

BEYOND THE WALLED GARDEN: ANGLICAN WOMEN AND THE PRIESTHOOD

Wendy Fletcher-Marsh. Dundas, ON: Artemis Enterprises, 1995.

by Marjorie Powles

The title of this fascinating book scarcely prepares the reader for the contents. The author has traced the movement to ordain women to priesthood in the Anglican Church between 1920 and 1978 as an attempt to achieve a new spirituality inclusive of both women and men.

With the exception of a dramatic move in 1944 to ordain a Chinese woman in Hong Kong, no further ordinations took place until 1974 in the United States and 1976 in Canada. By the closing date of the book, only Canada, the United States, New Zealand and again, Hong Kong, had woman priests. This book, then, is an account of events leading up to the ordination of women. Although there are references to other Anglican provinces, the study mainly compares the Church of England (CofE) and the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC), with a lengthy discussion relating to the Episcopal Church of the United States.

Within these parameters the history is well documented. Long endnotes follow each chapter. A 30 page appendix includes 22 reference tables and a lengthy bibliography. The lack of a general index and a not always clear correlation between notes and bibliography makes the valuable information in the book less accessible than one would wish.

A section at the beginning, entitled "Anglican Synodical-Episcopal Polity," helps readers understand the complexity of the decision-making process: diocesan and general synods; the relation between synods and bishops; the Lambeth Conference every ten years, where all bishops meet to give leadership to the church as a

whole; and finally, the problems of the CofE, whose establishment necessitates changing not only church rules but the laws of the country.

Changes in Anglicanism took place alongside change in society as a whole: increased acceptance of women in the professions, as well as change in other denominations. A strange omission is any specific mention of ordination of women in the Presbyterian and United Churches in Canada. The women of all these bodies have a common culture, and common experiences in training and work.

The longest section of the book is entitled "The Canadian Revolution Succeeds." In 1969 the Canadian Church, on the authority of Lambeth, began receiving women into the diaconate. From 1969 to 1976 there were task forces and commissions of General Synod and meetings of the House of Bishops discussing the ordination of women to the priesthood. The General Synod of 1975 passed a resolution authorizing the move in spite of considerable opposition. This was confirmed by the House of Bishops in 1975 and 1976, with the proviso of a Conscience Clause which left the decision whether to ordain or not up to the individual bishop. The first ordinations took place in November 1976.

Fletcher-Marsh calls this a "revolution from above," brought about by the Primate (Presiding Bishop), Edward Scott, together with other leaders. Most of the women who chose ordination in that early period did not classify themselves as feminists, nor were they active on their own behalf. It was a matter of "vocation," the answer to a personal call.

The section on the Church of England is entitled "Revolution Fails in England." As in Canada, there were discussions, controversy, and commissions from 1920 on. However, many commissions and church assemblies later, the General Synod of 1978 refused to set in motion legislation to make possible the ordination of women to the priesthood. During the whole period from 1920 to 1978, opposition was preoccupied with

sexuality: basically, a woman's inability to represent a male Christ.

As in the case of the Canadian Church, the deaconesses and church workers themselves were not, on the whole, active in pressing for ordination. However, the longer acceptance was denied, the stronger became the pressure on the part of lay women, who saw this as a feminist issue. After the 1978 defeat, the powerful Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW) was born, which gathered support from many quarters, including men. Of course, opposition was also organized, but ordination in England finally became possible in 1994, beyond the time line of this book.

The title, "Beyond the Walled Garden" (borrowed from an English deaconess to describe the ghetto conditions of church work), together with the artistic design on the book's cover, suggests romance. The author returns to the theme of the garden in her conclusion, expressing the hope that the Anglican Church is participating in a transformation of the church as a whole, where women and men can celebrate shared vocations.

There is indeed the stuff of true romance in the individual and collective stories of women enmeshed in the statistical tables, synods, commissions, and oral histories in this book. We need to hear more of these stories which are only beginning to be told, like that of Li Tim Oi, the Chinese woman ordained 30 years ahead of any others, the deaconesses, church workers, and ordinary lay women. Women throughout the decades have shown incredible patience and perseverance, often on behalf of others, and have continued to believe, beyond all odds, that they are made in God's image. Is this revolutionary? Only a church in the process of transformation as we move into a new millennium will answer that question.