Women and reconciliation in the Anglican Church

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We must let no one convince us that ‘women’s rights’ do not belong in the church or that ‘women’s rights’ are less urgent and less critical than other human rights. It may well be that many of us will live our entire lives to make one point: that women are people of God. To the extent that this point is made, the church and the world will be more fully human, more truly holy, arenas of life and divine movement.¹

Preface

In 1998 I wrote a paper for the Anglican Theological Seminar in Melbourne in which I attempted to explore what it meant to speak of reconciliation in relation to ordained women within Anglicanism in Australia. The context for this paper was my attendance at the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia, which had taken place earlier in the same year.

Reconciliation was uppermost in the minds of all participants at this 1998 General Synod. The pivotal question was how our Australian Anglican
Church could be made more whole by the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at all levels of church activity and organisation. Many issues were resolved: assuring representation of indigenous Anglicans at General Synod (including representation within the House of Bishops) and the formalisation of NATSIAC to secure the ‘interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the Church’. The theme of reconciliation was given its most moving expression in the Liturgy of Reconciliation which took place before the Synod Eucharist on the last day of proceedings – in particular in the apology addressed to Bishop Malcolm and Bishop Mosby by the Primate.

For the women and men present at this General Synod for whom the full reconciliation of women within the Anglican Church was still an issue, it was at once heartening and disturbing to listen to the two main arguments in favour of the representation of indigenous people within the House of Bishops. The arguments ran that clearly full reconciliation would not be achieved between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglicans and their white brothers and sisters until the fullness of the humanity of indigenous peoples was acknowledged, respected and represented at all levels of church government (including that their bishops represent them in the House of Bishops during General Synods). Further, the inclusion of indigenous Bishops at the highest level is a strong symbolic message to the indigenous peoples, and to the world at large, of the high regard with which indigenous Australians are held by the Anglicans of Australia.

There was no question but that these arguments were entirely just. It would at the time have seemed churlish to use the debate about justice for indigenous Australians to suggest parallel arguments in favour of the women of the church. Yet, on reflection, it is clear that the reconciliation of white and indigenous Anglicans that was truly striven for in General Synod was a reconciliation still being sought by women in the church and by ordained women in particular. It seemed clear to many of us that there would be a strong symbolic message of affirmation of women in the Anglican Church if they were allowed full access to Holy Orders and full representation at all levels of church government (including the House of Bishops).

Fifteen years on, these two aspirations of mine and many of my co-delegates have been realised in most dioceses in the Anglican Church of Australia. There is little discourse of disrespect of women in official circles, there is no questioning anthropologically or otherwise of the full humanity of
women and women are beginning to be represented (though not yet necessarily in equitable numbers) at all levels of church government (including the episcopate). The question that remains, however, is whether the structural changes that have facilitated this can be said to signify full reconciliation of ordained women with the structures and culture of the church.

In my first paper I defined ‘reconciliation’ in three ways and developed these definitions theologically. The first viewed reconciliation as a process of assimilation attended by a politics of acquiescence. I argued then that this was the model of reconciliation that the Anglican Church of Australia was in danger of pursuing. The second was reconciliation as an act of purification following the profanation of the sacred. Here I demonstrated that the priesthood of the woman is symbolically disruptive of deep psychological assumptions about, and emotional dependence on, traditional gender constructions. The third saw reconciliation as discourse, which allowed a postmodern critique of the reconciliation project itself and an evaluation of its inherent weaknesses in emancipating women clergy within Anglicanism.

I now repeat the exercise by bringing my three models of reconciliation into dialogue with the present ‘state of play’ for women in the Anglican Church of Australia, partially with reference to the data collected in 2013 from the ‘Taking Stock’ survey conducted by Dr Heather Thomson of St Mark’s National Theological Centre and Charles Sturt University4. This survey asks its clergywomen participants to identify and articulate achievements and challenges they have experienced in ordained ministry over the twenty years since the first women were ordained priest, which of course includes the fifteen years since my last evaluation.

Reconciliation: a process of assimilation, a politics of acquiescence

In November 1994, the Women’s Commission of General Synod contracted with the Department of Anthropology and Sociology of Monash University to undertake a research project examining ways in which gender differences might be impacting on the ministry opportunities and job satisfaction experienced by the ordained. The Women’s Commission had some difficulty reconciling the report of the research team with the work they were commissioned to do, as there was a feeling in the Commission that the team erred on the side of the interpretation of data over its analysis.

