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Church of England votes for women bishops; move seen as ecumenical snag

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The General Synod of the Church of England voted Monday to authorize the ordination of women as bishops and approved motions pledging to respect and work with people who believe that, theologically, the vote was a mistake.

Before the vote, Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury, spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion, told the synod that "to pass this legislation is to commit ourselves to an adventure in faith and hope. Like all adventures, it carries dangers ... uncertainties and for success will require integrity and courage."

One of those uncertainties is its impact on the search for Christian unity. The Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox churches teach that since Jesus chose only men as his apostles, only men can be ordained priests and bishops.

Fr. Anthony Currer, the staff person for relations with Anglicans at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, told Catholic News Service the vote "is not creating a new reality for our dialogue" because other provinces of the Anglican Communion, including the United States and Canada, already have women bishops.

However, he said, "it is significant" that the move was made by the Church of England -- the mother church of the communion -- which is a point of reference for Anglicans worldwide.

With the Anglicans, Currer said, "we have communion, which we describe as impaired or impartial. An area we have to explore with our dialogue partners is what is sufficient for the full communion we are seeking."

When the General Synod took the first steps toward preparing for women bishops in 2008, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity said, "Such a decision means a break from the apostolic tradition maintained by all the churches of the first millennium and is, therefore, a further obstacle for reconciliation between the Catholic Church and the Church of England."

Welby characterized the debate as involving "genuine theological arguments which differ," and not simply differences based on cultural influences regarding the role of women.

The archbishop called on the House of Bishops to act on its promises by setting up a procedure for ensuring the place in the church of those who disagree.

"You don't chuck out family or even make it difficult for them to be at home, you love them and seek their well-being even when you disagree," he said.

The vote came after several hours of debate, much of it focused on whether or not the motion offered sufficient

guarantees for the place and pastoral care of those with theological grounds for opposing the ordination of women, and on commitments to keep the Church of England united despite differing positions.

After the vote, the Anglo-Catholic group Forward in Faith issued a statement saying it was pleased that the Church of England "is committed to providing bishops and priests for our parishes, enabling us to flourish in the life and structures of our church." However, the group also said it was "deeply concerned about the consequences for the wider unity of the whole church."

The General Synod is elected from the laity and clergy of each diocese and meets at least twice a year to consider legislation for the church. The synod has 484 members divided into the houses of bishops, clergy and laity. Its resolutions must receive the assent of the queen before becoming law.

The vote on women bishops was part of the synod's meeting in York, England, July 11-15.

The Church of England began ordaining women to the priesthood in 1994. Consultative votes in the 43 dioceses of the Church in England showed overwhelming support for ordaining women bishops. Synod members were told that the majority of people in all dioceses voted yes and only nine dioceses reported a favorable vote of less than 90 percent.

A motion on ordaining women bishops failed in the synod by a tiny margin in 2012; commentators at the time said it failed because it did not ensure accommodations for opponents' continued membership in the church.

To address those concerns, the House of Bishops presented "five principles" to the synod, including one that recognized that "those within the Church of England who, on grounds of theological conviction, are unable to receive the ministry of women bishops or priests continue to be within the spectrum of teaching and tradition of the Anglican Communion."

The bishops promised such Anglicans "pastoral and sacramental provision" in a way that "maintains the highest possible degree of communion and contributes to mutual flourishing across the whole Church of England."

When Cardinal Walter Kasper, then the president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, was invited to address the Anglican Communion's Lambeth Conference in 2008, he told the delegates from around the world that ordaining women, especially as bishops, creates an obstacle to the Roman Catholic Church recognizing Anglican ordinations, a key step toward full unity.

The Second Vatican Council recognized that Anglicans held a special place among the Christian communities formed at the time of the Reformation because they maintained the three-fold ministry of deacon, priest and bishop and recognized the bishop's role as a guardian of faith and the point of unity between the universal and local church.

Pope Benedict XVI, responding to a journalist's question on a flight to Australia in 2008, said he hoped the Anglican Communion could "avoid schisms and splits" as they debated the ordination of women "and that they will find solutions that respond to the questions of our age, but that also are faithful to the Gospel."

[Simon Caldwell in Manchester, England, contributed to this story.]

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