

# Lay Presidency at the Lord's Supper

(A report from the Diocesan Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.)

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## 1. A Brief History

- 1.1 In 1983 the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney received a report from the Diocesan Doctrine Commission which was a response to the General Synod Doctrine Commission Report, *Towards a Theology of Ordination*. The Sydney report drew the following conclusion –

"Since the [General Synod] Report, in our judgement, is in error regarding (a) 'the nature of ministerial priesthood', it can also be shown its conclusions are incorrect regarding (b) 'the relationship between ordination and presidency at the Holy Communion', (c) 'lay presidency at the Holy Communion', and (d) indelibility."

The report then examined the question of lay presidency at the Lord's Supper in the light of Biblical, historical, theological and contemporary considerations. This part of the report concluded –

"If the Christians of the sixteenth century rediscovered [the] biblical doctrine of the *Priesthood* of all believers, Christians of the twentieth century are rediscovering the *Ministry* of all believers. Fundamental to that ministry of all believers is the word-ministry of the pastors and teachers in the congregation which equips the other members for their ministries (Eph. 4: 11-12). One of these ministries is leadership to be exercised by those members whose gifts of experience and maturity commend them to the congregation. Presiding at the Eucharist is a proper expression of such gifts, and one which is thoroughly in keeping with the 'body members' gifts' pictures of church life within the New Testament."

- 1.2 The 1983 Synod resolved (37/83) that a committee be set up –

"to explore the desirability and constitutional aspects of lay presidency at the Holy Communion."

- 1.3 1985 Synod received the report of the committee which affirmed the desirability of lay presidency at Lord's Supper in certain circumstances, and noted that –

"A person should not be given authority to preside at the Lord's Supper unless he or she is authorised to preach *and vice versa*." (emphasis added)

and recommended alterations to the Deaconesses, Readers and Other Lay Persons Ordinance 1981 to give effect to the proposal.

- 1.4 That Synod resolved (18/85) that it –

"endorses the principle of lay presidency and requests the Standing Committee to investigate ways the possible legal and other difficulties in enacting this principle could be overcome."

- 1.5 The 1986 Synod received the report of the committee which stated –

"the committee accepts that there exist no doctrinal objections to lay presidency in the context contemplated by Synod. This context includes the authorisation by the bishop of suitable and duly prepared persons in situations where the regular ministry in the local congregation of an episcopally ordained priest is not available. The reason for stressing this context is that we see difficulties if lay presidency became the norm as there are some who would argue that it could alter the role of the priest whom they would see as a focus of leadership and unity."

The report further stated –

"We do not think that there would be a threat to the concept of the three orders if the Church allowed lay presidency as contemplated."

"The majority of the committee believes that lay presidency as contemplated does not contravene any 'principle of worship' of the Book of Common Prayer envisaged in Section 4 of the 1961 Constitution."

- 1.6 The 1987 Synod received the report of a Legal Committee which declared –

"There is no principle of worship involved, nor any principle of doctrine, in having a lay president ... in situations where the rector (archdeacon or bishop) is obviously the president of the congregation, but the particular service, at the president's direction, is carried out by a lay person."

"... a majority of the members ... are of the view that there is no legal impediment to lay presidency ... and that the view of the 1985 committee and the majority of the 1986 committee is correct in law." (There was a minority report.)

1.7 In 1992 the Synod referred to Standing Committee a notice of motion –

"In the light of Synod resolution 18/85 endorsing the principle of lay presidency and the further report to the 1987 Synod, Standing Committee is requested to bring to the next session of Synod legislation to enable lay persons to preside at the Lord's Supper."

1.8 In 1993 Standing Committee referred to the Doctrine Commission for its comment the above notice of motion.

## 2. Theological Assumptions

2.1 The Doctrine Commission accepts the finding of the 1983 report that the arguments against lay presidency at the Lord's Supper, such as those expressed in the General Synod Doctrine Commission Report *Towards a Theology of Ordination*, are incorrect, and that "there is no Scriptural or doctrinal barrier to lay presidency".

