

**THE MISSION FIELD
AND THE
ORDINATION OF WOMEN**

**BY
E. LOUIE ACRES**

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PAMPHLET

**Anglican Group for the Ordination of Women
to the Historic Ministry of the Church.**

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At a Conference held in the College of the Ascension, Selly Oak, to consider the Ministry of Women with special reference to the Report of the Archbishops' Commission, a desire was expressed for further information than was then available concerning the possibility of, and the need and opportunity for, women priests in the Mission Field. The Anglican Group for the Ordination of Women to the Historic Ministry of the Church, therefore, endeavoured to obtain evidence upon this point on as wide and varied a scale as possible, and letters were sent out to more than eleven hundred women working in the Mission Field. They were asked if they considered that the work in the Mission Field would benefit or be hindered if the full ministry of the Church were opened to women; what effect they thought the admission of women to full Orders would have on the understanding of the Christian message with regard to the equality of the sexes; and whether they had any evidence as to the opinion of the people of the country in which they were working with regard to the ministry of women.

Replies were received from many parts of the world: numerically, the largest number came from India, while many were received from Africa and China. They were written by those doing definite evangelical work, by medical women, and by educationalists—some of long residence, others of recent appointment. As was to be expected, the answers reflected a great variety of opinions. From *China came considerable evidence of a desire for women priests, although some were not sure that the time for such a move had yet come. Some felt that considerable advance in understanding of the Christian message of the equality of the sexes was necessary before women could be admitted into the ministry, while others held the view that the best way to further the advance of this understanding would be to have ordained men working with ordained women under suitable Church authority. One writer put forward the argument that the ordination of women would be likely to lower the conception of the priesthood in the eyes of her people. In districts where women were taking a responsible part in the social and political life of the community, some felt strongly that the attitude of the Church had resulted in the anomalous position that the women who had become Christians were worshipping within the Church and accepting her Sacraments, but were fulfilling themselves and their vocations apart from and outside the Church because they found so little scope within.

Changes in social conditions are coming so rapidly that delay is dangerous, unless the Church is content for the day of opportunity to pass. This is stressed by more than one writer.

Social customs in the past have protected women, although they may have hampered them seriously. And these customs, as well as the serious shortage of

*For extracts from these replies see separate leaflet published by the Anglican Group.

clergy in some parts, have placed the whole instruction of women and girls in the Mission Field in the hands of women missionaries, who often have to undertake the most delicate pastoral work. Many people have little idea of the work women have been doing quietly in the Mission Field, nor have they any conception of the value of the work done. Many of these women have been doing, in the name of the Church, work that is normally done at home only by ordained men. Often the English missionary is a law unto herself: she has to be. The need creates duties that she dare not refuse. Some of the finest of them feel "the mighty ordination of the pierced hands," and where they have expressed a desire for the Church's ordination for themselves or for others it is in order that their service to the people among whom they labour may be the greater. This spirit of selfless giving is noticeable in many letters.

Some are impressed by the strain under which women missionaries often have to live, and hesitate to suggest further work and responsibility. The stress and strain of priesthood is evidently much in the mind of the missionary from whose letter the following extract is taken:—

"While considering the matter and seeing the many advantages which would accrue, and thinking of several women who would have the necessary qualifications, I feel doubt on one point—if a woman is temperamentally suited for such a task. There are always outstanding exceptions, but in general, I feel that women would be under a much greater mental strain than men. One realises that a priest gives out and of himself continuously. In the Mission Field particularly this is true, and it is work with many heartaches, and I wonder very much if women would bear the burden."

Does not this correspondent lose sight of the point made in another letter which reads:—

"Already women do much of the work that belongs to a priest. They prepare the women and girls for the sacraments, and they do the bulk of the teaching, but they have to do it without the grace and authority of ordination."

The next extract from a long and interesting letter raises the same issue:—

“Women missionaries are continually engaged in delicate pastoral work with souls, and it certainly seems fitting that this should be recognised and given the sacramental seal of ordination, so that their priesthood *de facto* may become a priesthood *de jure* formally sanctioned by the Church.

The same thing applies to the teaching office of the priest, which again is being continually exercised by women, though not officially. I cannot but feel that it would be a great advantage to have women who are teaching the Christian faith in the Mission Field regularly commissioned and trained, not just by missionary societies, but by the official Church, as ordained men are. The Lambeth Diploma and Licence are a step in the right direction, but stop short of the full commission ‘Take thou authority to preach the Word of God.’

