



Episcopal News Service photo.

Ordination service of the "Philadelphia 11," the first women priests ordained irregularly in 1974, breaking the gender bar in the Episcopal Church and parts of the Anglican Communion.



A Brief History of the Lambeth Conference

Part III of IV

Fourth of a nine-part series on the Lambeth Conference and the Anglican Communion.

By Christopher L. Webber

The 1950s are sometimes remembered as a time of peace. In fact they were the years of the Korean War, the McCarthy hearings and the Supreme Court's decision outlawing school segregation. Nonetheless, the Lambeth Conference of 1958 may have been the fulfillment of the early vision of what such meetings could be. The conference adopted 131 resolutions, carefully organized

under 8 headings beginning with the Bible and ending with 20 resolutions on "the Family in Contemporary Society."

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procreation of children, and the organisation of family life must be related, consciously and directly, to the creative, redemptive, and sanctifying power of God." Concentrating as they were on the family, the bishops had little to say about women's ministry outside the home except to say that "fuller use should be made of trained and qualified women, and that spheres of progressive responsibility and greater security should be planned for them."

To say, as they now did, that family planning is "a right and important factor in Christian family life" is to admit either that they had been wrong in 1920 or that the times had changed—perhaps both were true. It was the first of several issues on which the bishops would reverse earlier stands in the last half of the 20th century.

When the conference convened in 1968, Pope Paul VI had just issued his statement condemning birth control. The Lambeth bishops said they could not "agree with the Pope's conclusion that all methods of conception control other than abstinence...are contrary to the 'order established by God.'" Of course, this meant that the Lambeth bishops had been wrong themselves in 1920.

Many of the bishops felt they had also been wrong on the subject of women's ordination but the conference could only say that "the theological arguments as at present presented for and against the ordination of women to the priesthood are inconclusive."

The 1968 conference called for creation of a consultative council including approximately equal numbers of clergy, both bishops and priests, representing the member churches. The council, which became the Anglican Consultative Council, would have authority only to study, coordinate,

and advise. A Communion that had been held together by "mutual affection," a Prayer Book tradition, and occasional meetings of bishops, would now have a representative body meeting every two or three years. Communion would be expressed through a committee.

None of that, of course, dealt helpfully with the question of the ordination of women. Thus, when the bishops convened in 1978 they found that the world had moved on without them. Women had already been ordained in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Hong Kong.

The bishops acknowledged "that both the debate about the ordination of women as well as the ordinations themselves have...caused distress and pain to many on both sides." They felt that their role was primarily pastoral: "To heal...and to maintain and strengthen fellowship." They pleaded for patience and sensitivity and suggested the possible provision of alternative ministry for those unwilling to accept women as priests and bishops.

Other, even more painful issues, were already looming on the horizon. There was a need, the bishops believed, "for deep and dispassionate study of the question of homosexuality, which would take seriously both the teaching of Scripture and the results of scientific and medical research." There were few churches that responded to the Lambeth resolution and the bishops were no more ready to deal with the subject in 1988 than they had been 10 years earlier.

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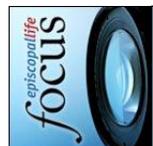
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