2.2 Moreover there do exist positive reasons, theological, historical and practical, for allowing lay presidency at the Lord's Supper.

- (a) The welcome development of lay preaching ministry over many years has resulted in a distortion of our Anglican order which has, in effect, elevated the Sacrament above the Word in that those authorised to preach are not necessarily authorised to preside (note the words "vice versa" in the 1985 report quoted above). To preserve the balance of Anglican order there is a need for lay ministry of the Sacrament to develop in a way corresponding to lay ministry of the Word.
- (b) On the grounds that Jesus Christ alone was the proper *sacramentum* given us by God (1 Tim 2:3-7; 3: 14-16), the 16th century Reformers worked to heal the split between Word and Sacrament endemic to medieval theology and practice. Anglican writers of the period when the formularies were being composed "regarded the ministry of the word and that of the two sacraments as closely bound up together, and were, generally speaking, entirely free from those sacerdotal conceptions which put the ministry of the eucharist in a class by itself"<sup>1</sup> While the question of lay presidency at the Lord's Supper hardly arose in this period, this was because lay ministry was generally only envisaged in cases of necessity or "highly remote theory".<sup>2</sup> Normally a layman could neither preach nor administer the sacraments. Where opposition to lay presidency was expressed, it was in terms of the general argument propounded by Calvin, which was based on the concept of those "called and authorised" to each and administer the sacraments.<sup>3</sup> The main stream of Anglican writers did not apply Calvin's argument narrowly, as can be seen in their views of lay baptism, and, at least theoretically, of lay preaching. The development of Anglican lay ministry generally in more recent times has likewise not accepted a restricted application of Calvin's principles of order to modern church life. We have recognised that lay people too may be "called and authorised" for various ministries. However the separation we now see between preaching and sacraments was inconceivable to the Reformers. This separation has developed in the climate created in Anglicanism by the theology of the 19th century Tractarian movement which reverted to pre-Reformation views of Church and ministry.<sup>4</sup>
- (c) It follows that the role of presiding at the Lord's Supper should not be elevated above the role of presiding when the congregation of God's people gathers for prayer and the hearing of God's Word. This is not a diminution of the importance of the Lord's Supper: it is, rather, a recognition of the importance of every gathering of God's household. At the centre of every such assembly must be the word of Christ, the gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified. We have rightly recognised that the headship of Christ over his household allows for any suitably mature and gifted member of the congregation to be authorised to preside at Morning and Evening Prayer (see the conclusion to the 1983 Doctrine Commission Report, 1.1 above). It follows that the prohibition of lay presidency at the Lord's Supper is today a serious inconsistency, which has distorted Anglican order as envisaged in our formularies (see (d) below).
- (d) The anomaly of churches, schools, colleges which have regular Anglican ministry, but must bring in an outside priest on certain occasions in order to conduct the Lord's Supper suggests the "Mass priest" concept rightly rejected by our forebears.
- (e) When lay people are permitted to share in every form of ministry except one in the regular meetings of the congregation, except one, the impression can be given that the prohibited thing is the essence of ordained ministry. A sacerdotal view of the priesthood is difficult to avoid. Again this is a distortion of Anglican order due to the welcome developments in lay ministry which have not however been matched in the ministry of the Sacraments.

## 3. Ordering Ministry in the New Testament

3.1 Ministry is exercised in the New Testament by two principles –

- (a) A "charismatic" principle whereby the members of a congregation exercise various and diverse gifts for its edification (e.g. 1 Cor 12:4-13; 14:1-38; Rom 12:3-8).
- (b) An "official recognition" principle whereby some persons called "elders"/"bishops" and "deacons" appear to have had an accepted "role" or "office" within congregations (e.g. Acts 14:23; 15:2; 20:17, 28; 21:18; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1-13; 5:17-22; Tit 1:5-9; Ja 5:14; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:1-4; 2 Jn 1; 3 Jn 1; (cf. e.g. Rev 4:10)).

These "elders"/"bishops" are to be found across the New Testament writers - Paul, Peter, James, John, Luke-Acts - and must be regarded as well established roles within the New Testament.

