



## NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DIOCESAN ADVISERS IN WOMEN'S MINISTRY (NADAWM)

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### **Why Women should be Ordained Priest and Lead Churches**

#### **A Guide for Congregations**

The first and most obvious reason why women should be ordained, and should lead churches, is because God is gifting them to do so! Since God is calling faithful, faith-filled, diverse, gifted women to the Church, who are churches to refuse this gift?

Some might hesitate at this bold assertion, fearing it is contrary to God's word or the traditions of the Church. Perhaps these women have misheard God's call. However, their call is entirely consistent with God's creation in which women and men together were charged with reflecting the likeness of God and given the stewardship of all God had made (Genesis 1:26-27). Their call is also consistent with God's new creation, in which Jesus' first post resurrection act is to send a woman as an apostle to bear the good news (John 20:11-18).

Some people would focus on Paul's letters in which he says women should remain silent and should not teach (for example 1 Timothy 2:11-13, 1 Corinthians 14:34). Much ink has been spilt discussing how such verses should be read.<sup>1</sup> However, it is abundantly clear from those same letters that Paul worked alongside, affirmed and learned from women leaders and church leaders. These include Phoebe, Prisca and Junia in Romans 16 and Lydia in Acts 16. Whatever the meaning of the former verses, they were clearly not a binding prohibition against women leading or teaching throughout the church.

Those in the Church who come from a more catholic tradition may have reservations about a woman standing "in persona Christi" when communion is celebrated. Can a woman do this, when the incarnate Christ was a man? However, in terms of incarnation and salvation, it is Jesus' humanity that matters, not his masculinity. One of the Church Fathers, Gregory Nazianzen argued: "For that which he has not assumed he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved." In this, he echoes Paul when he writes that in Christ, there is no male and female (Galatians 2:28). While there are wonderful differences between women and men, the ability to be an instrument of God's grace in Christ Jesus is not one of them.

Church unity matters in a particular way to many catholic Anglicans, and our impaired communion with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches is a source of sadness to them. They fear that ordaining women takes us further from the day when our churches may be one again and goes against the unity Jesus prayed for in John 17. Some are also concerned that in taking a step not yet sanctioned by those traditions, namely allowing women to be priests, the very validity of the sacraments women offer is in question. This leads to fears around sacramental assurance: If a woman

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting reflection see Rachel Held Evans *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* pp251-255, Nelson Thomas Inc 2012

pronounces God's absolution, am I truly forgiven? If a woman presides at the altar, have I truly received God's grace in the sacrament?

It has long been established that the character of the priest does not impair the gift of the sacrament. If a priest were to be an unrepentant sinner of the worst imaginable kind, the sacraments they administered would not be invalid. In which case, can we honestly believe that God will withhold God's grace when a woman, faithfully and honestly ordained according to the agreed practices of her church, celebrates at the Eucharist? Furthermore, we have many differences with our Roman and Orthodox siblings, so why is this issue the one that is so problematic? And while ordaining women is not yet the practice of the whole church, it is not as divergent as it might seem. The Roman Catholic Church agreed as long ago as 1975, in a Pontifical Biblical Commission report, that there was no scriptural reason why women could not be priests and in 1997 the International Theological Commission agreed that women could be sacramentally ordained<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, many in the Roman Catholic Church would love to see ordained women and are speaking out in favour of it. Perhaps we are walking the same direction of faithful obedience to God, just at a different pace.

Having addressed some of the reservations, let us return to gifting. Ordaining women and welcoming their leadership is good news for the Church and for society. It is a prophetic act in a world where women are still often regarded as second-class citizens. It benefits the Church as women's lives experiences and bodies are used to proclaim and amplify the good news of Jesus Christ in diverse ways which reach more and different people with the Gospel. It encourages women and girls to be all they can be – there is research from the USA which shows that experiencing the leadership of a woman in church transforms girls' hopes and dreams, and can eliminate the gender gap between women and men in their personal and economic empowerment.<sup>3</sup>

As congregations consider their approach towards women being ordained, or leading a local church, there are questions they might like to pray about and discuss, including:

1. Since God has demonstrably gifted women with those things necessary to lead churches into spiritual and numerical growth, why would God not allow women to do just that, for the furtherance of the Kingdom?
2. What is the nature of tradition in your congregation? Which of our traditions are simply habits, or things we are used to, things which we may be called to set aside or change. And what forms our Tradition, those practices and beliefs which sustain us spiritually? Where does gender fit into that?
3. What damage, if any, occurs when women preach, teach or lead a in local church, and to whom? Conversely, what fruits are seen where women do lead? (Matthew 7:20) In light of this, how do we weigh the Biblical text and apply it?
4. In a world where women continue to be subjugated, can the Church hope to speak prophetically about dignity of all people, if women are excluded from ordination to priesthood and from leadership?

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<sup>2</sup> John Wijngaards, "It is time the Church recognised there is no justification to continue the ban on women's ministry" The Tablet 28 March 2024 (<https://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/2754/it-is-time-the-church-recognised-there-is-no-justification-to-continue-the-ban-on-women-s-ministry#:~:text=The%20Pontifical%20Biblical%20Commission%20concluded,on%20to%20the%20Theological%20Commission.> Accessed 4.9.24)

<sup>3</sup> Knoll BR, Bolin CJ *She Preached the Word: Women's Ordination in Modern America* Oxford: OUP 2018