

AL/1991

Copy of a letter sent to the Bishop of London with reference to comments made by the English Church Union on those raising the question of the ordination of women.

Crick Rectory,
Rugby.
August 18th, 1916.

My Lord,

I am venturing to enclose a short statement (extracts from which have already appeared in The Guardian) with regard to the proposed conference to discuss the position of women in the Church's ministry which has recently been the cause of considerable agitation within the English Church Union. My object in sending you this statement is to make clear the following points:—

(1) The conveners of the meeting in question have not the least desire to exploit the National Mission in the interests of Feminism. We should, on the other hand, be deeply distressed were the work of the Mission to be marred by the confusing of the issue which has threatened to follow from the action of the E.C.U. in giving the conference a gratuitous and unwelcome advertisement.

(2) We are not rebels against Church order and discipline; we are not claiming the "right" to ordination; we are not threatening to "strike" if we are ignored. A vocabulary which includes such phrases as "to capture the priesthood", "to demand orders", "to agitate for admission to the ministry" or "to give up the Church if it refuses justice" is not and never has been our vocabulary. It may be objected that some of the remarks which have appeared recently in the press were obviously written by people of the type which such phraseology as the above suggests to the mind. This is true; but such remarks do not represent the point of view of those who convened the meeting. Had that meeting taken place it would have been made plain by the chairman and by the readers of papers that women who felt themselves moved to use such language as that which I have indicated would feel themselves out of sympathy with the spirit of the movement and would do well to stand apart from it.

(3) The movement (if such an informal and tentative affair can be called a movement) was an attempt by corporate prayer and corporate thought to learn the will of God for those women who felt that He was calling them to serve Him in His Church in a way that was new for them. Those concerned would have met together -- I think that I may say we shall meet together -- to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. We believed that He had already spoken to us as individuals and we were prepared to listen to whatever He might go on to say to us corporately.

(4) Any words of counsel, or if needs be of rebuke that you, my Lord, may vouchsafe in response to this statement will be received with all due humility. We have every desire to render

the obedience and reverence which we owe to the Episcopate. The only counsel which we should feel it incumbent on us to reject would be that we should refrain from further waiting upon God in prayer and from further honest thought about the question, and this, my Lord, it is inconceivable to us that you should bid.

May I in conclusion respectfully ask that, while giving any publicity that may seem good to you to this letter and enclosure, you will have the kindness and the courtesy not to disclose the name of your correspondent?

I am, my Lord,

Your very obedient servant,
Ursula Roberts

Note. Presumably there was an answer to this letter but I have no record of it.

The apparent cowardice of the final paragraph may, perhaps, be excused. My husband, the Rev. W.C. Roberts, though unfailingly generous in the help which he gave me was not himself enthusiastic. Far from it. He recognised that his shrinking from the idea of a woman at the altar was emotional not rational, but he could not change his attitude. Fifty years ago to tolerate the advocacy of women in the priesthood was to most churchpeople almost a crime. He was already scorned in the diocese as a supporter of women's suffrage and as a socialist. I felt compelled to shield, when I could from undeserved obloquy.

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When he was ill and growing old and needing ^(him) a move after twenty-one strenuous years at St. George's Bloomsbury, there was some question of exchanging with an incumbent in Canterbury. He was sent for to be interviewed by the Archbishop. On his return from Canterbury he told me that the plan could not come off. Lang did not want another socialist parson in the city; the Dean was enough. And, Lang, added, he understood that Mrs. Roberts held some very peculiar views. . . . My husband tried to comfort me with completely unresentful generosity when I burst into tears. I hated standing in his way. I knew that but for my peculiar ideas he might have been offered a canonry or some such.