Canon Kay Goldsworthy (now Bishop Kay Goldsworthy) of the Women’s Commission is reported to have reflected that some of the reservations of the
Commission were due to ‘the use of language that was more interpretative than analytical of the data, and thus went beyond the brief’.⁵

Notwithstanding the difference of opinion between the Commission and the Monash University Research team, the report suggested some interesting insights. One conclusion of the report which was recognised to constitute valid ‘analysis’ of the data rather than invalid ‘interpretation’ was that:

The careers, employment conditions and satisfaction of men and women clergy in the Anglican Church of Australia are significantly different at every stage. This difference reflects a pattern of reported less positive and often negative treatment of women. Women are less likely to have full-time stipendiary positions; less likely to have parish appointments; less likely to be granted full expense and entitlements packages; and are less likely to report satisfaction with the progress of their careers given expectations held.⁶

Despite the contention between the research team and the Women’s Commission over the interpretation of data in the report, it has to be stated clearly that the Women’s Commission did not disagree with the data itself and prefaced its publication of the report by agreeing that certain clear trends indicating serious disadvantage of women clergy did emerge from this research.⁷ These findings were reinforced by a report on ministry opportunities for newly-ordained women in the Diocese of Adelaide that was produced by the Women’s Synod Task Group of that diocese in 1996. This latter set of statistics was presented to the Adelaide Diocesan Synod in 1997 with disclaimers appropriate to the document’s necessary limitations in terms of ‘sample size’ and time span.

In so far as both these reports identified a trend of disadvantage and mirrored one another’s findings across diocesan and national references, they were invaluable resources for the serious debate that necessarily ensued at both diocesan and national level concerning the most appropriate way to respond to the presence of women priests in the Anglican Church.

In response to the report, the Women’s Commission made a series of recommendations which were referred to Diocesan Councils or Bishops-in-Council for action. Included in this was the suggestion that agreed terms and conditions for appointments and remuneration of clergy be developed and consistently implemented; that processes for filling vacancies be examined;
that each diocese develop a grievance procedure ensuring ‘protection from discrimination, exploitation or abuse’ and, most significantly, that each diocese should consult with women clergy about the recommendations of the Women’s Commission with a view to implementing the recommendations.

These recommendations were groundbreaking at a time when there had been little intentional thinking, policy making and acting to secure equitable working practices in the engagement of women clergy and when it was thought to be acceptable to tell marginalised ordained women or their support groups that positions for women were simply not available, that their ‘emancipation’ would be a long process that would require patience and that bishops had no real power to remedy the situation as the buck stopped with individual parishes. I critiqued this at the time as a policy of acquiescence (arguably traditionally engendered within Anglican culture) encouraging ‘en-“gender”-ed’ acquiescence. The situation was not helped by the fact that, with the discontinuation of the Women’s Commission and with the replacement in 1998 of General Synod Commissions generally with Task Groups/panels responsive to issues generated by a strategic issues group, there has not been since then any agency within the national church monitoring women’s issues and employment trends nor hearing and effectively responding to issues of concern with respect to the deployment of women clergy.

All this pointed to a process of what might be deemed ‘assimilation’ of women clergy rather than reconciliation, as it involved them getting used to, and the church becoming acceptant of, unfair structures, policies and processes instead of working to adapt them to the new reality of increased participation of women in ordained ministry.

Twenty years on we see a picture that has been altered significantly. Agreed terms and conditions for remuneration of clergy (in those dioceses which ordain women) have largely been developed and consistently implemented (in terms of gender fairness). The ‘Taking Stock’ survey demonstrates, however, that there are still questions of equity for distinctive (permanent) deacons, women and men alike, who are often unpaid. It is argued that this is not a gender equity question but one of how the church values the diaconate. One wonders though whether the predominance of women deacons over men has not somehow influenced the way the discourse has been managed in the church.
Remuneration aside, it is still unclear that equitable practices apply in terms of how women are appointed because processes of selection are still conducted confidentially by presentation boards, working often to their own models and free to determine their own *modus operandi*, particularly with respect to advertising for candidates to fill incumbencies or inviting those they have discerned might be suitable. There is no systematic way of monitoring whether paternalistic discourses still influence those proceedings. One hears stories of how it is still possible for casual evaluations of women candidates to be offered around their ability to ‘lead from the front’ or their potential to become pregnant during an incumbency and how this might have a negative effect on a particular parish and of whether, if there are young children in the family, they will manage to juggle their childcare and parish responsibilities. Perhaps there is still room for the development of guidelines for clergy selection processes which outline the potential for discriminatory discourse within these processes and advise about how this might be recognised and avoided. Notwithstanding the above concerns which remain, the high levels of participation of clergywomen in ministry clearly suggest a significant and positive change from the situation that existed twenty (or even fifteen) years ago.

