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# Women bishops in the Church of England: No or not yet?

## Women bishops in the Church of England: No or not yet?

[Charlotte Methuen](#) [1] 22 November 2012

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The vote against women bishops raises many questions, including whether Church of England bishops should continue to sit in the House of Lords.

- *Voting in the House of Bishops: in favour 44; against 3; recorded abstentions 2.*
- *Voting in the House of Clergy: 148 in favour; 45 against; no abstentions.*
- *Voting in the House of Laity: 132 in favour; against 74; recorded abstentions none.*
- *The motion was carried in the House of Bishops and Clergy, and lost in the House of Laity.*

In this way, the Church of England decided on Tuesday 20 November not to approve the Measure admitting women to the episcopate in the Church of England. The vote required a two-thirds majority in each House; the House of Laity was six votes short. Within hours of the news from General Synod, a colleague and friend, a parish priest in the north of England, had received this e-mail from a parishioner:

*On the one hand I do not feel that I can belong to an organisation that does not confer equal status on women. Such lack of inclusivity goes against all my fundamental beliefs. I would not join or continue to belong to any other organisation that had made a decision to exclude women from its highest positions in this way. I cannot justify to my family and friends continuing to belong to the Church of England. I do not see how I could bring my grandchildren to the church after this decision. I feel that I need to find a church of another denomination in which I can feel comfortable.*

*On the other hand, I love coming to St. Anon's. My attendance on Sundays is the core of my spiritual life. I have great respect and affection for many members of our congregation. Leaving St. Anon will be extremely painful for me.*

The pain of this parishioner is real and deep and is reflected in the hearts of many people across England, and wider afield. For those who have given up on the Church of England long ago, or who have never seen the point of organised religion, it may seem a strange reaction. Why can this person not simply walk away? But pain and anger are being felt in unexpected places.

"My wife is furious and she doesn't even go to church," a colleague told me at a meeting on Wednesday afternoon. The Church of England's decision has offended, angered and distressed people who didn't know they cared. Stephen Cottrell, the Bishop of Chelmsford, suggested after Tuesday's vote: "There's a risk the national church will become a national embarrassment." For many this is no longer a risk; it is reality.

Although I was not entirely surprised at the vote, I found myself saddened, disappointed, and – yes – unexpectedly angry. The General Synod of the Church of England has several times affirmed that there is no theological objection to admitting women to the episcopate. 42 of the 44 diocesan synods in the Church of England voted for this Measure as a means of so doing. How can it be that the lay members of General Synod, elected to represent their dioceses, rejected the motion?

The result of the vote raises questions about what it means to be a diocesan representative on the General Synod. I often find myself charged with representing the views of the Church of England in international theological dialogues with other churches (specifically the Lutherans and the Reformed) and in theological debates with other Anglicans from across the Communion. I have always believed that part of that responsibility includes trying to understand and present the views of those with whom I disagree. But it would seem that there are lay members of the Church of England's General Synod who do not share that understanding of what it means to represent their diocese.

This vote will almost certainly lead to a review of the processes of synodical elections. Yet Tuesday's vote raises deeper questions: about the credibility of the Church of England, yes; and also of whether the Church of England's bishops should continue to sit in the House of Lords, should continue to have a say in debates about the government of the nation. If the Church of England can show itself so resistant to the (Christian, and biblically founded!) imperatives of equality, so unaware of the historical evidence for the women leaders in the early church, so dismissive of the gifts and leadership qualities of half the population (and around half of those now training for the priesthood) what reasons can be offered for its voice to be heard on matters such as the living wage, same-sex marriage, poverty, or economic injustice?

My first instinct on Tuesday evening was to have nothing more to do with the Church of England, the church in which my faith was nurtured, the church through which I was ordained into the Church of God, the church which I have served in different ways for over twenty-five years. Maybe I am one of the lucky ones: I am a priest, but my livelihood comes from teaching theology at the University of Glasgow (which has its own problems, perhaps a reminder of the sinfulness of all human institutions), and my job has brought me back to Scotland, and to the Scottish Episcopal Church, which voted in June 2003 by an overwhelming majority to admit women to the episcopate – but has not yet elected a female bishop. In May 2012, the Revd Susan MacDonald became the first woman to be installed as Dean of a Scottish Diocese.

Scotland reminds us that a vote to admit women to the episcopate can also be followed by a long period of waiting. However, in those Anglican churches where women have become bishops, we can also see that ways forward have been found [without the need for the complexity of the legislation](#) [8] rejected by the Church of England's General Synod on Tuesday, and with much more joy and celebration that the God-given gifts of women could serve the Church in this way. A friend remembered that her mother attended the ordination of Bishop Penny Jamieson in New Zealand for the Diocese of Dunedin: "It was such a huge step forward and I simply can't understand what seems such narrowmindedness over here."

So what next? "The Measure deserved to fail because the provisions for those who are opposed were not strong enough." This view has been expressed in a number of quarters, but my sense is that those who hold it will find themselves increasingly beleaguered.

The Measure that was rejected on Tuesday was the result of several years of attempting to find a solution to the challenge of holding the Church of England together as one church, with recognisable structures of unity, whilst making a safe space for those who dissented. That that safe space was not felt to be safe enough is now clear. But the response to the amendment by the House of Bishops earlier this summer indicated that the provisions offered by Measure were as far as many supporters of the ordination of women to the episcopate were prepared to go. The rejection of the Measure will not open the doors to the kind of structures that those who are opposed want. Rather, this vote is likely to lead to a more vocal campaign to remove the "protections" that currently exist, and in particular the Provincial Episcopal Visitors, the special, "flying" bishops, appointed for those who do not accept the ordination of women.

There are other questions to be asked too, particularly about whether a theology of dissent has not sometimes been allowed to mask a theology of discrimination. The Diocese of Chichester offers a deeply worrying example of how of a culture which was dismissive of the gifts of women was also [unmindful of the need to safeguard the vulnerable](#) [9]. This is not to say that those who have reservations about admitting women to the episcopate are necessarily unmindful of the proper treatment of women, but it is to say that the right to hold a theological position cannot lead to discrimination. It would be good to see a commitment by the House of Bishops that all Dioceses should ensure that an ordained woman is a part of senior staff.

The call for women to be admitted to the episcopate is not going to go away. Voting across the Church of England's diocesan synods and in General Synod shows that there is strong support for it. There will be - and probably sooner rather than later - a new Measure, a new way of taking forward the General Synod's affirmation that women should be admitted to the episcopate of the Church of England. And I suspect that those new proposals are likely to include fewer "safeguards" than those in the Measure that has just been rejected.

My vision for the Church of England is of a place in which women and men can joyously preach and hear the gospel of Jesus Christ in a way that they can embrace it gladly. Of the Church of England as a place in which the Good News cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, discriminatory, or even abusive. And of the Church of England as made up of parishes to which those who have grandchildren can gladly take them, knowing that those children will be given an inspirational vision for a better world. Perhaps, in the end, we will come to see Tuesday's vote as a step that leads in that direction. But for the moment, I — like many others — am deeply saddened and disappointed.

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