Other references include "those who lead", "him who catechises", "pastor-teachers", "teacher", "those who are ... over you in the Lord" (Heb 13:7; Gal 6:6; Eph 4:11; Ja 3:1; 1 Thess 5:12).

Hints of the principle of "official recognition" are seen in the practice of "the laying on of hands" (e.g. Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tim 1: 18; 4: 14; 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6) and the show of hands/voting hence electing (Acts 14:23; cf. 2 Cor 8: 19).

- 3.2 There appears to be considerable fluidity implied between "charismatic" and "official recognition" in the New Testament references; clear cut definitions do not easily emerge from the relevant texts.
- 3.3 Nonetheless it seems likely that the "official recognition" principle applied where ministry was exercised in the congregation on an ongoing basis, including where a minister was remunerated (Gal 6:6; 1 Tim 5: 17). This may account for the weight given in the New Testament to qualifications for "elders"/"bishops" and "deacons" (1 Tim 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-9) and the duties of "elders" (1 Pet 5:1-4; Acts 20: 17-36).
- 3.4 It should be further noted that we have no New Testament statements as to who "presided" at the Lord's Supper. The question of Lay Presidency at the Lord's Supper today involves more than the direct application of explicit New Testament teaching to modern church life.
- 3.5 The Doctrine Commission affirms a high view of the Lord's Supper and the presidency at the supper. It is a *koinonia* in the blood of Christ/the body of Christ; a sharing in the cup of the Lord/the table of the Lord. In hearing watching and eating/drinking "in remembrance" of the Lord, his people participate in an eschatological occasion, which to misuse is to profane the body and blood of the Lord and risk illness or even death (see 1 Corinthians 10-11).

#### **4. Anglican Order**

- 4.1 Questions of order in Christian ministry and church life are often not settled by direct Biblical prescriptions, and a certain liberty is recognised in such matters (Article 20). However order must reflect and express sound theology. The biblical doctrines of justification by faith alone, of the atoning death of Christ, and of the Word of God led to the rejection of sacerdotalism and insistence on the unity of word and sacrament seen in the ordering of ministry in the Book of Common Prayer and The Thirty Nine Articles (e.g. Articles 2, 6, 11, 19, 25 - 31).
- 4.2 The Anglican formularies, as defined by the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty Nine Articles –
  - (a) joined together word and sacrament, and
  - (b) made the ministry of the sacraments secondary to (and dependent upon?) the ministry of the word.
- 4.3 In the Ordination of Priests the Bishop "shall deliver to every one of them ..., the Bible" and say –

"Take thou authority to preach the Word of God, and to minister the Holy Sacraments in the Congregation where thou shall be lawfully appointed thereunto."

A Priest is ordained –
  - (a) to "preach", and also
  - (b) to "minister the Holy Sacraments in the Congregation."
- 4.4 On the other hand the Deacon is handed only the New Testament and given "Authority to read the Gospel in the Church of God, and to preach the same," if he is "thereto licensed by the Bishop". This is a diminished authority as compared to the Priest who is given a Bible and who solemnly agrees to "teach the people committed to [his] Cure and Charge." The difference between Priest and Deacon in the Ordinal is seen most clearly in terms of the responsibility and authority taken by the former for "the Congregation where [he] shall be lawfully appointed thereunto", rather than in terms of specific actions he is authorised to perform. The Deacon is to assist the Priest in Word and Sacrament. (It therefore appears to be inconsistent that a Deacon may in the absence of the Priest baptise and preach (if admitted thereto by the Bishop) and yet have no authority to preside at the Lord's table.) See the Doctrine Commission's paper on Diaconal Presidency.
- 4.5 According to the Ordinal, and the New Testament which in this respect it accurately reflects, the priest/presbyter's identity consists in the responsibility he takes for "the people committed to your charge", "all within your care", "the flock of Christ", "those who are committed to your care". The authority he takes for this task is the authority "to preach the word of God, and to administer the holy sacraments in the congregation". Ordination is therefore more than a license to perform certain actions (preach, administer). Ordination confers responsibility for and authority in the congregation.
- 4.6 In our received order, therefore, on the one hand we reject the notion of a sacerdotal priesthood, and on the other hand we do not separate the ministry of word and sacrament; those licensed to preach also preside at the table; those who preside also preach. This principle was recognised in the 1985 Report (#7).
- 4.7 However with the subsequent development of lay ministry of the Word in the Anglican Church our inherited order has been distorted. We now have many persons licensed to preach who are not permitted to preside at the Lord's Supper.
- 4.8 It is important to note that while the principle of not separating Word and Sacrament may have been expressed in the Ordinal by authorising the one person to perform both functions, the same principle is also expressed liturgically in the Lord's Supper in the Book of Common Prayer, where the Sacrament must be accompanied by a sermon. It is relevant to note that this is a concept applied to the theology of the Sacraments (i.e. the Sacrament must be accompanied by the Word preached), but not to the theology of the Word (i.e. the Word need not be accompanied by the Sacrament).
- 4.9 Although the situation may not have been envisaged in the 16th century, the principle of the unity of Word and Sacrament does not seem to be compromised simply by virtue of their being conducted by different persons. When one priest presides at the Lord's Supper while another priest preaches the sermon (a common Anglican