There has been less success in the area of instituting clear grievance policies to protect women clergy from discrimination, exploitation or abuse. One of the ‘Taking Stock’ survey respondents felt that, at a vulnerable time in her career, she was not protected from the violence of misogyny of a senior priest and supervisor. The picture is patchy across dioceses in the Australia Anglican Church which has taken such strong steps to deal with allegations of sexual abuse but which does not always offer recourse to a process of complaint for those experiencing bullying, particularly that arising from gender discrimination.

A question remains therefore as to whether the genuinely improved situation for clergywomen in terms of employment opportunities, terms and conditions represents a true reconciliation of the church with its clergywomen or whether a subtle process of assimilation is still operating by which women’s needs and perspectives are at times not honoured in a culture that still demonstrates strong elements of patriarchalism.
Reconciliation: a process of purification, a politics of symbolic transformation

Reconciliation relates to ‘purification’ in the arguably originary view of atonement in the Levitical sacrificial cult. Here atonement is viewed as a spilling of the life blood of a sacrificial animal in order to purify the tabernacle, and particularly the inner shrine, to make it a place fit for God’s habitation, an appropriate place within which God might meet and be reconciled with humanity. This system tabooed the essence, the being, of femaleness by strictly forbidding the participation of women in the cult and by viewing focal aspects of the life of women – birthing and menstruation – as requiring the ‘cleansing’ of ritual purification.

It was not lost to me as a much younger woman seeking the church’s discernment of my emerging sense of call that for many people in the church my being female was an incontrovertible sticking point. I used to watch faithful women in the congregation I belonged to literally ‘creep’ into the sanctuary of our church, to fulfil their roster obligations towards flower-arranging or silver-cleaning, demonstrating by their cringing stature that they had absorbed a lifetime’s discriminatory discourse telling them that only men (pre-eminently ordained men) had a right to be there.

I remember too the first retreat that I was required to attend as an ordinand (one women amongst twenty-two men). The topic for the second address of the male retreat leader was how clergymen should ‘manage’ their wives when they reach that ‘inconvenient’ stage of menopause! Traditional taboos around women’s bodies and sacred space had a huge impact on the acceptance of women at an early stage in the history of their emancipation in the church. The following is a poem I wrote about the faith and courage needed by women clergy to stand firm in the face of discrimination and to be prepared to take the risk of transgressing some pretty powerful taboos present in the minds and consciousness of church members raised in a patriarchal society and intensified by a patriarchal ‘holiness’ discourse.

The Meeting Place

I had not thought
until today
to seek you
in your Tabernacle:
mindful of forbidden things;
mannered of a sensibility of fear, of charm and talisman – the vague and delicate inculturation of taboo.

And it hits, That is, What I dare to do ...

A priest, yes, but of a different ‘order’?
A woman, and with no sacrifice in upturned palm – only an intuition of a new allowance (playful and profane) that my life-giving, life-bearing blood might draw near to consecrated soil and stone.
and that we may be one.

And if for this atonement I must look upon your face and die, this place of earth and blood and incense will be sacred still.

It seems that the experience of the ministry of clergywomen over the past twenty-six years, and of women priests-in-charge/rectors over the past twenty-one years, has all but eradicated the profanation of women’s being in the suggestion that the presence of women in sacred space profanes God’s being. It is not overstating the case to say that women have had to offer themselves sacrificially in places less than hospitable to them, often at great cost to their health and wellbeing, to bring about this transformation.
What is left of this profanation of women's bodies? Almost nothing, except possibly the issue of how women clergy are supported during pregnancy. In most dioceses of the national church there are maternity leave schemes for clergywomen who wish to take leave at or around the birth of a child. (They vary in breadth and are not always as comprehensive or as valuable in financial terms as those available in the secular workplace.) The maternity leave provisions that are in place work when clergywomen are in full-time permanent situations as parish priests or in permanent ministries in church agencies. The responsibility for the care of women clergy in curacy situations or in assistants’ positions in parishes or agencies, most of whom are temporarily placed before their first full-time placement by their Archbishop, remains more than a little ambiguous.