I suppose what people really boggle at is the prospect of a woman being put in charge of a parish. Well—leaving aside the point that that need not necessarily happen—that is again something that virtually occurs so often on the Mission Field. If there is no man missionary in a station but one or more women, as by no means infrequently happens, the woman is really ‘in charge’ even though some priest, Indian or European, comes from time to time to administer the Sacraments. It is she who deals with the actual questions that have to be settled on the spot, and both men and women come to her for counsel and rulings. It therefore seems merely absurd that she should not be properly appointed as ‘curate in charge’ with her rulings controlled by the Bishop in the regular manner. After all, the priesthood is just as much a setting *under* authority as it is a setting *in* authority, and the best way to control people with a love of power is to give them a properly safeguarded sphere for its exercise. Many women missionaries are in a position of very dangerous power without sufficient control.”

As work in the Mission Field progresses and bears fruit, the growth in the number of communicants and the frequency of acts of Communion constitute a real difficulty in some areas. Perhaps the shortage of man power is the least of the reasons why women should be

ordained as priests but it is a very practical one, not to be minimised in reviewing the field of enquiry, especially, it would seem, in the mass movements of India. A worker tells of Christmas Communions being made about Easter time, and similar difficulty is experienced in other places.

Both Deaconesses and lay women express the hope that women may be authorised to carry the Reserved Sacrament to the sick in cases of urgent necessity. A worker in India writes:—

“Cases may arise in which a woman is the only person available to satisfy the request of a dying person for the administration of the Holy Communion. I should welcome an ecclesiastical arrangement by which permission might be given to Christian women workers of the Church to administer this sacrament in emergencies similar to that which they have in respect of the sacrament of baptism.”

Others raise the same point, and an actual instance is given by a Deaconess.

The difficulties of the confessional are emphasized again and again. In the words of one writer:—

“I have known cases in which the shy reticence of a Japanese woman has made her quite tongue-tied before a priest to whom she wanted to make her confession. In one case I had to hear it and help her out myself, and the priest (an Englishman) gave her absolution on the strength of that.”

This writer is personally of the opinion that it would be possible—and preferable—to regularise a practice like this rather than ordain women, but would it be desirable to make absolution conditional on the word of someone other than the priest and the penitent? Sacramental confession apart from the priesthood raises grave difficulties of order and practice. A teacher in Africa working in a city slum amongst the coloured (not native) population feels strongly that:—

“These women and girls need a *woman* confessor, especially as the sex instinct in these folk is so strong and often abnormal.”

From India came the opinion that:—

“The position of Indian women and the etiquette which hedges their meeting privately with men makes it almost impossible for women to seek spiritual advice from a man priest. There are topics which it would be unthinkable for them to discuss, and yet these might be matters vitally concerned with their soul's health. Women should be ordained to hear confessions and give absolution, and the logical sequence from that is that they should also administer Holy Communion.”

One writer says that among the Tamil people:—

“Objections are constantly made to women going to Church because the services are conducted by men. Converts in Hindu homes can often come to our meetings, but are strictly forbidden to go to Church because of the men.”

From South Africa a worker writes:—

“Although the people are taught the full Catholic faith, very many of them have scanty opportunities of practising it. All candidates for Confirmation are expected to make their confessions, and most priests agree that this sacrament is of very great value to our natives, but very little attempt is made to teach them to come regularly. If many of them did, the staff could not possibly cope with the work.”

She adds:—

“Several native girls have questioned me about the reasons for women being debarred from the priesthood and from serving in the sanctuary. Their questions are not aggressive or bitter, but puzzled. I have not discussed the question with native men, but I do not think that, except where they have been influenced by European views, they would see anything unnatural or unseemly in women being priests.”

In the more backward areas, the ordination of women would probably raise difficult problems, but these problems are not lacking now, although in a different form, and some claim that a healthier atmosphere would be introduced if women as well as men were working as ordained ministers of the Church. It is obvious that great care would have to be exercised in the selection of

candidates, both men and women. In the words of one missionary of experience:—

“Christian opinion would not find a difficulty: women teachers are highly respected, and non-Christians have been begun to understand the Christian attitude towards women, but after nearly 26 years in the country and watching the folk, I would very strongly deprecate the ordination of young women, or of any who are not white-haired.”

