

Measure of compromise



The media has depicted the Church of England as being on the verge of collapse because of the rejection of a General Synod Measure permitting the appointment of women as bishops. It was seen as a triumph of obscurantism over progress, a refusal to recognise the right of women to equal treatment with men. But there is more to it than that.

Strong feelings militate against compromise, but a willingness to compromise could have produced a better outcome. It still could, once tempers cool. No one's interests are served by the Church of England inflicting damage on itself over this issue. Nor is it simply true to say that the Church has turned its back on women bishops. It has turned its back on one way of achieving them, because the proposed route did not go far enough towards safeguarding the rights of the opposing minority.

The rejected measure has had a long and tortuous history. It began as part of the unfinished business of 1992, when the synod approved the ordination of women as priests. From within a Catholic theology of priesthood, the decision applied logically to women bishops as much as to women priests. It was inevitable that the issue of women bishops would have to be faced, particularly as there are now more women coming forward for ordination than men. Throughout, the key questions have been about how to deal with those priests and parishes who were adamantly opposed to female ordination. Space was made for them – the so-called “flying bishops” solution – though not enough for some.

Both conservative Anglo-Catholics and conservative Evangelicals were opposed to anything that would make them look like second-class Anglicans. They wanted statutory guarantees that they could continue to conduct themselves as if women bishops did not exist. Instead they were offered the

protection of a non-legally binding code of practice, of so far unspecified content. But it was not enough, which is why the Measure was defeated in the House of Laity on Tuesday. The reason they were not given the legal protection they wanted was because proponents of women bishops complained that that might undermine their equality of status. Just a little more movement on that point – which the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, had earlier argued for – might have been sufficient to close the deal.

The advocates of women bishops rejected the archbishop's compromise. They saw that the battle for female equality had been won in secular society and they believed the Church of England had to bow to the same logic or appear irrelevant. That may be true, but both the Anglo-Catholics and the Evangelicals anchor their doctrine elsewhere than in the shifting sands of public opinion or the secular equality agenda: in Catholic tradition in one case and Scripture in the other. Neither group minds being thought out of touch. But even if they have good arguments, it was a mistake for the more liberal sections of church opinion to forget that the very basis of the Anglican Settlement is a tacit agreement that no one part of it should ever push its case so far as to drive another part out into the cold. If the Measure could be revised in that spirit, a more acceptable and consensual solution might yet be found.

The Tablet