

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Sheep without a Shepherd?

One of the side-effects of the decision to consecrate women as bishops in the Church of England has been the official recognition of the need to appoint an Evangelical bishop with a brief to minister to those who cannot accept female episcopal oversight. That some concessions would have to be made to the conservatives in the Church has been clear all along, and in that sense, the news that such an appointment will be made is not particularly surprising. The battles of the past few years over women bishops have been quite vicious at times, and honest observers have had to admit that the blame for this rests on the shoulders of the victors, who cannot (or will not) understand their opponents' point of view. Worse still, the victors have done their best to silence objectors altogether, even if the people concerned are in principle on their side. It is impossible to forget the attempt that was made to impeach Philip Giddings, the chairman of the House of Laity in General Synod, merely because he voted against the immediate introduction of women bishops. Dr Giddings supports the consecration of women but he thought that the provisions being offered to those who disagree with that were not generous enough, and when he was attacked for his principled stand it was clear to most people that things had gone too far. Even the archbishop of Canterbury was moved to comment that how we treat one another when differences divide us actually matters—the notion of 'good disagreement,' which he is now so keen to promote, can almost certainly be traced back to this unhappy episode.

What is surprising is that recognition should at last be given to Evangelical opponents of women's ordination and consecration, as opposed to Anglo-Catholics who hold the same position for very different reasons. It is not that such Evangelicals have been thin on the ground. For over twenty years they have lobbied for special provision but have been denied it. By rights, one of the three 'flying bishops' appointed to minister to dissenters should have been an Evangelical, but this has never happened and all the appointees have been Anglo-Catholics. That has made a number of Evangelicals reluctant to make use of them, with the result that it has been possible for the Church authorities to claim that there are not enough Evangelicals for such an appointment to be viable. It

also seems that some Anglo-Catholics have objected to the appointment of an Evangelical flying bishop because his unwillingness to wear eucharistic vestments would make it impossible for him to minister in their parishes, and that this has been accepted as a valid reason for not pursuing the matter any further.

Now, however, all that is about to change. The suffragan see of Maidstone in the diocese of Canterbury, which has been unfilled and dormant since 2008, is to be revived and set aside for an Evangelical candidate. It is possible that a name will have been announced before this issue of *Churchman* goes to press, but if not, we can assume that the selection process will be well underway by then. How widely Evangelical representatives will be consulted about this is impossible to say and may never be known, but it is safe to assume that others will be deeply involved in the appointment and that their voice will carry considerable weight. This matters, partly because Evangelicals have a well-founded suspicion of the church authorities who have not listened to them in the past, and partly because there are forces at work that would prefer to see this 'experiment' (as they think of it) fail. Women and the Church (WATCH) has already called the Maidstone decision 'divisive,' and as they are acknowledged experts in divisiveness, their opinion must be taken seriously. They will do everything they can to limit the new bishop's activities, and some diocesans may deny him the permission he will need to function in their jurisdiction. Whether he will ever be able to do anything beyond ordain and institute a small number of clergy here and there is a question that at least has to be asked, even if the answer turns out to be less gloomy than some might imagine. We must remember that Wallace Benn, the last Evangelical bishop, was undermined in his own diocese by people behind the scenes who wanted to discredit him, and there is no reason to think that the same tactic will not be tried again.

But however grave the threats from outside may be, the fundamental problem that the new bishop of Maidstone will have to face is not that there are those who object to the very idea of his appointment. Rather, it is that many Evangelicals have little use for bishops and would happily do without them. They accept an episcopal polity as a historical fact that they are prepared to live with, but because the hierarchy has seldom been sympathetic to them they keep their distance from it as much as they can. Bishops appear for confirmations and institutions, but most of the time Evangelical clergy get along quite nicely on their own. Over the years they have suffered episcopal heretics, high churchmen who do not like them, and even the occasional persecuting prelate, so the prospect of having an unacceptable woman in charge is not as daunting as it might appear at first sight. For many Evangelical incumbents, it will simply be one more reason for having little or nothing to do with their bishop, and on the few occasions when some interaction will be necessary, they will grit their

teeth and bear it as they have done for years. In these circumstances, persuading Evangelical lay people that they need a male-only bishop will be nigh on impossible, since lay people usually have even less to do with the episcopate than their clergy do. Of course there will be a few exceptions—there always are—but in the general run of things we can assume that the bishop of Maidstone will be unlikely to get many invitations to function outside the Canterbury diocese. A lot of his potential supporters will just shrug their shoulders and reckon that the trouble and expense of bringing him in will not be worth it.

The truth is that if an Evangelical flying bishop confines himself to his job description, he is unlikely to appeal much to the constituency he is appointed to serve. Evangelicals respect leaders who have proved themselves on the mission field, whether that is overseas, in some domestic parachurch ministry or in the local parish. A proven record of church growth matters to them, and if there is none to point to, the man's qualifications for episcopal office will be called into question. Evangelicals tolerate theologians to some extent but do not really trust them because they are not evangelists, and they tend to think that church administration should be left to lay people whenever possible. Much of what a bishop does is of little interest to them and men who have a successful evangelistic ministry will not want to give that up for what they see as a mere desk job. They may even suspect that someone who accepts such an episcopal appointment has failed in the parish (or equivalent) and is therefore unsuitable for the role he is being asked to assume.