Agreement as to the need for safeguards does not necessitate disagreement with the principle involved, and advocates for the ordination of women would be the first to desire that everything should be done decently and in order, and that choice should be made only of “fit persons.”

Some missionaries seem to find the question of women's ‘ceremonial uncleanness’ a difficulty. One such writes:—

“At the present stage of her mental development and outlook an Indian woman considers herself to be physically unfit to partake of the Holy Communion at certain times.”

Another reviews the varied types and nationalities ministered to in her Diocese, in which:—

“The Hindu would raise no objection to the theory of spiritual equality, but would instantly ask the practical question ‘What is to become of the congregation when the priestess is unable to minister on account of her monthly infirmity?’”

She continues:—

“I imagine that if women were admitted to the priesthood, the bishops would give dispensation from Leviticus XV. 19.”

It should be sufficient answer to a question of this character to remind the writer that we live in the Christian era and not under the Jewish dispensation.

Several writers feel that deaconesses could do all that is necessary for the women's side of the work in the Mission Field if the Order were raised in status and en-

larged in scope. Others pin their faith to the religious communities which they feel could meet the need if they were strengthened and enlarged. One member of a community reports the view of twelve sisters who felt that "the work of the Mission Field would be greatly hindered were women admitted to the ministry, and concludes:—

"I am only answering this letter because I feel if the people who are opposed to this all keep silence, the matter may get passed."

But the valuable services which members of the religious orders and deaconesses render to the Church in the Mission Field still leave gaps in the ministry, as is shown in the extracts from letters given on other pages.

Several write of the progress in India of non-Christian women. Here are two extracts:—

"One is aware of the existence among non-Christians of a certain amount of more or less 'enlightened' Indian thought, which is mainly atheistic and imbued to a certain extent with Western ideas, to which the functioning of women in any capacity whatsoever would probably present no difficulty: such a body of opinion being probably essentially non-religious in outlook and therefore not representative of the truly Indian point of view."

"Non-Christian women such as . . . have for years taken their place side by side with men in political and social work, addressed mixed audiences, and are respected as much as almost any men leaders. . . . was formerly Vice President of the Madras Legislative Assembly, and I see that . . . has been recommended to be Deputy Speaker of the Madras Legislative Council."

But we need not think of this *progress as confined to non-Christian circles. On the general progress of women, Christian and non-Christian, a missionary writes:—

"Educated Indian women are now coming to the fore in so many departments of life that their admission to the ministry would, I think, merely be considered as part of the

*See "Devotees of Christ," by D. S. Batley (C.E.Z.M.S.).

general progress. Amongst the half-educated there would, of course, be a certain amount of prejudice, but in all ages there have been women whose personalities have overcome that, and they are not lacking to-day."

Several writers emphasise the necessity of encouraging the Indian Church towards independence. In the words of one of them:—

"I feel so strongly that what we missionaries out here should seek to do is to fade into the background and try to make the Indian Church stand on her own feet and take all responsibility. I feel that more 'taking over' of Churches by us English, which I suppose is what your proposal would mean, would be a backward instead of a forward step. . . . If the full ministry of the Church were open to women, it should be to Indians rather than to English or foreigners."

Or, as another sees the problem:—

"Too often has Christ been preached as inseparable from Western civilisation. It is that mistake from which the Church is now suffering."

One missionary thinks that:—

"The exercise of priestly function by males only (and that of a restricted caste) is so familiar a conception in the East that any introduction of female Christian priests would probably be looked upon as a Western idiosyncrasy."

On the other hand, another considers the idea so familiar among the Hindus that:—

"Women being admitted to the Christian priesthood would not exactly be an innovation calculated greatly to impress non-Christians."

A missionary working in Ceylon is of the opinion:—

" . . . that the work in the Mission Field would benefit if the full ministry of the Church were open to women. Here, in Ceylon, girls' education is as advanced as that of the boys. Women are entering the different professions and have been elected to the State Council. Some of them would do splendid work in the Ministry. . . . I have not come across any feeling of inequality because men only are admitted to the Ministry, but that is, I think, because they just take it for granted that men only shall lead in worship. In Buddhism there are no women priests,

so they do not expect them in our Church. I believe that a big impression would be made on the girls whom I know if the Ministry were open to women. It would be such a big step forward from Buddhism, which has really little use for women, to a Christianity which could use them to the fullest extent in God's service."

