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**Women Priests
and the Episcopal Church
in the USA**

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In debating the issue of women's ordination at the 1976 General Convention, some opponents of ordination predicted that the decision would cause a major defection from the Church. A look at the actual membership figures, as published yearly by diocese in the Episcopal Church Annual disproves this prediction. No evident defection took place as illustrated in the graph in Fig. 1. In fact, the data show that:

1. The Episcopal Church has been declining in membership since the peak years of the late sixties, as have other "mainline" Protestant churches in America.

2. The period of most rapid decline was early on, from 1969 to 1973. In the years since the 1976 Convention, the decline has slowed down noticeably.

3. Baptisms (and in most provinces, confirmations), after many years of decline, have begun to increase, mostly in the last five years.

4. Worship attendance has increased steadily since 1977 showing an overall increase in attendance between 1977 and 1983.

Far from being a divided and unhappy Church on the decline, the Episcopal Church shows signs of increasing vitality. Its upturn in membership over recent years is illustrated by the fact that 72 dioceses have opened up new churches, and over 200 new congregations have been formed in the past five years (see Fig. 2):

The pattern of change has differed significantly across the eight provinces of the Church in the U.S., reflecting social and economic changes and subsequent population shifts. For example:

--Province IV (the American South) has grown steadily during the past twenty years; its rate of growth is now greater than at any other time since the mid-sixties.

--Province VII (the Southwest) and Province VIII (the West) have halted their decline and show signs of growth.

--The provinces of the industrial Northeast (I, II, and III) and the Midwest (V) continue to decline reflecting economic recession and population movements. It is clear that the "sunbelt" is

growing at the expense of the older urban industrial centers. A focus on only one of these geographical areas, therefore, can be misleading if the overall pattern is not clearly seen.

As illustrated in the graph in Fig. 1, the major fall in membership occurred between 1972 and 1974; i.e. before any women priests were ordained. In these early years of the decade, communicants declined by almost 2% on average, but since 1976 there were only two years when the decline in communicants reached as much as 1%. That the decline is clearly levelling off is apparent in the trend in baptized members.¹

Even more marked has been the steady increase in worship attendance since 1977. Attendance of baptized membership increased from 37% to 41%, with a total increase in church attendance of an overall 8.6% between 1977 and 1983. These figures are compiled by the "State of the Church Committee of the General Convention", and are based on attendance at 4 key services.² Since 1976, when women priests were officially sanctioned, the percentage of baptized members attending services has risen from 32% to 41% by 1983 (the last available annual data).

This Parochial report analysis also illustrates a slight overall national increase in Church membership as a percentage of the total population. This has gone up by an average of 0.1% per year since 1980 nationally, but this increase is over 2% per year in some dioceses, most of which have women priests. While this increase in Church membership is still relatively small, it would appear that the decline of the early 70's has been reversed. The upturn in membership has occurred as ordained women clergy are being increasingly employed in parishes around the country. This analysis also shows the trends in giving per household per week which has also increased by 10% per year since 1973. The ordination of women seems not to have affected this trend.

It is clear from the above statistics that women priests have not contributed to any significant loss in membership in the Episcopal Church, contrary to what has sometimes been claimed by opponents to women's ordination. In fact, the figures show quite the reverse.

The Schisms

Exaggerated figures are often quoted about the extent of the rupture which occurred over the issue of women priests. What was the extent of the damage? It is difficult to estimate how far women's ordination, per se, contributed to the formation of split off churches during the seventies, some of which had begun prior to 1976. Four issues contributed to the reaction of some clergy and laity at this time. These were:

1. The revision of the prayer book.
2. The reaction against "Liberalism".
3. The reaction to Black Power.
4. The ordination of women.

In 1977, 400 priests and 1600 lay persons met in St. Louis in reaction against the 1976 Convention. There followed several years of turmoil, but by the end of the decade the split off segment of the Episcopal Church consisted of no more than 10-15,000 members, less than 5% of total members, and nowhere near the "third" that has sometimes been claimed. At present, there are nine Church bodies separated from the Episcopal Church which have 23 bishops and 250 congregations. Most of the 400 priests who protested in 1977 remained within the Episcopal Church. A few disgruntled individuals went over to the Roman Catholic Church and, at present, there are five "personal parishes" made up of ex-Episcopalians within the Roman Catholic Church. However, no Episcopal parish "went over" to the Roman Church as a parish.³

