinion that nothing but benefit would accrue to the Church:

I think the work in the mission field would undoubtedly be benefited if the full ministry of the Church were open to women. In China the differences between the sexes are very marked, although modern ideas are helping to free the women. But the conditions for women are so different that a woman with the authority of a priest would have much more influence and understanding of the woman's question there. . . . I believe that the admission to full Orders would have the effect of making people realize that God must speak through whom He will, whether that person be man or woman; and this would emphasize the fact that God regards with equal value the two sexes. When women are ordained it does not mean that all women will have the same power or ability, but people will sense the difference, not between man and woman, but between priest and priest. Women will, of course, have their own particular temperament to be used in God's service as men have, but this difference will surely be a gain to the Church, as God cannot be fully expressed by a one-sided priesthood of mankind. I believe that when women are ordained the world will realize more fully that the equality of the sexes does not mean the sameness of the sexes.

I think the admission of women to full Orders ought to achieve a great deal in helping the churches abroad to realize the Christian message of the equality of the sexes. I feel the young Church of China on this point, as a Church, is considerably in advance of the Church of Ireland to which I belong.

I consider the work in the mission field would benefit if the full ministry of the Church were open to women. Girls and young women will talk more freely and frankly of their doubts and difficulties to women than to men, and where home and surroundings are non-Christian it is better that it should be so.

I do think that the work in the mission field would be benefited if the full ministry of the Church were open to women. I think that, in China at any rate, the admission of women to full Orders would help people to a better understanding of the Christian message with regard to the equality of the sexes and the realization that in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female. I have found many of the Chinese Christians, knowing that I am a deaconess, expecting

me to be able to do everything that a deacon would do, and taking it as the natural sequence that, in time, the deaconess would go on to full Orders and responsibilities. And many have expressed the opinion that it would be a great help to the Church.

Considerable evidence is given that would seem to indicate that Chinese Christians would welcome women's full accession to the historic ministry. One deaconess writes:

Question three is the easiest of the queries to reply to, as from the time of my own ordination as deaconess the question: 'Why does not the bishop ordain you to the priesthood?' has been constantly asked, and I have had to explain many times the difference between 'deacons as a step to the priesthood' and 'the Order of deaconesses.' . . . The Chinese pastors have on several occasions written to the bishop to ask if I might help in the administration of the Holy Communion. I have been sent out to the country to take weddings and funerals many times by the pastors in charge of the local church. During these past years in the city the pastor has asked me constantly to baptize women and children, and in the case of dying people I have been many times the only one available to admit them to the Church when the pastor was away or ill. He appoints me to read the services or to preach in the parish church in turn with the other ordained members of the staff—himself and a foreigner.

Others write in a similar strain:

On general evidence I believe Chinese Christians would welcome the admission of women to the historic ministry of the Church. The attitude of the Chinese pastors with whom I have worked is certainly that. By their words and actions they have shown they hold in the greatest esteem the work women are doing. Chinese Christian thinking people would have no difficulty in agreeing that the Holy Spirit can know no artificial barriers of sex where vocation and work for the kingdom of God is concerned. It would recognize it was of the 'mind of Christ.'

Where Christianity has been established among the Chinese, the women have shared equally with the men in the functions of the service . . . and I believe it would seem as natural a thing for the Chinese to be served by a woman priest as by a man priest.

Here in China the admission of women to Orders would be the most natural thing in the world. In this modern, young, growing-up China there is no difference put between the sexes. Girls and boys do the same things and do them together. . . . Women, with men, are eligible for all posts—public, civil and economic, medical and educational—and valiantly they are proving themselves. For the Church to hang back in such a matter would be dreadful. You can

imagine how such a differentiation will soon strike the young people of China: they will think the Church quite out of date and it will lose its appeal and prestige.

With regard to question three, I can speak only by hearsay, as I have never discussed the matter with anyone. I have heard that the Chinese look upon the Anglican exclusion of women from the ministry as a foreign superstition.

The evidence I can give is that the Chinese clergy of the diocese, catechists, evangelists and lay workers in our synod of 1929 unanimously welcomed the introduction of the Order of deaconesses and gladly avail themselves of their services.

Now that in China educated women are becoming doctors of medicine and doctors of law, and are taking their place side by side with the men, I think that the effect of the admission of women to full Orders—as regards the Christian message—would be all to the good.

This point I have never discussed with my Chinese fellow-workers, and though I have no doubt at all as to the welcome the Chinese clergy and others would give such fellow-workers in full Orders, I have no direct evidence to offer. I write with an experience of thirty-three years in China.