A worker engaged in education writes:—

"I have never heard any opinion expressed by the Sinhalese people of Ceylon with regard to the desirability of the ministry of women, but in our own school chapel, on the Sundays when we cannot get a clergyman to take our Sunday service, we are accustomed to having mattins read by a woman and an address given by her. Our difficulty here is that we can only rarely have a Holy Communion Service in our own chapel, as we can seldom find a priest free to come to us on Sunday mornings early."

After discussing the subject with a Ceylonese pastor and several Ceylonese friends, a missionary writes:—

"Here in Ceylon the only extra things that women would be able to do when ordained that they cannot do at present are administering the Sacraments, and conducting liturgical services in Church. We already preach and do pastoral work and prepare candidates for baptism and confirmation, and do, I think, everything else that a clergyman has to do. I do not think that the Ceylonese laity would have any feeling against women conducting the morning service or evensong, or celebrating the Holy Communion. . . . I have frequently been asked to preach and take services in churches here belonging to other missions, and I take informal afternoon services regularly for Anglicans in . . . parish. I have never striven for these opportunities, and I should not worry myself if they were withdrawn, but I have interpreted the request to preach as a sign of the need and have been willing to do whatever was needed. I think that the ease with which people accept women preachers is an indication that they would not find any difficulty in accepting the Sacrament also from a woman."

From West Africa the opinion is expressed that the towns and advanced villages would probably not appreciate the ministry of women, but that the people in the backward areas would value it. One writer thinks that it might be extremely difficult for the African man

to accept ministry from an African woman, but this view is not shared by another, who writes:—

"The primitive people among whom I work would take it as the natural result of the Christian message that women should be ordained to the Ministry. Sex does not preclude a woman from being the Chief, even of large towns, out here, provided she has the gift of leadership. Chiefs out here are semi-sacred individuals."

One correspondent in East Africa finds that the idea of the equality of the sexes is gradually taking shape in the mind of the Christian African. Another is of the opinion that:—

"The more primitive and simple folk would not in the least mind if they were administered to by women, but the better educated and more advanced would object as they have seen that it is not the custom. The people who would most strongly object are the older clergy. The younger ones and really well-educated would welcome it."

Another feels:—

"that the work in the Mission Field would benefit if the full ministry of the Church were open to women. In this, all the European, Indian and native lay people with whom I have discussed the matter agree with me. Our African priest is also in favour of this for his people, but he says we must mark time, they are not ready for it yet. I think the admission of women to full Orders would do much towards bringing about the equality of the sexes among the African people, who think a great deal of their priests. At present, women are thought very little of, but were these people to have fully ordained women among them, I feel sure women in general would be better respected. Our African priest feels very strongly about this too. As far as I can see the lay people here are quite in favour of the full ministry of the Church being open to women. Our native priest also drew my attention to the fact that his people have elected a woman to represent them in Parliament."

One correspondent from Japan, has been at great pains to test the general feeling on the questions raised by the enquiry. She writes:—

"The Japanese Bishop of . . . the Japanese Principal of . . . Theological College, a leading

Japanese parish priest, and a thoughtful woman (also Japanese) in close touch with Church people and movements, have all been helpful. The warm way in which they have spoken of the work of women in the Church, and of their ability, is very encouraging. As to Ordination, some think that 'the time may come' but all seem to feel that 'it has not come yet' All have been ready to discuss the subject thoughtfully and kindly."

To the same enquirer, the Bishop had written:—

"There is no difference between men and women in Japan in ability to study and take examinations. One of my women workers lately passed the most brilliant examination that my examiners had ever conducted."

In contrast to this free discussion, another correspondent is doubtful as to the wisdom of introducing the subject to the people with whom she worked:—

"I do not think it would be wise to collect direct evidence about the views of the Japanese on the subject of women priests. Probably the less the subject comes before the Church in Japan the better."

Another expressed the view:—

"Personally I should be inclined to think the day may not be very far off when this change would be welcomed in Japan, where women are making themselves felt. . . . Lately I have been impressed with the way Japanese women pioneers in Christian Social Service along different lines have been making themselves realised as a power, not so much in our Anglican Church as in others."

