

CEEC Position on the Ordination of Women

Introduction

No topic of current debate has stirred more controversy or touched more fundamental issues of our common humanity as Christians than the issue of whether women can and should be allowed ordination to Holy Orders in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. In our time we are wrestling not only against perceived social conventions as to the roles of men and women, but also received ecclesiastical conventions and practices. Cultural and social developments, as well as theological and ecclesiological perspectives on this issue, have differed widely across the spectrum of the Church universal.

The question of whether women should be allowed to serve in ordained roles of leadership within the Church has been with us since the beginning of the Church's journey. The CEEC views the question in all the complexity of its implications as one which cannot be taken lightly or naively. In other words, in our perspective it is not simply a matter of either "established tradition" versus "cultural accommodation", or "liberal" versus "conservative". There are many notable exceptions to the above contrasts between those we would wholeheartedly accept as true brothers and sisters in Christ who find themselves falling on two different sides of the issue. The CEEC has continued to study the issue from a biblical, historical, ecclesiastical, theological and ecclesiological/soteriological perspective.

Current Practice and Canonical Standards

Seeing ourselves in the CEEC as standing within the received historic "catholic" tradition of the one Church of Jesus Christ, we hold the issue of women's ordination to be of significant importance for the whole of the Church as we enter upon the third millennium of Christianity. The studies the House of Bishops has engaged in have led us to the conviction that biblically and historically there is plenty of evidence that women from the beginning were ordained as deacons in the life of the Church (at various times, either called "deacons" or "deaconess's"). Studies particularly done by Eastern Orthodox scholars, among others, have historically verified the principle and practice of women in Holy Orders as deacons/deaconesses at various periods in the Church's history. In addition, the Celtic Christian tradition, with whom the CEEC closely identifies, has a long history of women serving in very prominent roles of spiritual ministry and leadership authority.

In our own humble estimation, these historically verifiable practices, together with the biblical studies on this portion of the issue make it clear that women may indeed serve in the diaconate as ordained ministers of the Gospel and of the community of faith. Therefore, it is our common practice to ordain

women to Holy Orders in the Church in the role of diaconate, across the board. The only exceptions to this aspect of "women's ordination" would be in respect of cultural differences in other nations in which women in this capacity would cause a stumbling block to the Church's witness and evangelism within the culture. In other words, there is an openness in our current practice that allows for these kinds of differences.

Women in the Presbytrate

Regarding the issue of women being ordained to the role of presbyter, we realize that this step is the place where more serious tensions can arise within the Church, especially within those branches which trace their order of worship, practice, and government from apostolic times to the present through the historic succession of bishops. We also realize that there are other expressions of the Church of Jesus Christ who do not hold to the liturgical/sacramental practices of historic "catholic" Christianity who are also wrestling with these same questions.

The practice and agreement among our bishops in covenant together is to allow those bishops and dioceses who are convinced of the validity of women being ordained as presbyters through sincere theological, historical and biblical reflection to pursue this course within the boundaries of their own jurisdictions. Those who are not comfortable with this are also supported and honoured in their own right as bishops in the Church of God. Each bishop is allowed the practice that best accords with his own convictions, within his own diocese. At the same time, if a woman who is serving in the capacity as a presbyter in one diocese finds herself in a situation of ministry in another diocese where the bishop does not adhere to this practice, she understands that we honour one another's convictions and that she would not be allowed to preside at or consecrate at the Lord's Table within that diocese.

All members within the House of Bishops, including those of other nations, have agreed and covenanted together to support one another in this divergence of practice from diocese to diocese, or within provinces internationally, as the case may be. For those inquirers approaching possible relationship with the CEEC, and who may have specific interest in this issue, please contact the Diocesan Bishop.

Women in the Episcopate

At this time in our history as a communion of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, the CEEC House of Bishops has unanimously agreed not to consecrate women to the episcopate. Although there are some differing opinions and perspectives among our bishops on this aspect of women's ordination at the personal and theological level, there is unanimity on our abstaining from this practice as a communion.

At the same time, we are open, as stated in our Canons, to 'intercommunion' relationships with other jurisdictions who may come to us already having women bishops among them. In terms of those dioceses, provinces, and congregations in 'full communion' with us, we abstain from the practice of consecrating women to the episcopate. In all of these arenas we seek to operate in a spirit of discernment, discretion, caution, and respect.

On Women's Ministry within the Christian Church

In regard to women serving our Lord Jesus Christ within and through the life of the Church, we are committed to the reality that in Christ the walls of division and barriers of prejudice have been broken down; between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female - Christ is all and in all. We would wholeheartedly affirm the biblical revelation of Almighty God's created and assigned roles of care and responsibility within the home and the order of responsibility in joint leadership within the home, with the husband having ultimate responsibility and, therefore, primary leadership and authority accountability.

The Scripture plainly teaches that "in the last days I will pour out of my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams, and on my menservants and on my maidservants I will pour out my Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17,18). In light of this prophetic promise and the subsequent examples we have in Scripture and Church history, it is our humble conviction that our God has poured out his gifts of service and empowerment on all, male and female, and that all are equipped by the grace/charisms given each one to serve and function in the Church in various roles; evangelism, healing, prophesying, preaching/teaching and leadership responsibility at various levels. In these aspects of service we would theologically and pragmatically differentiate between charismatically enabled functions and gifts of service and the three-fold order of bishops, presbyters and deacons. The latter is seen as encompassing offices of oversight and servant leadership arising from the apostolic and pastoral foundations of Christ's own representative oversight and care of His whole body, the Church.

Therefore, we thoroughly embrace and affirm the ministry of women within the life of the Church, and the great need the Church has of the special grace given through the ministry of women to the whole of its life and mission. After all, it was through a very special woman that our Saviour was born into this world and was given our human nature. It was Mary Magdalene and the other women who came to the tomb early on the first day of the week who became the Church's first evangelists, breathlessly bearing the glad tidings of His resurrection to the disheartened band in the upper room. Throughout salvation history, women have played key roles in the unfolding of the plan of

God and have continued to offer an aspect of divine likeness in its nurturing, sensitive and compassionate attributes that men are often lacking.

Our prayer is that the 21st century will see continued affirmation, acceptance and honouring of the roles and ministries and gifts of all women as faithful members of the Body of Christ, reminding all Christians of our calling not only to be His body, but also His Bride.