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A Church Forgiven - Ministry in the Church in Wales post-Women Bishops

Summary

In the wake of the Church in Wales's historic vote to allow women to become bishops this paper explores ways in which the wounds of the past can begin to be healed. It argues that difference ought to be seen as the essence of a re-creative process generated by and within the life of the Holy Spirit. The anger that is bringing about greater equality in the Church's life might now become the energy and motivation for forgiveness, making it possible for the work of mission to begin. The will for forgiveness might now drive the Church forward in a re-creative process, rather than allowing for backward looking attitudes, regrets and recrimination to stall its development. This is the energy of 'converted' anger. With these ideas in mind, the paper argues that the Code of Practice, which was agreed upon in September allows for a degree of freedom. Its existence will imply an invitation to all parties to take responsibility for the other and to emphasise gift, rather than gender, as the basis for mission and for the enrichment of its common life.

At the meeting of its Governing Body on September 12th, 2013, the Church in Wales voted 'yes' to women bishops by a significant majority in all three of its houses; bishops, clergy and laity. It can now look forward to having a woman bishop at some time in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, there is work to be done if this historic decision is to transform the way the Church in Wales not only conducts its day to day business, but conveys the Gospel into the world. We owe this momentous breakthrough in great part to those whose particular gifts for managing conflict has ensured that the vote on September 12th did not leave the Church, once again, only partly representative of the population it exists to serve. They fought for justice and they won the day. In doing so, they also pointed the Church in Wales in a new direction. It will need to become a different kind of Church by converting the swords of strategy and planning into the ploughshares of peace. This will take a certain amount of re-shaping of existing metal, if I may be forgiven for pushing the metaphor a little further. We shall all have to change the way we are by changing the way we think about the Church as it is at present. We have an opportunity to do this over the coming year, before the Bill is written into Canon law.

One thing that has emerged in conversations to which I have been party since the September vote, is that everyone needs time to adjust; those whose cause has now been vindicated, as well as those who feel there is no longer a place for them as faithful Anglicans in a radically transformed Church. Mutual distrust prevails, making for a continuation of the existing stalemate in our internal relationships. There are some, in both camps, who still feel angry about the past. Anger is a way of releasing energy and of protecting the as yet unhealed

wounds of conflict, but it needs to be converted, rather than suppressed. The creative energy which has made the full inclusion of women in the Church's life a reality must now be re-directed towards the building of a new and different kind of Church, one in which Anglican collegiality and hospitality exists for everyone, even while there is continuing difference.

There is the danger that for those who finally carried the day, anger which was once the energy for justice and change could now 'set' into a subtle form of vindictive triumphalism, to the detriment of the Church's common life. What is needed, therefore, is a common will for breaking new ground, beginning with the difficult process of forgiveness and reconciliation. Part of the process involves hearing anger, so that truth can be spoken. Speaking and hearing truth is a prelude to the embracing of difference, as numerous truth and reconciliation exercises both within and outside the Church have shown in the past. They have shown that it is by embracing difference, rather than being wary of it, that anger is converted into a creative energy which has love at its source. This is the energy of God's grace which transforms a community's common life into a new reality, something resembling the Kingdom.

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of participating in a new reality, one which comes from having made the leap from loving for one's own sake to loving for God's sake.¹ This leap of love takes us from one way of thinking, the way which fits with who and where we were before, into an altogether different dimension and way of being in the present. Grace allows love to span past, present and future, reshaping them into a single eschatological event which is full of challenges and surprises. This new reality brings with it a new will for change, born out of the growing realisation that continuing rancour and mutual resentment not only confines the Church to the past, but saps its spiritual resources and diminishes its life in the present. It denies the ontological significance of the Holy Spirit in its midst and blocks the Spirit's dynamic movement, or energy. Where this happens the Church's spiritual life ultimately dies, leaving the Church without any means of acting or speaking prophetically into the world. Ultimately, we shall all have to come to terms with the fact that whatever we may feel about women's ministry, the life of the Church as a single body must continue for the sake of this, its primary task. Part of its prophetic task consists in loving God's people in such a way as to make it possible for them to love the world back into Christ. Only a Church which has known the forgiveness of God in Christ and learned to forgive in its own relationships can do this. Only a forgiven Church can bring forgiveness to the world outside its doors.

Forgiveness brings freedom. The passing of the bill for the consecration of women to the episcopate in the Church in Wales has come about as a result of astute strategic planning, allowing for a Code of Practice, rather than a more rigidly defined amendment to the bill itself which would have resulted in misogyny being enshrined in Canon law. A code of practice, as opposed to an amended bill, gives everyone a degree of freedom of movement.²

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM Press, London:1954 p.21

² The Bill would have been amended so as to guarantee that those who do not want women's episcopal ministry would automatically be provided with a male alternative. The Code of Practice allows for a more fluid and adaptable approach.