practice), or when a lay person reads the Bible in the Lord's Supper service, it would be difficult to argue that Word and Sacrament had thereby been separated.

- 4.10 To preside at the Lord's Supper one would need to be a person of good repute, respected in the congregation, a mature Christian with an adequate grasp of Christian truth and able to lead the service acceptably. But the question arises whether only those authorised to preach should be authorised to preside. Here the members of the Commission took different views.
- 4.11 Some held that the qualifications for presiding at the Lord's Supper should be precisely the same as the qualifications for presiding at Morning or Evening Prayer (see 2.2(c) above). To preach the Word, one needs at least those qualifications, but preaching has additional demands, and requires additional gifts. Therefore it seems reasonable to say that anyone who is authorised to preach, should also be authorised to preside, but, at least in principle, some may be authorised to preside who should not be authorised to preach. In other words anyone who is competent to preach will be competent to preside, but not necessarily vice versa. Our current practice is the reverse of this.
- 4.12 Others took the view that presiding at the Lord's table should be limited to those licensed to preach. This view maintains that since in the Ordinal authority "to minister the Holy Sacraments" is secondary to (and dependent upon) authorisation "to preach the Word of God" in the congregation (see 4.1,2 above), the same principle should apply to lay presidency. A high view of the Lord's Supper (see 3.5) demands a high view of those qualified to preside at the meal on behalf of the congregation. Furthermore, in the absence of the rector the possible need for the president to exercise discretion and discipline of communicants, as envisaged by our Order, means that the president must be of sufficient maturity and standing in the congregation. Since the teaching of the Word should only be permitted to individuals on the most stringent of qualifications, it is held that the Lord's Supper and the presidency at the Lord's Supper is best secured by requiring that only those who are authorised to teach should be authorised to preside.
- 4.13 In any case the Doctrine Commission agrees that the theological principles behind the ordering of ministry in the Anglican formularies have the following implications.
- (a) Those authorised to preach should be authorised to preside at the Lord's Supper.
  - (b) Since there should be no distinction between qualifications required to preside at the Lord's Supper and qualifications required to preside at Morning or Evening Prayer, the present requirements for presiding at Morning and Evening Prayer may need to be reconsidered.

## **5. Qualifications**

- 5.1 Lay persons who are to be authorised to preside at the Lord's Supper (and Morning and Evening Prayer) should have demonstrated educational, theological, personal and pastoral fitness to do so. Appropriate externally established educational and personal qualifications for such ministry are desirable.

## **6. Safeguards**

- 6.1 To protect congregations from the imposition of persons unsuited for this task it is desirable that –
- (a) lay persons who will preside must first be approved by
    - (i) nomination by the incumbent, and
    - (ii) resolution of the Parish Council; and
  - (b) a lay person may not preside at the Lord's Supper unless licensed to do so by the Archbishop or Assistant Bishop.

