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Church of England faces backlash over rejecting women bishops

by Trevor Grundy by Religion News Service

Canterbury, England — When the Church of England scuttled plans to allow women bishops Nov. 20, incoming Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby called it "a very grim day for women and their supporters."

Now, that grim day is turning into a church-state nightmare for Britain's established church.

On Monday, *The Times* of London quoted from a leaked memo to church leaders from William Fittall, secretary general of the General Synod, who called the public and political fallout "severe."

After the unexpected defeat, the church said the process to allow women bishops would need to begin anew, and couldn't start again until a new General Synod is seated in 2015.

According to *The Times*, Fittall's memo outlined a plan that could lead to simpler legislation, such as a clause to consecrate women bishops with no provision for opponents. That measure could be put to the current synod when it meets again at the University of York next July.

"Parliament is impatient," Fittall warned. "Unless the Church of England can show very quickly that it's capable of sorting itself out, we shall be into a major constitutional crisis in Church-State relations, the outcome of which cannot be predicted with confidence."

A former archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, upped the ante when he called on church leaders to "rip up its rule book" and speed through the introduction of women bishops. He said it was "ridiculous" to assume that the General Synod could not reconsider women bishops until 2015.

A full 42 of the 44 dioceses of the church voted for legislation that would have made women bishops next year. There are 3,600 ordained women in the Church of England and 37 female bishops in the worldwide Anglican Communion, including Africa's first Anglican woman bishop, Ellinah Wamukoya of Swaziland, who was consecrated five days before the defeat in Britain.

Meantime, Prime Minister David Cameron has warned the church to think again -- and fast -- about its "very sad" rejection of women bishops.

Chris Bryant, a Labour member of Parliament and former Anglican vicar, has proposed stripping the church's exemption from the Equality Act of 2010, which prohibits gender-based discrimination. Bryant has also proposed denying seats to the 26 bishops who sit as "Lords Spiritual" in the House of Lords until the church changes its position on women bishops.

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