First, it allows for development and change. Second, and more significantly, it offers everyone the chance to willingly take responsibility for the other in the full realisation of our need for one another as members of a single family. Taking responsibility, and admitting our need for each other changes the way we are, if we are willing to perceive the possibility for such a change and to allow it to take its course. Taking responsibility for the other is first a spiritual task involving transparency before God and a graced will, or desire, for things to be better for everyone. Change of mind and heart allows us all to move from difference and ‘strangeness’ to a place where each is necessary to the other’s completion. The way in which the Code of Practice is applied will probably vary depending on context and circumstances, but it will give us all permission to move towards one another and, subsequently, more deeply into God. However, without the vulnerability needed for grace to operate and transform it, it will remain no more than a bureaucratic instrument shaped around nothing in particular. Legislation alone cannot change hearts, or make a new creation. The Code of practice, and everything that is said and done around it needs therefore to be put to the service of forgiveness.

The Church in Wales felt different from the moment the outcome of the vote was announced. There was already a sense of new possibilities, of space, affording greater potential for the gifts of all to be used imaginatively in the service of God’s people and for the making of new disciples. The space around us is unfamiliar and strange. One way of filling it, in order for everyone to feel safe and secure, is to resist change by stalling and playing for time. This is easily done by filling this conceptual space with old clutter, things we thought we would get rid of but decide at the last minute that we need after all, old habits of mind and the kind of ‘pack mentality’ which reinforces them. It is crucial, therefore, to keep moving forwards with our eyes on Christ, during this interim time, before the Code of Practice is put together and before we actually have a woman bishop. If we do not do this, we shall be like Peter who, on realising that he was walking on water and that he could not swim, took his eyes off Jesus, looked at his feet and immediately began to sink. We have reached such a decisive moment.

This interim period is an ‘already and a not yet time’, a time of realised eschatology in the life of the Church in Wales, if we will allow it to happen. We have the chance to see this historic vote transform our common life so that we can be a prophetic witness to the re-creative work of Christ in our midst. This suggests that we shall need to use the coming months to begin the creative process of becoming Church all over again. We have separated and now we must be bound together again, mirroring in our lives God’s own initial creative act which is a process of differentiation, of separation and of bringing together in order to make a new creation.³ It follows that we shall have to adapt the way we think about ourselves as separate opposing groups and shape a new vision for the Church in Wales, one which begins from a new place and models God’s forgiveness in its own life. Only when the Church forgives itself from within will this new vision take shape.

³Miroslav Volf likens God’s own creativity to a twofold activity of ‘separating and binding’. His argument suggests that things are first separated and defined as living beings and are then differentiated as full persons who are bound up with one another. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996 p.65

Adapting the way we think can only begin when we recognise each other's gifts and their intrinsic value to the life of the Church as a whole. Until now, women's gifts as equal members of the human family, and not just as women with exclusively 'feminine' skills, have not been fully deployed, or even acknowledged, so the Church is not a differentiated body. It is not fully created. The first step towards creating a differentiated Church therefore consists in re-working our relationships in recognising and freeing everyone's gifts, not only women's. This will involve two things. Firstly, women will need to develop a degree of sensitivity and self awareness with regard to former opponents. They will need to convert the energy which until now has been used for the attainment of equality and proper recognition into a powerful force for reconciliation and for the building of a just and merciful Church. Secondly, all will have to work together to make sure that the complementarity of gift, rather than of gender, is used and celebrated to the full. Complementarity leading to an impartial deployment of gift lies at the heart of Anglican collegiality. The presence of women on the Bench of Bishops ought to reinforce this collegiality, rather than weaken it. Where there is real desire for forgiveness and reconciliation, their presence ought also to inspire and enliven the collegial aspect of Anglican authority, especially with regard to how bishops will now envision the future of the Church as a forgiven community.

Collegiality which respects and works with gift and differentiation is of special importance to the Church in Wales at present, as it begins to implement one of the key aspects of the 2011 review. Fewer clergy and fewer resources oblige us to think differently about how the Church in Wales will continue to function as it explores and begins to implement the idea of ministry areas. Creating ministry areas is itself a process of differentiation, of taking apart in order to put together in a new way. Differentiation on the basis of gift, rather than gender or party identity, will make the Church better able to relate to those it is there to serve. Valuing all its members as people with specific gifts will also help to shift the focus of Church life from issue driven politics, along with those pertaining to how it can afford financially to keep going, onto the real work of mission. The new ministry areas should free clergy to exercise their particular gifts knowing that others, including laity, have different skills and abilities to offer to the building up of the body of Christ. But where there has not been the kind of mutual acceptance which comes with forgiveness in all three areas of the Church's collegial life, among bishops, priests and laity, a shared ministry of the sort being envisioned at the moment will not be possible.

