Chapter 8: a case study

It is one thing to come to certain theoretical conclusions. It is another matter to test those conclusions in terms of practical experience, which is what this chapter tries to do. This chapter is shorter and more open-ended than the others: it presents a transcript of an interview with an Anglican bishop who is a woman and attempts to relate some arguments of this thesis to inferences drawn from the interview. ¹

The aim of the interview was not to canvas arguments for or against female bishops in the Anglican Church but to consider the symbolic role of the bishop and how being a woman might affect the role. The interview focussed on key questions which appear below in bold type. The bishop’s responses are summarized in italics. I conclude with my analysis of the bishop’s responses.

- **How would you understand the symbolic role of a bishop in the Anglican Church?**

  *The bishop to me, traditionally, has been the symbol or the focus of unity within the church. The bishop has a seat or a cathedra in the cathedral, and that symbolizes that each person is joining together in the focus of unity for that group of people, parishes and agencies within a particular geographic area. (The main bishops are the diocesan bishops who are in control of each of the dioceses in Australia. And then within certain places there are also assistant bishops and I’m one of those.)*

- **What is being symbolized in that role?**

  *A bishop has a crosier or a shepherd’s crook and that is a very powerful symbol of where Jesus said in the New Testament: ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep’. This is the image of the shepherd going out, because in those days you used to have the sheep at night in a fold to keep them safe and, if a sheep was lost then the shepherd would go out and use the crook with its bent top to reach down and get hold of the sheep*

¹ Due to lack of space, it is impossible to do more than present a sketch of issues arising from a lengthy conversation. For clarity’s sake I have not followed the exact sequence of what was said in the interview but have attempted to do justice to the bishop’s overall responses to my questions.
that might be caught in a rock or a ravine or get it away from the wild animals and safely back.

- **How does being a woman affect the episcopal dimension of your ministry in a symbolic sense?**

  At a very basic level people are saying, “What do we call you? Someone said, “Can we call you Your Grace?” And I said, “If you want to, you can. You can call me Bishop B. [i.e. first name]. You can call me Bishop D. [i.e. surname]. You can call me B. [i.e. just by first name] if you want to but usually, in a formal context, I prefer something that indicates I’m the Bishop, as a sign of respect and as a symbol of the unity.” For example, when we take someone new into a parish, they say, “B., bishop in the Church of God, we present to you etc.” So it’s my role, my symbol there, of being the person representing the wider church. I think naming is an important thing to try and work through for women: what they’re going to call us and what they’re happy to, because it’s not something they’ve had to deal with before. A lot of people dealt with that when women became priests because a lot of people in the more High Church background say ‘Father’ like ‘Father Peter’ or ‘Father Philip’ or ‘Father John’, and some of them laugh and say ‘Father B.’. Then they say ‘Mother B.’ and I say, “No. I’m not that.” And then I became a canon so they called me ‘Canon B.’ or ‘Vicar’ if they were in my parish. There’s still this whole issue of what do we represent and what do they call us?

  At the moment [the episcopal dimension] affects us because we’re pioneers. So still, wherever we go, people are surprised, welcoming, open, wanting to know what difference being a bishop makes. And that puts the pressure on us to behave and to act and to do something in a way that’s going to be positive, hopefully, and not negative. I think for the younger women coming through, as in any role with something happening for the first time, we’ve kind of broken through various barriers and they’re pushing harder for going further than we dared to go.

  But being a woman and a bishop does raise a big issue because, if the bishop is a symbol of unity, because of who I am and because I’m female, I’m a symbol of disunity for a very small minority of people. Some people who are from a more evangelical perspective will say, “The bishop is someone who’s just doing administration. They’re not really in spiritual leadership over us.” So within the Anglican Church there’s all different ways of looking at what the bishop is, which affects how they rationalize it. That’s to me a real sadness that women should be a symbol of unity but we’re not, with some people. Some probably will say, “I don’t want to take a parish in Bishop B.’s area because I don’t think it’s right to have a woman who’s bishop”. They haven’t said that to me yet. But I have a feeling there are some of them around. But there are others around who are quite happy to have me and who, I thought, may not. So that’s a symbol of disunity or uncertainty of unity.
• How do you see a gender inclusive episcopate from a symbolic point of view?

I think we’re still working out what it means to have a woman who is there, dressed as a bishop and acting as a bishop. What does it mean to people symbolically and I think it does mean something different. The most important thing that I can think of is that it shows at least half, or probably two thirds of the people in the church that there is a possibility that women can have this role, that it’s no longer restricted to men, it’s open now to men and women. And that opens up great possibilities.

Someone came up to me and said, “Oh I remember you. You’re the Vicar of Dibley.” That show made an incredible impact, even though it’s a bit over the top. The whole thing just helped people realize that there could be a woman who was up there being the Vicar. And that just brought down a lot of barriers. So whether that’s symbolic – I think she might be a real symbol. It just helped break down the stereotype.

The thing that will take a long time is for a woman to be in charge of a diocese. I know some people got very worried that the woman might be bearing a child or be a mother and breast-feeding, and what would that mean: how was her role in leading the Eucharist in some way affected by the fact she was a woman, that her body was doing things that our Lord didn’t do? That leads right back to the image, what does it mean to be part of the image of God.

• Can you give a positive example of the different dimension offered by the inclusion of women in the episcopacy?

Looking at what does it mean to be a woman in this position, a lot of us are still working that out. I think we can bring a different way of looking at things. And I don’t want to say that all men and all women are the same. But I think we do have different ways of doing things. For myself, I know that I’m far more relational than some of the other bishops. I’m very much interested in where people are and how they’re reacting to a situation and their emotional and spiritual well-being. I’m concerned for that as well as for getting results. And again, a lot of men are like that too but I think I do that in a different way.