More subtly though, anthropological distinctions are still often made or assumed about women and men that are undermining of clergywomen. In these last twenty-one years, much discussion has taken place about what it is that women priests bring to the ordained ministry that is in some way distinctive. Much has been said about what these new priests signify by the people they are and by the work they carry out. It is clear that one inadvertent mark of distinction is that women who are priests deconstruct the traditional identity and role of priest simply by being priest, so that the aforesaid compelling force of the taboo and the gender stereotype is turned on its head through the powerfully subverting symbolic impact of experiencing women in this sacral, traditionally male community role.  

This deconstructive female priesthood has both reinforced and been upheld by feminist theological work which has clearly discredited a classical patriarchal anthropology by which men’s nature has been seen as normative, the true bearer of the imago dei, while women’s nature has been viewed as derivative and certainly more prone to the condition of sin. Twenty years on, it is valid for the church to reappraise the impact of gender on priestly roles and to attempt this work without falling back on traditional gender stereotypes that emerge from faulty anthropological stances.

Ruether was the first feminist writer to identify the dangers inherent in a liberal feminist anthropology. This is a way of thinking about being female which regards women as having the same capacities as men and supports the provision of equal social and educational opportunities for men and women to assist them develop their capacities. Undoubtedly there is much within this anthropology that is valuable. The greatest weakness
of this schema, however, is that it views as normative the traditional male public sphere and it does not critique the functioning of that sphere where it needs to be critiqued, for example in its ‘predilection’ for competitiveness and its tendency to alienate individuals from the sphere of the domestic and the relational. Additionally it offers no critique of tokenism: any ‘promoted’ woman is regarded as highly successful within the ‘system’; and/or (sometimes cynically) as someone whose appointment satisfies the demands of the latest ‘affirmative action’ document.

The dangers for the church are obvious. We must guard against female priests’ accepting as normative a perceived standard ‘male’ model of priesthood which, if it begs definition, might include a tendency to authoritarianism and poor relationality. Additionally the dangers of ‘tokenism’ are becoming ever clearer as women seek to maintain integrity and credibility whilst working with an admittedly evolving, but as yet unredeemed, ecclesiastical structure.

Ruether also points out the dangers of romantic feminist anthropologies which view the traditional ‘feminine’ spheres, and the characteristic ways in which women have functioned within them, as ideals. It is possible to understand this particular anthropology as having ‘lost ground’ since it was first mooted; the economic and social relationships within families having altered significantly over the last twenty years. Additionally within the church can be seen the development of a contemporary pastoral theology which has reacted against any idealisation of the domestic sphere.

One’s listening to what is commonly and regularly said about women in ministry might lead to the suggestion that vestiges of a romantic feminist anthropology still remain. Women priests, it is conjectured, have a qualitatively different and ‘engendered’ set of gifts to offer the church: gifts that are geared towards pastoral care, grief counselling and ministry with children and not towards ‘responsible’ leadership roles. Now it may be true that women clergy, who arguably are products of their social conditioning into nurturing and relational ways of being within the family and community, do demonstrate a range of highly refined nurturing skills. The danger is that many have strong leadership competencies too which needn’t necessarily be recognised or valued in and by the church.

Notwithstanding this concern, the ‘Taking Stock’ survey summary has a section of entries that are either explicitly about women’s leadership or imply acceptance of the leadership roles of women. The dedication and commitment as well as the demonstrated skills of women clergy over the last
twenty years have ‘done to death’ the male hegemony in both the leadership and sacral spheres of church life. This has to be a good thing.

**Reconciliation: as discourse, a politics of difference**

Postmodernism requires of us that we ask whether it is valid to speak of reconciliation at all. It asks that we seriously consider whether reconciliation is simply another discredited ‘absolute’, another hackneyed tenet of the Grand Narrative. Miroslav Volf suggests that ‘it could be argued that in some cases reconciliation is not what is needed, at least not before justice is done.’ As this line of argumentation would fail to see justice as an absolute (there being many competing justices), Volf would also argue the paradoxical line that unless reconciliation is the goal, there can be no such thing as justice. Thus both reconciliation and justice are deconstructed within postmodern thought and are seen to be situated in dialectical relationship to one another so that there could be no realisation of one without the other. Thus if women are to find reconciliation in the church, justice must be done; equally if justice is achievable, it must happen within an impulse towards reconciliation. This logic works as an interior principle governing the struggles of any particular group seeking emancipation.