One missionary, after discussion with a Japanese colleague, writes:—

"I have just asked my Japanese fellow-worker what she has heard on such a subject. She is from Tokyo Women's University and comes of a family of rather outstanding women. She says it is too early; ordinary people have never given a thought to such a possibility. But, she says, some of the up-to-date young women won't train as Church workers because it doesn't lead to anything more."

Several correspondents refer to the excellent work being done by women admitted to the ministry of the Free Churches in Japan and elsewhere. One missionary

compares the position of women in Japan with that in England:—

"Since the ability, education and opportunity of the Japanese woman is almost equal to that of women in our own lands (I say 'almost' because in regard to law and tradition Japanese women are still on a lower status than men) it seems to me the problem of their ordination is much the same as in our own land. I believe the work in the Mission Field and at home would benefit if the full ministry of the Church was open to women."

A writer from Palestine, not averse from the principle, raises practical difficulties not experienced in other parts of the Mission Field, which must claim the consideration of the Church in examining the question:—

"While I am very sympathetic to the work of your Group, I cannot say that in the Near East the giving of full Orders would benefit our work. We are not working here in purely Moslem lands, but in lands in which half a dozen and more ancient Eastern Churches watch us. . . . These Churches have to bear the brunt of the giving of Christian witness to the Moslem people around them, and cordial relations with these Churches are of extreme importance. . . . Had we not this complication. . . . I think that the ordination of women might have a valuable effect on the understanding of the Christian message in regard to the relationship of the sexes. . . . I think that in many ways we feel the shadow of Islam. All Christians here have lived among a Moslem majority and have been infected by the unspiritual Moslem view of sex relations. Until recently in our Anglican Church in . . . it was not possible for men and women to kneel side by side at Holy Communion because the proximity of a woman was too disturbing to the man worshipper. In only one of our churches has this broken down."

An observer, also under the shadow of Islam, in another corner of the Mission Field writes:—

"To my mind the admission of women to full Orders would have a good effect on the understanding of the Christian message with regard to the equality of the sexes. In a country where, as a result of Hindu and Mohammedan practice, women are under-privileged, the giving of com-

plete spiritual equality to women would seem only logical in the face of the frequent protests of Christians against the position of non-Christian women: it would only be practising what is so often preached: that 'in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female.' "

According to evidence received, the Church is felt to be the main link with the Old Country by our own people Overseas, and while some settlers would welcome women into the Ministry, others would resent any "innovation" or "radical" change. The differences of opinion are similar to those found in the Home Church.

One realises the varied stages of development that exist in the Church when such quotations as the following are contrasted:—

"Such Chinese as I have discussed the matter with utterly failed to see why ordination grace should be limited to one sex. It seemed to them neither Christian nor sensible."

"This country has had no experience of even a Deaconess."

"Practically no woman over 20 can read, and hundreds under 20 are not in schools."

"Our Church Council has not yet admitted women of their own congregations to the Council meetings."

"They would not be able to understand what it meant by spiritual equality. They are a simple people, almost incapable of abstract thought. It would not even be possible to translate the phrase into their language."

If we compare these with some of the passages already quoted, it will be difficult to place limits to the varieties of development and experience. The Church does not, in other matters, go the pace of its slowest member, and enough has been written to show that women priests would be welcomed in some places and would find work to do which at present is left undone, or partially done without the authority and grace of Orders.

In presenting the result of this enquiry, the Anglican Group realises that it is limited in scope and by no means exhaustive. Interest has been aroused and dis-

cussion started: the ball has been set rolling. One missionary writes:—

"I shall make a point of canvassing the question among my Indian colleagues and friends."

and another, from Africa:—

"This would make an interesting discussion to have at some of the women's meetings in the more advanced places."

The time now seems opportune for a general discussion by the Church, on a much larger scale than has yet been attempted, on the ordination of women to the diaconate and priesthood, with special reference to its repercussions in the Mission Field. Possibly the united Missionary Conference to be held in Madras at the end of 1938 might make a start. It is evident that the recipients of the Anglican Group's enquiry have given the questions submitted to them careful thought. The whole question is now referred to the judgment and prayerful consideration of Church-people at home and abroad.

It has been said that the Mission Field always offers the Church opportunity to be greater than her fears, and in the ordination of women to the priesthood comes such an opportunity.

GROUP LITERATURE.

MEMORANDUM ON WOMEN AND THE PRIESTHOOD,
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