Some Statistics on Women in the Episcopal Church

By October of 1985, there were 968 women in Holy Orders: 629 priests (65%) and 339 deacons (35%). These women constitute over 7% of ordained ministers in the Episcopal Church. In seminaries, on average, 35% of student enrollment are women, and some seminaries have as many as 50% women. At the current rate of growth, the number of women clergy is doubling every three years and it is

expected that parity will be achieved by 1994. From the deployment figures, however, it is apparent that women are less likely to be employed as rectors of parishes: only 14% of ordained women were rectors or vicars at the end of 1985. By contrast, many churches are increasingly hiring women as assistants or curates. Forty-five percent of ordained women were functioning as assistants/associates at the end of 1985. Only 1% of women, however, were reported to be unemployed.⁴

These statistics on women's deployment reflect an increasing popularity of women in parishes, although their positions in senior posts are still relatively limited. However, the fact that it has been only eight years since women were officially admitted to Holy Orders could well account for this. After nearly 2000 years of tradition it is remarkable that such a major change can take place in such a short period of time, and it reflects the rapid acceptance of women as priests in the Episcopal Church.

Attitudes toward Women Priests

At present, only 11 out of the 94 North American dioceses do not ordain women. This situation, however, is constantly changing as alterations in the Church's leadership occur and as women priests become more accepted. Also, it is apparent that many who were originally opposed to women's ordination are changing their views.

A notable example of such a change in views is that of the Bishop of Central Florida, Bishop Folwell, an opponent of women's ordination at the 1976 Convention. In his diocesan publication of October 1983, Bishop Folwell writes:

It is as a consequence of study, prayer, listening and observing, that I am now committed to the decision our Church made at the General Convention.

He goes on to state his reasons, which are both theological and practical.

For seven years we have belonged to a Church which has authorized the ordination of women to the priesthood. It has also seen over 300 women ordained. We cannot live as members of this Church as though it never happened.

Bishop Folwell clearly reflects the views of many who were originally opposed to the ordination of women, but who have come to see the Holy Spirit at work in this fundamental change.

People's actual experience of women as priests contrasts with their early negative reactions to the abstract idea. Many stories are told about this. For example, in a small booklet about women in the priesthood, published by the Board for Clergy Deployment in 1979, it is reported that when a woman stepped in to assist a parish when the priest was ill, the parishoners changed their opinions of women in the priesthood from negative to positive because of her presence. The acceptance of women priests seems to come from having encountered them and realizing that they fulfill a need which was previously unrecognized.

Finally, does the increasing number of church members in recent years bear any relationship to the increasing number of women priests in America? It is impossible to document this statistically, as comparisons between dioceses which ordain women and those which do not cannot be made because of so many other variables, and because women still constitute small numbers, even in dioceses where women have been ordained for several years past. There are only six dioceses where women represent more than 10% of canonically resident clergy, and some of these are in areas where economic recession is causing migration.

On the other hand, as can be seen from the map in Fig. 2, many of the dioceses where no new churches are opening are also those which do not ordain women. Five out of the 11 dioceses which do

not ordain women have no new churches. Again, however, economic and social factors may be the more important determinants influencing the opening of new churches. One interesting case which can be cited is the diocese of Virginia, where there is a relatively large number of women priests (31 by the end of 1984), many of whom are deployed as assistants (curates) in parishes. Church membership was declining by 0.4% per year on average from 1972 to 1976, but since that time it has been growing by 0.8% per year, and since 1980 by as much as 1.46% per year.

In summary, far from being in a state of serious decline, the figures show that the Episcopal Church shows signs of increasing vitality and growth since the ordination of women became official policy. The statistics show more and more women being ordained and being employed in parishes and institutions around the country, reflecting the increasing acceptance of women in the Church, a change which has taken place in an amazingly short period of time.

The figures also show clearly that there has been a marked upturn in church attendance and membership in the years since women were ordained and began to be deployed in parishes.

Footnotes and Sources

1. This data has been prepared by Michael Sieman (currently a resident at General Theological Seminary), who is undertaking an analysis of the Episcopal Church Annual. Work in Progress, Episcopal Church Membership: 1964-1983.

2. Committee on the State of the Church. Parochial Report Analysis. Data obtained by Alison Warner from the Episcopal Women's Caucus.

3. These figures are from an editorial in The Christian Challenge, "An Independent Episcopal Witness in the Anglican Tradition", Vol. XXI, No. 11, Dec. 1982. This gives an historical account of the schisms in the Episcopal Church since the late sixties.

4. Data from the Rev. Sandra Boyd and the Rev. Susanne Hyatt of Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Mass. Prepared for the Office of Women's Ministries at the Episcopal Church Center in New York City.

Other data and information cited is from the Office of Women's Ministries of the Episcopal Church Center, 815 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

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