## **7. Some Implications of Lay Presidency**

- 7.1 Some concern was expressed in the 1986 report that –
- "... we can see difficulties if lay presidency became the norm as there are some who would argue that it could alter the role of the priest whom they would see as a focus of leadership and unity."
- It is unlikely that lay presidency will become the "norm" (in the sense of more usual than clergy presiding) any more than lay preaching has. On the other hand the suggestion that lay presidency should be perceived as a departure from "the norm" (in the sense that it should be thought of as "abnormal") must be opposed on theological grounds. Therefore to allow lay presidency only "where the regular ministry in the local congregation of an episcopally ordained priest is not available" (as envisaged in the 1986 report) is unacceptable, unless we are going to insist on the same principle for lay preaching, and for lay presiding at Morning and Evening Prayer. The position expressed in the 1987 report (which is consistent with the 1983 report) is preferable. That report declared there to be no problem with a lay president "in situations where the rector (archdeacon or bishop) is obviously the president of the congregation, but the particular service, at the president's direction, is carried out by a lay person".
- 7.2 The introduction of lay presidency must not be interpreted as reflecting a low view of the Lord's Supper, but rather of a high view of the ministry of lay people.
- 7.3 Our current practice encourages both a perception of a "Mass Priest" when a congregation brings in an outside priest in order to share the Lord's Supper, and a sacerdotal view of the priesthood, when the one thing that only the priest can do is preside at the Sacrament. The introduction of lay presidency is bound to diminish both of these aberrations of Anglican polity.
- 7.4 To this point the paper has discussed the question of lay Presidency without specific gender reference. In the light of contemporary debates, it is appropriate to ask how the proposal to allow lay presidency applies to the general

question of how women may appropriately exercise their ministries. Is there any barrier to lay women presiding at the Lord's Supper? If there is no difficulty with lay women taking this ministry, it may be asked what further barrier remains to the ordination of women to the priesthood?

- (a) On biblical and theological grounds the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney has declined to ordain women to the priesthood. These grounds have included New Testament texts indicating that gender does make a difference to human relationships and therefore to ministry. Arguments against the ordination of women have not been based on a supposed sacramental function of the priest, or the view that women are excluded from performing such a function for some reason, but on the New Testament concept of "headship" in the family and the church, and on New Testament texts based on this or a related concept. Anglican priesthood, as defined by the Ordinal has to do with responsibility for, and therefore authority within, the congregation (the "cure of souls"), not with capacity to dispense sacramental grace.
- (b) If gender makes a difference to ministry, then (in addition to the ordination question) it is right to ask whether lay presidency is equally appropriate for both lay women and lay men. This question arises in connection with lay preaching as well lay preaching and lay presidency for women may not be appropriate in all circumstances, but would be appropriate in many contexts. The arguments of this paper would lead to the conclusion that it is appropriate for lay women to preside at the Lord's Supper only in those circumstances in which it is theologically and biblically appropriate for lay women to preach.

## 8. Conclusion

- 8.1 In summary, there are no sound doctrinal objections to, and there are significant doctrinal reasons for, lay presidency at the Lord's Supper. There are also sound reasons based on our received Anglican order for allowing lay presidency. In the light of this the continued prohibition of lay presidency at the Lord's Supper does not seem justifiable theologically. Since church practice ought to conform to sound doctrine, practical problems related to the introduction of lay presidency ought to be dealt with, but should not constitute an obstacle to reform motivated by theological truth.

For and on behalf of the Diocesan Doctrine  
Commission of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney

P.W. BARNETT  
*Chairman*

27 September 1993

## Endnotes

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- 1 R.T. Beckwith, *Priesthood and Sacraments*, Latimer Monographs 1 (1964), pp. 44.
  - 2 C. Buchanan, Some Anglican Historical Perspectives on T. Lloyd, *Lay Presidency at the Eucharist?*, Grove Booklet 9 (1977), p. 12.
  - 3 Cf. C.J. Cocksworth, *Evangelical Eucharistic Thought in the Church of England* (1993), pp. 222-4.
  - 4 Cf. Buchanan, p. 13.