Anglican collegiality has always been held together by a sense of God's abiding presence in the Eucharist and in its life as a worshipping community of different churchmanships and often widely differing theological views. We are reminded of this shared presence when forgiveness and reconciliation begin to reshape Anglican polity. A greater sense of God's presence will allow ministry to become more dependent on the spiritual, on learning together how to wait on God and to hear and understand his purpose for the Church at a far deeper level. But it will only do this if all its members can work together from that deeper place. At present, as in other parts of the Anglican Communion, the Church in Wales seems to be experiencing difficulties which are closely related to its spiritual life and the way that life has been diminished by our divisions and differences.

This diminishment of our spiritual life has affected us on two fronts, that of identity and of the purpose of our life together. In other words, what is the Church in Wales? and what is it for? These questions, taken both separately and together, relate to how the Church in Wales is to be recognised and known as a community of Christians who, together, articulate the transforming reality of Christ in its midst. They also relate to how the Church functions as a human body which is graced by a particular calling. It is here that many clergy, especially women, experience the Church in Wales as excluding. From the vantage point of the excluded, it resembles a male club in which favours are given and returned within an existing inner circle. Clergy, both men and women, are also increasingly discouraged by the emphasis on bureaucracy and management which generates much sterile talk and little in the way of inspired and transformative living. The Church is either talking to itself in numerous committees, or embarking on annuated action plans relating to ‘mission’, without the spiritual energy needed to make real mission possible. Combined with its lack of imagination and gender based selectivity with regard to the deployment of gift, this general loss of a sense of purpose has generated a negative and cynical attitude to its life and purpose in the world. It indicates a real need for visionary leadership drawing on a fully differentiated Church which knows the abiding Spirit of Christ to be in its midst.⁴

Engaging with God and with God’s people ought now to be the basis of Anglican life in Wales, something which begins in a sense of having been forgiven in all of our internal relationships. The Church will not know what its life is for, or what it is meant to do or become in the particular context which is Wales, until this process of deep reconciliation has begun. For this to be possible, real communication needs to begin between those who welcome women’s ministry as bishops and those who do not. Women themselves, as those who have finally ‘won the battle’, will need to be the prime movers in this exercise.⁵ So reconciliation becomes a matter of finding our way back to a place of deep unity, not by retreating into the past, or holding on to pain, resentment and hatred, or of narrow triumphalism in the aftermath of the recent vote, but of seeing the good in the other and so offering them healing and forgiveness.

This new way of seeing each other requires a dual focus. It requires that we look within, in an examination of conscience which is both collective and personal, while at the same time looking outwards, towards Christ and towards one another, with both of these perspectives contained and held together under the merciful regard, the ‘looking’, of Christ from the particular vantage point of the Cross. This dual and reciprocal ‘looking’, is the work of reconciliation, grounded in the everyday and in the practical outworking of Church polity. The purpose of the Church’s life is to draw all people into friendship with God in Christ by modelling his sacrificial love in its own relationships and thence to the world.

⁴ Archbishop Rowan Williams, in a day conference which he hosted at Lambeth Palace, indicated the need for clergy to be liberated from ‘inappropriate business of completing tasks, as opposed to engaging prayerfully with God and with God’s people.’ ‘Transformation: Theology and Experience of Women’s Ministry’, Lambeth Palace, September 9th, 2011

⁵ There may be a need for a degree of reconciliation work to be done between women themselves.

The Church's inner life in God gives meaning and purpose to its missional work, so the task of forgiveness consists of re-missioning, or re-converting ourselves, beginning with an acknowledged desire for healing. But does the Church in Wales really want to be healed? A similar question was put by Jesus to the paralysed man by the pool of Bethesda. (John 5:2-7) It is one which we all need to hear. The man's instinctive response is to blame others for his ongoing paralysis. He will not take any responsibility for the fact that he never quite makes it to the pool. Are we in the Church in Wales doing something similar by telling ourselves that it is up to the 'others' to change first? How might we, in our separate interest groups, change in regard to these 'others'? Perhaps they also long for healing but cannot get near the pool for the same reason. They are waiting for us to change, so that they can change. They need those who are 'others' to them to take responsibility for them, as well as for themselves, and to offer them healing, the kind of healing which only comes about through genuine communication.

Genuine communication begins with overcoming fear so that we can recognise the 'thou' in the other, that person who God has created specifically for friendship with him and with other persons. It involves receiving forgiveness from another person at the deepest level of our individual and collective consciousness, and being ready to give back to them from that same place. It is self evident that this work needs to be undertaken together, rather than as separate interest groups. So the challenge will be to allow the joy of the Holy Spirit to embrace and warm the whole Church, and not just those of us who have won the recognition of the Church's need for women's ministry as bishops.