Half a Loaf

Too little, too late. That is how the Anglican women’s movement viewed the half-hearted approval given to women’s ordination at the Anglican Church’s General Synod meeting in July.

The synod passed a provisional canon (church law) to authorise women priests. But it failed, by just a handful of votes, to make the law effective immediately. Instead, the canon must now go the rounds of all the 24 Australian dioceses before coming back to a special recalled meeting of the synod in November. The general expectation is that the legislation will then once more receive two-thirds support in each of the three ‘houses’ of synod—bishops, clergy, laity—and come into force.

Just a few years ago, last week’s limited success would have been warmly welcomed. The Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW) would have erupted into cheering in the public gallery of the synod hall, with much waving of festive banners. The many members of synod who wholeheartedly support women priests would have partied well into the evening. Not this time, though victory is at last within reach. There was just one half-hearted banner in the gallery, and no champagne in sight. In fact, even the usual MOW demonstration was missing from outside Sydney’s St Andrew’s Cathedral during the main synod service, a few days before the crucial vote.

Each time General Synod has met since the early 1970s, when the women’s ordination issue first erupted, the procession of bishops, grand in their Elizabethan ‘convocation’ robes, has had to run a considerable gauntlet to reach the main cathedral entrance. This time, ironically, while the bishops entered the cathedral discreetly, from side doors, there was not a demonstrator in sight. The women’s movement was so low key as to be almost invisible.

After the ordination of the Perth women earlier this year, and the ruling from the NSW Court of Appeal that such ordinations were not illegal, this synod was likely to produce the goods at long last. Why such despondency so close to the longed-for goal? Perhaps because the movement is simply exhausted. The struggle has continued for 15 years now, with a neverending series of wearying battles over the issue in local and national synods. These have resulted in women being admitted to the diaconate (the first step to priesthood) and visiting women priests from overseas allowed to function in many parts.
of this country. But the gains have come inch by gruelling inch, at a snail's pace. "Like a mighty tortoise moves the church of God." Support has ebbed and flowed, as church leaders from time to time succumbed to propaganda from opponents, and applied the brakes every so often. Keeping up the momentum has been sheer hard work. Particularly over the last couple of years, many in the women's movement have sensed their enthusiasm (though not their determination) for the struggle draining away under the relentless onslaught of the powerful male conservatives opposed to them.

The gracelessness of the slow and grudging approval has eaten away at our joy. And, despite the overwhelming support for our cause both within the church and in the wider community, we have often felt alone. The secular women's movement and those who claim to be its champions, have scarcely bothered with us. Even while arch-conservative males, with financial backing from the arch-conservative Diocese of Sydney, took the matter to the civil courts, we heard scarcely a whimper from those who claim to defend Equal Opportunity legislation. Should we have expected anything more? If we had known our feminist history better, perhaps we would have been prepared for the heartache, the disappointment, the loneliness and the cost of such a struggle. The first feminists were themselves Christian women. The remarkable Grimke sisters, who discovered the disadvantages of their sex as they fought against slavery in America in the 1830s, were devout Quakers. The first women's convention, held in Seneca Falls in 1848, was more interested in women's full equality in the church than in the vote, and succeeding generations of women activists believed likewise. So from the beginning we should perhaps have realised how long and difficult a journey we were facing.

Where to now, if there is not to be a mammoth celebration? Women will be ordained, bit by bit, across most of Australia in the coming months and years. Look to Brisbane and Adelaide, Canberra and Tasmania for the first moves. Ironically, Melbourne, the historical leader of the women's movement, may take longer because of its own restrictive constitution.

At about the turn of the century, or perhaps a bit earlier, look for women priests in the Diocese of Sydney. But when women's ordination finally comes in that bastion of opposition, don't expect trumpet fanfares or breast-beating. They will most likely pretend that they always expected to see such a day dawn. At about the same time, expect to see a new controversy over women bishops. It will not be quite so bitter or prolonged a struggle, because the ministry of women will have made such a move seem more natural. There will not be the same fear of the unknown—and of women—that has bedevilled the current debate.

Perhaps, too, expect to see a renewed and revitalised church, as that same women's influence begins to bear substantial fruit. The Anglican Churches in New Zealand, Canada and the United States—all of which have had women priests for as long as the argument has been raging in this country—are vibrant, prophetic churches. There, stuffy Anglican respectability and inertia have long since disappeared.

Though we are tired and despondent now as we take the last weary steps to the rescue tent, we should take heart. One day our daughters and granddaughters may experience a far better church, one that accepts women's gifts naturally, easily, without demur, a church that is at last the compassionate, gracious, and generous place we had hoped to find ourselves. That hope should make it all worthwhile.

MURIEL PORTER was a Melbourne representative at the recent General Synod. Her book Women in the Church: the Great Ordination Debate in Australia is published by Penguin.