One correspondent made the following point:

I do not think that in the particular diocese in which I am working the ministry of women would meet with great approval at present—chiefly because the Christians, and particularly the clergy, have been taught to believe it is not in accordance with God's will and is non-scriptural.

A deaconess of over twenty years' service in China writes with regard to the opposition she has met:

I have hoped for the day when I might be one of those to be made a priest, but as I listened to the remarks of some of those to whom you sent your questionnaire, I felt it would be long before women as a whole will help in that matter.

Emphasis is now rightly placed on the training of native workers to replace the foreigners of earlier days. A difficulty in this connexion is referred to by a correspondent who writes:

In this diocese the majority of the clergy are now Chinese, the foreign clergy few indeed in numbers, so that the introduction of foreign women as priests is not, I think, to be thought of; and so far there are no Christian Chinese women in the diocese with anything approaching sufficient scholarship for taking priest's Orders. . . . Our young educated Chinese Christian women

have been unwilling to offer for training as deaconesses. For one thing I think, so far, they are lacking in the love and sympathy and vision needed for the varying duties of Holy Orders.

She does not say how far this may be due to lack of training, or whether she considers there is an inherent incapacity.

A more hopeful note is struck in the letter of another contributor:

In this diocese at present we only have one (English) deaconess at present. In there are several. It is of their helpfulness I can testify. One is a headmistress with her own school chapel, able to conduct her own services and baptisms if no other help is available—and doing it with a very thorough knowledge of those to whom she ministers. Wonderful results have followed in the homes of those girls: several, I believe, are now in preparation for church workers, and under a Chinese bishop are likely to be ordained themselves.

This seems to indicate that it may be only a matter of time before Chinese women will be ready, spiritually and intellectually, to be trained as priests.

Shortage of priests in the present régime is not, by itself, a valid argument for the ordination of women as priests, yet the fact must carry weight in a consideration of the whole subject. Two deaconesses write of the large areas to be covered and the difficulty of following up the sacramental teaching of the Church by giving the Christian converts opportunity for the reception of the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion:

I consider the work on the mission field would greatly benefit if the full ministry of the Church were given to women. My twenty-four years' experience in China has led me to this conclusion and I give some reasons for it. First of all, with regard to the question of the administration of the sacraments: for seventeen years I visited in a district 100 miles by 120; for most of that time there were only three ordained Chinese men and one foreign priest. There were fifty-four places of worship scattered over this wide area and I was the only person to do the itinerating work in it. The Chinese clergy were situated in three cities, and in one of them the foreigner was in charge of a large boys' school which left him no time for any country work except an occasional weekend in near-by places. My work took me into almost every centre of work two or three times a year. I constantly heard of Christians who had not received the Holy Communion for six months or a year. The 'churches' were sometimes only schools in charge of a young teacher, where, on Sundays, Christians from four or five miles away would gather for worship; sometimes the 'church' was in the

home of a Christian. On one occasion I baptized over twenty people in a village church, at the request of the pastor who lived two days' journey away and was not able to go there that term. In 1922, when I was ordained deaconess, I had the experience over and over again of arriving at a 'centre' to find the people, who already knew of my intended visit, coming prepared for Holy Communion, and I had sorrowfully to tell them that I had no power to administer the Rite.

From November to June I was the only ordained person in the parish. In size it is about twenty-four miles from north to south and about twenty-five miles from east to west, and there are ten out-stations where we have groups of Christians, some with an evangelist in charge and some a catechist. During this time I had to conduct the whole service and preach twice on many Sundays. I baptized all the women and girls and conducted funerals. . . . I have personally no great desire for the priesthood, but it was a real sorrow to me to be for weeks at a time myself unable to partake of Holy Communion and to know there were many Christians in the parish who for months at a time were unable to do so. My experience during these months led me to feel that in many places in the world, where the need is urgent, the raising of women to the priesthood might supply a real need, and I can see no valid objection to it.

Differences of opinion there must be, but enough has been quoted to show that the matter is vital to the well-being of the future Church in China. A few writers expressed the opinion that the work would not be advanced—rather that it would be hindered—were women to be ordained to the priesthood; others felt that the time was not yet.

One of the features of the Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui, entitling it to be described as both catholic and evangelical, is that it combines 'respect for antiquity with freedom in the pursuit of truth' (Lambeth Conference, 1930).

The Unified Statement for 1937-38 stated that the Church in China has features peculiar to its own environment and that the experimental solution of the resulting problems may prove valuable elsewhere. Is it possible that the Holy Spirit may lead the Chinese Church to examine this question closely and to train its women with its men to become the priests of the future?

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