• What role does interaction between male and female in the episcopate have, in symbolic terms?

That’s something that I’m still very much exploring. It changes the dynamics to start with. When we [bishops] go away for a retreat, now I go into one unit and the guys go into another unit. And now that there are women as part of the group, it changes the dynamics. But to me, the symbolism is that it’s male and female. God created us male and female. And that we can work together. And we represent the wholeness of God’s people and not just half of God’s people.
• What symbolic implications do you see for men and women in general, and for the Christian community in particular, from the admission of women to the episcopate?

What we really want to do is to encourage people to see that there can be leaders that are both men and women, who can work together for the fullness of what it means to be members of Christ in the church: that we, by the roles we do, can encourage and enhance other women and men to see more of what Christianity is like by modelling and encouraging them to see that God has given gifts to all people, men and women. I think that’s really important to me.

I think, for many, it is a feeling of satisfaction and joy that they now can have men and women representing them at all levels of governance within the church. Again, I don’t know how to translate that into symbolism. And most people are excited. Most people really want to see me wearing my episcopal gear and doing my episcopal things. I just took a Guide service today for the centenary of Guiding. I used to be a Guide. And there was a palpable feeling amongst the older women that ‘isn’t this fantastic to have a woman bishop who’s been influenced by her own Guiding background to be one of the leaders in the church now’. So it was just a very positive experience.

• What does this symbolize beyond cultural emancipation?

I’ve thought about the whole issue of subordinationism and equality of the Godhead and I’m certainly very much of the feeling that it’s not God the Father on top of or above God the Son, above the Holy Spirit. To me, it’s male and female and the fact that we are complementary, not in the terms that the evangelicals are using now, but that we are together made in the image of God. I just think that’s vital. And that man was not sufficient by himself. He wanted to have someone who was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. And I think by having leaders who are both male and female that we are then in a way imitating, and I know we can’t use human language to explain the Godhead fully, but that we are then more like the Godhead in that there is a relationship that is there between us, which is not one dominant over the other but creative together and together enjoying relationship with God. That’s my understanding.

I’m not trying to say we want to be the same as the guys or we want to take over from the guys but that, within the Godhead, we see the complementarity there, with the Creator, the Redeemer, the Sanctifier and that we can have that in a human dimension and also, as you talk about, the human-divine. There’s the link that way as well as the link within us.

You’ve helped me to try and work out what does it mean with symbolism. I think we’ve still got a long way to go.
An analysis of the bishop’s responses

Much of what the bishop said about symbolic significance applies to the broader question of women in church leadership rather than specifically to how being a woman affects the episcopal dimension of ministry. This indicates to me that the general question of symbolic role in terms of women in church leadership is prior to consideration of how the question affects a specific ecclesiastical position. Nevertheless, the symbolic role of the bishop appears to highlight the importance of symbolism.

The idea of the bishop as a symbol of unity for a geographical area of the Anglican Church seems in line with a sensed solidarity with a key personage (similar, although on a different level, to Paul Ricoeur’s depiction of Adam as ‘an exemplary man, an Anthropos … who symbolically stands for the concrete universal of human experience’).\(^2\) The focus, in this sense, is on the bishop. The shepherd’s crook would indicate that the bishop carries spiritual authority in a delegated sense, since it is based on the notion of Jesus as the shepherd of the sheep. This kind of symbolism is like that of a candle pointing to Jesus as the light of the world. The focus then is not so much the bishop but the higher reality to which he or she points.

The idea of ‘breaking barriers’ and providing a role model for others would not in itself specify symbolic meaning beyond cultural emancipation. But, for a female bishop, the function as female role model is combined with the bishop’s

---

\(^2\) See Charles E. Reagan & David Stewart (ed.), The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, p. 41. See also Chapter 7, Section D.
role as a key personage offering a focus for others. The bishop’s role as a symbol of unity for a region goes beyond culture in also symbolizing the shepherding role of Christ. In this regard, the bishop drew attention to a negative symbolic consequence of women’s inclusion in the episcopacy: female bishops are a symbol of disunity for some members of the Anglican Church. I would assess this negative consequence as due to a sense of distance from, rather solidarity with, a key personage. For some, a sense of distance may be ‘rationalized’ away rather than fully analysed: a notion that the bishop is someone who’s just doing administration and is not really in spiritual leadership over the people runs counter to the bishop’s shepherding role. Such rationalizing would indicate a loss of symbolic function in the bishop’s role.

The bishop emphasized the importance of a gender inclusive episcopate representing the wholeness of the people of God and went on to outline how this might represent interpersonal relations in the Godhead: male and female working together in the episcopate points to the unity and ‘complementary’ nature of the Trinity. In describing the *imago Dei*, the bishop connected Genesis 1: 26-27 with the narrative of the man and the woman in Genesis 2 in the welcome arrival of the woman who was bone of the man’s bone and flesh of his flesh. The man, she said, was not sufficient for himself; he wanted the woman. But she was not the same as him.

The bishop referred to a gender-related distinction in ways of doing things that seems to go beyond individual differences. She stated that female bishops are ‘not the same as the guys’ but her argument for a gender-inclusive episcopate
representing the Trinitarian Godhead is not developed in terms of gender
difference. Nevertheless, the bishop’s responses raise the question, explored in
this thesis, of how gender difference accords with the *imago Dei* and what this
means for women in particular.