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The Feminization of the Ministry — A Milestone in Britain

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The Church of England ordained more women than men in the past year, according to news reports across Great Britain. The church reported a total of 423 ordinations last year, 213 women and 210 men.

That statistical development might seem insignificant — after all new women priests outnumbered new men by only three. But the really significant fact is that women outnumbered men as new priests for the first time. It will not be the last.

As a matter of fact, *The Sunday Telegraph* [London] reported months ago that the number of women priests would match that of men by 2025. That date may well creep nearer.

The Church of England allowed for the ordination of women priests fifteen years ago. Since then, the number of women preparing for the priesthood has steadily increased. At the same time, the number of men entering the ministry has steadily decreased. A recent report indicates that the number of men serving as priests may be cut in half by 2025.

These are not unrelated developments, of course. The feminization of liberal Christianity grows more and more complete with every passing year. In the United States, the number of women enrolled in Master of Divinity programs now represents almost a third of total enrollment. Among mainline Protestants, the situation is much like that of the Church of England — only more so. In many liberal seminaries, women students now vastly outnumber men.

The decision to ordain women as priests rocked the Church of England back in 1992. As *The Telegraph* [London] reports:

Supporters of women priests predicted that the church would be transformed, and pews would overflow. But opponents were distraught. “Swamped by modernism, liberalism and feminism, the Church of England is now nothing more than a rotting carcass,” lamented the Rev Francis Bown.

In the following weeks, more than 400 priests left the Church. Many took shelter in Roman Catholicism, where they were joined by high-profile parishioners such as the MPs Ann Widdecombe and John Gummer. Others made use of an opt-out clause which let them exclude the women from their parishes. In a move that is now being challenged, the legislation also barred women from becoming bishops. These are still open wounds.

Now, the decision to allow women to serve as bishops seems inevitable. Once women serve as priests, service as bishop certainly seems to follow. However, the decision to allow women bishops would put the Church of England on a collision course with the more conservative churches of the Anglican Communion.

As Ruth Gledhill of *The Times* [London] explains, “The Synod is now locked in contentious debate over whether women should be ordained bishop, an issue that insiders fear could be as divisive as that of homosexual ordination, even though some provinces such as the US and Canada already have women bishops.”

The feminization of the ministry is one of the most significant trends of this generation. Acceptance of women in the pastoral role reverses centuries of Christian conviction and practice. It also leads to a redefinition of the church and its

ministry. Once women begin to fill and represent roles of pastoral leadership men withdraw. This is true, not only in the pulpit, but in the pews. The evacuation of male worshippers from liberal churches is a noticeable phenomenon.

Furthermore, the issues of women's ordination and the normalization of homosexuality are closely linked. It is no accident that those churches that most eagerly embraced the ordination of women now either embrace the ordination of homosexuals or are seriously considering such a move.

The reason for this is quite simple. The interpretive games one must play in order to get around the Bible's proscription of women in congregational preaching and teaching roles are precisely the games one must play in order to get around the Bible's clear condemnation of homosexuality.

Put another way, once one is satisfied to relativize the biblical texts limiting the congregational teaching office to men, one can (and almost surely will) be satisfied to employ those same strategies on texts condemning homosexuality. In both cases, the texts are relativized by postmodern ideologies.

The future course of the Church of England seems rather clear. What about your church?

See also coverage in *The Guardian* [London]. Enrollment statistics for member seminaries of the Association of Theological Schools is available here [pdf file].

My article, "Biblical Pattern of Church Leadership Limits Pastorate to Men" is available here.

My article, "Women Preachers, Divorce, and a Gay Bishop — What's the Link?," is available here.

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