The politics that are supported by this understanding, however, are ‘a politics of difference’ in which space is made for the ‘other’, the other (so called) of ‘nature’ or of ‘culture’. This ‘politics of difference’ is posited over and against a politics of equal value or dignity as this, arguably, has an ‘absolutising’ tendency in which, in the name of emancipation, difference may be obliterated altogether. For women clergy it amounts to the question: in order to be equal am I free to be myself?

The institution of a politics of difference is a subversive idea for a faith sustained on the ‘absolutising’ moral tenets of the nineteenth century. And if such a politics resulted in a situation where the views and the gifts of all are respected and valued, difference could be understood as a measure of richness, as something to celebrate in the life of the church.

Ironically it is possible out of a humility about human failing, and out of a sense of ecclesiastical pragmatism, to feel compelled by the force of this postmodernist challenge to find a means of both firmly instituting and apparently ‘tolerating’ a quality of ‘difference’ which is, in real terms, no more than spectral. There is one problem about negotiating such a ‘settlement’ of toleration with respect to the place of women and women's
ministry within the life of the Anglican Church in Australia. It is that the toleration of ‘difference’ is meaningless if the ‘difference’ is not real but is socially constructed, that is if ‘difference’ itself is suspect: itself a form of ‘imperial speaking’ which makes ‘other’ that which is truly not ‘other’ and which thus seeks to negotiate a ‘settlement’ on false premises.

Are women as a group really ‘different’? If so, how? Rosemary Radford Ruether wasn’t sure we were or, at least, to no more extent than individuality; giftedness and competence differ from one single Christian person to another. The process of emancipation is complex. The language games within which its attendant negotiations are played out often remain unequal, so that nothing changes. On the other hand, we must be careful about what kind of reconciliation we ask for or we might get it!

It is important to end with acknowledgement that there are places even in the Anglican Church of Australia where precisely nothing has changed in the past twenty years. The late Patricia Brennan reminded us of the deal-making which took (had to take?) place for any Australian woman Anglican to be ordained to the priesthood.

Some may understand the shame we felt in 1991 when, after fourteen years of humiliating public debate, the national church made a deal over its women. The General Synod said to the Sydney Diocese: let the rest of us ordain our women in exchange for releasing you to do whatever you like with yours.17

It is in full knowledge of the presence within this debate of both shame and complicity, struggle and collusion, victory and failure, attention and forgetfulness, all yours and mine, that I offer this reflection on reconciliation: a sought after but ambiguous entity, absolutely essential yet perennially elusive.

Endnotes

2. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council.


7. The identified ‘trends’ were as follows:
   - many women have only been able to gain part-time employment;
   - fewer women have gained parish employment;
   - fewer women are in stipendiary positions; many are honoraries;
   - far fewer women receive housing as part of their employment conditions;
   - far more men receive full or partial expenses;
   - a quarter of the women (but only one man) receive no entitlements beyond stipend;
   - women are slightly more likely to be members of synods or their committees;
   - women are given more marginal parishes, more non-parochial positions and far fewer ‘cutting edge’ opportunities;
   - far fewer women expressed satisfaction with their ministry experience than did men. Some women, but no men, reported becoming dissatisfied;
   - women describe their strongest disappointment in terms of:
     - discrimination in appointments,
     - the need to financially support ministry from their own secular salary,
     - rejection,
     - lack of support,
     - lack of respect.


11. In an unpublished paper, Dianne Bradley explores the symbolic impact of the pregnant priest who, she argues, also breaches the clear boundaries set within patriarchal public discourse to delineate the sphere of the private and domestic. She also alerts us to the danger of breaching these boundaries. ‘Does a priest’s pregnant body symbolise a transgression of boundaries and a freedom for women transcending public discourses of the domestic? Is
she indeed a symbol for other women in a quest to change public practice and thought, or is she more a symbol of the dangers and cost in making public the domestic?’ Dianne Bradley, *The Cultural Context of Women’s Stories: Priesthood and Pregnancy*, p. 3.