If the new bishop of Maidstone is to have any credibility among Evangelicals he will have to show that he is an effective preacher and evangelist. Of course we cannot expect that his consecration by the archbishop of Canterbury will be enough to give him those gifts if he has shown no sign of possessing them already, so what we are really looking for is a prominent Evangelical clergyman who is still young enough to give episcopacy a reasonable go. He will also have to be someone who can command the respect of the different Evangelical tribes – Reform, Alpha, New Wine, Proclamation Trust, and so on. Obviously he will not appeal equally to all of them, but at least he should not be so closely connected to one constituency as to alienate the others. That in itself would be a major accomplishment, and only a man with a clear focus on the Gospel and its proclamation will be able to achieve it. Such people exist, but will they be tempted to leave the post they are in for the uncertainties of a new position whose remit is undefined and whose very existence remains precarious?

Perhaps the most important qualification for the new bishop of Maidstone is that he must have clear pastoral gifts. The clergy today are under enormous pressure and are in great need of spiritual support. Most bishops are nice enough people but few really excel in this area. Can a

bishop of Maidstone, whose brief will extend to the whole of England, visit and encourage lonely and disheartened vicars in obscure places? Will he be the kind of person that such clergy believe that they can turn to because they think that he is never too busy to meet and pray with them? That is a tall order, but in the end it may be the factor that will decide whether an openly Evangelical bishop is worth having or not.

It will also be very important for the new bishop of Maidstone to have a firm grasp of the Christian faith and a conviction of its truth that is too deep to be shaken by events. He will be expected to speak out against the homosexual agenda, for example, but what would happen if his son suddenly announced that he was gay? Would he be as firmly against divorce and remarriage if that were to happen to his daughter? Far too many Christian leaders fall in this way, and it would be foolish to suppose that an Evangelical bishop would escape the pressures of the world, particularly if they touch him through his family. On the contrary, he is more likely than most to become a target for such attacks because if he should succumb, his failure would be spectacular. It would do just the sort of damage that the enemies of this whole project are looking for and that would give them the perfect excuse to wind it up. The recent experience of the Anglo-Catholic bishop of Fulham should serve as a warning here. A divorced man who decided (and received permission) to remarry during his spouse's lifetime was repudiated by many in his own constituency because his action betrayed their principles, and in the end he was forced to stand down. Evangelicals cannot afford that kind of thing, but the danger that something like it might happen must not be discounted.

It is easy to sound too negative about the prospects that an incoming bishop of Maidstone will face, but it is wise to consider the worst case scenario first, if only to be sure to guard against it. Not the least of the new bishop's challenges will be to find and prepare potential successors. He will not serve for very long, and if his kind of ministry is to continue, there will have to be men who can take on the task when the time comes. Right now there may be a surge of support for opponents of women's ordination, but what will happen when the presenting issues change and new challenges present themselves? Where will the next generation of leaders come from and what will they look like? Will they remain faithful to the principles that have guided the men and women who have struggled to get this appointment recognised, or will they move off in other directions and leave their first love behind? That is essentially what happened to many of those who were expected to succeed men like John Stott and Jim Packer but who failed to wear the mantle of those men with any distinction—or conviction. A generation of potential leaders was lost to the Evangelical cause, and only now are we beginning to pick up the pieces and rebuild.

There are plenty of good clergymen in the Church and we must be grateful for them, but real leaders seem to be thin on the ground. Could the new bishop of Maidstone fill that role? The possibility should not be discounted, but it should not be taken for granted either. The reality is that we are facing a dearth of leadership in many walks of life—just look at our politicians if you doubt this—but that episcopacy is only justified if it provides that essential quality. The first specifically Evangelical bishop will have to earn his spurs, but will he be able to prepare the way for what will happen after his retirement? Even more challenging—will he be able to create the sense of need that might lead to the creation of other designated Evangelical bishoprics elsewhere? The real achievement of the bishop of Maidstone will only become visible if and when people up and down the country start to demand someone like him for themselves. If that happens, we shall know that the ‘experiment’ has succeeded and that the promise of an Evangelical bishop has not been hollow.

Until then, the jury will be out. Evangelicals in the Church of England are like sheep without a shepherd. ‘Do they need one?’ many will ask. Can we not carry on as we have always done? Perhaps we can. Will we be given a shepherd whom we shall come to regret, rather in the way that Israel demanded a king but were then let down by the inadequacies of Saul? That too, is possible. The future remains hidden from our eyes, but those of us who care about the witness of the Gospel in this land – and that, after all, is ultimately what the appointment of the new bishop of Maidstone is about—cannot be indifferent when a chance has been given for a new opening to proclaim the Word of salvation. That is what makes Evangelicals the people they are, and it is with that purpose in mind, and not because of some misplaced desire for a cheap victory in ecclesiastical politics, that we look forward to welcoming the new appointment and to praying for the man chosen to fill the post, that he may be given the grace to accomplish the formidable tasks that await him.

GERALD BRAY