



WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

The 48th Annual Barry Marshall Memorial Lecture

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The Most Reverend Kay Goldsworthy, AO

Archbishop of Perth

When I looked at the number of people who had booked for this year's Barry Marshall memorial lecture, I was taken aback by the crowd interested in joining us tonight. When the organisers talked with me earlier in the year, and I was unravelling problem number 465 (or thereabouts!) in my new role in Perth, I was asked if this lecture could be more than descriptive. This somewhat alarming request made me think twice, but I hope that any insights I may have will chime sufficiently with your own understandings and experience to enlarge us all in the mission of Christ's love entrusted to us.

I know that there will be various reasons why so many have ventured out on a winter's night for a lecture on women's leadership in the Anglican Church in Australia. I know that some of you will be here because you want to hear about the place and role of women who are leaders in the life of our church right now, and what that could look like as we move into the future. Maybe some of you are potential leaders looking for a few tips- some do's and don'ts. Some of you will have come because Barry Marshall was the chaplain who cared for you and inspired you when you were reading theology or working for another degree here. Some of you are people who, over many years, have been discerning, choosing or appointing women to positions of leadership in the church. Others will be here because, as a theological student, it has been suggested that this will be a useful or perhaps even essential way to spend some of your time. Some have even come because we are friends and you want to show your support. Thank you for that.

These days I get invited to take part in and address lots of symposiums, Professional Development days, and panels discussing women's leadership in both the corporate world and not-for-profit sectors. In every single case I hear us (by which I mean us women) saying the same things as I have been saying for far too long. Women, both young and old, still talk about and focus on what they *do not* have to bring to a role, a job, a place on the board rather than the skills, talents, training and compatibility that they do bring to the so called 'table'. Changing this pattern is taking time and its costly.

I recognise, and I ask you to recognise, that any discussion of women's leadership in our church is necessarily a protracted and ongoing conversation—begun certainly, but by no means nearing completion. And thank God for that. Are not we all really part of the unfolding conversation that is church as we do theology, practice belief, and fumble our way into the grace of God's new day in this new season in the church's life?

I asked Kate, one of Perth's assistant bishops, what was distinctive for her, being a female bishop, and she pointed to how it is often the case that we are confused for each other because our names sound similar. She reminds me that people still do not always see the person in front of them.

So, what do we mean by leadership and what is it we are looking for from women leaders in the church's life right now? Material of successful leadership abounds and reinforces the understanding that leaders are those people who help create an inspiring vision of the future, and they motivate people to engage with it. Leaders manage the delivery of vision and help build and grow a team to make it more effective. And what sooner or later becomes plain is that aspiring business, corporate, political, and community leaders are all looking for one thing only, the secret of successful leadership.

If we want to measure that for the place of women one measure might be had by counting the numbers. The latest clergy directory figures for the Australian church reveal that ordained female leaders include more than 200 deacons, more than 500 priests, and six bishops including two who have recently retired, plus 1 bishop elect here in Melbourne. This month's *TMA* has a centrefold of the 2018 Diocesan Theological Education candidates of which 14 are men and 16 are women. Perhaps this is one measure of how women are 'going' right now. The fact that some of those women will never be allowed to take up roles of leadership over men in the church however, does raise questions about what these numbers mean for our topic.

These are not the numbers to count. I rejoice that the General Secretary of the National Church is woman. I rejoice that a woman chairs the Church Law Commission. I rejoice that women are Diocesan Chancellors, (at least one of whom has held that position for almost two decades!) I rejoice that women figure among the CEOs of various Anglican Agencies across the country. I rejoice at the number of women teaching theology and helping form people for ministry. We rejoice. Many of these were unthinkable not too long ago, but each contributes to a wider view, a bigger picture. These women help expand our vision of what is possible for God's church and God's world.

Numbers are not the only thing that matters, but they do matter. And they matter as they reveal what is not happening as much as what is. A 2014 study reported around 500 priests who were women, the same as now. What does that mean? Are there places where women are not being encouraged to step forward and test a call to ordained ministry? Have those of us who have been at this for a while now been good enough role models for younger women? Have women like me been the kind of gate keepers who keep emerging young leaders from emerging? Has the rise of a conservative theology of gender impacted how women are framing the church and their place in it and is therefore keeping them silent?

At a gathering of women in episcopal ministry from Australia and New Zealand held in Gippsland last year discussed our experience of encouraging women to see themselves as capable of stepping into new and authoritative roles in the church's life. This responsibility was a common thread between us. We wondered why there was no female bishop on the Lambeth 2020 design group. We spoke of the strength of programmes like Leading Women begun by a group of English priests during that period of waiting for female bishops in the mother church of the Anglican Communion to become reality.

That programme was designed for promoting women who have the potential to develop into senior leaders and may at some stage consider a call to senior posts. Its purpose was to provide a safe and challenging learning community in which women could explore their long-term vocation, gain confidence in God's purposes for them, and develop skills necessary for leadership. It allowed further opportunities of mentoring and leadership training both within and outside the church.

This is not to say that there have not been attempts to bring women together for such opportunities here, but they have tended to be isolated 'one off' events unlike the English efforts orchestrated and resourced by Sarum College Salisbury. It is worth noting that this undertaking became a pathway for bishops to use as they put forward names of women within their dioceses whom they identified as potential leaders.

There are significant lessons to be learnt from those women. Rather than waiting for permission to take leadership, in those long years of debate between 1994 and 2014 they used the skills, resources and relationships at their disposal for the good of the whole church as more and more women grew into the possibility that God might call them to new places of ecclesial leadership. They were proactive, and prepared. Shared, collaborative leadership. Clear goal, agreed pathway, great outcomes.

We have not been as systematic. Although different dioceses may recognise a leadership pool and pathways to leadership roles for their clergy and lay people, we seem to be wary of naming this process, and it is not evident in our public discourse as it is in other parts of the Communion.

A 2015 article in *The Church Times* on the eve of the consecration of Libby Lane as the first female bishop in the Church of England, and when Philip North who does not recognise the ministry of female bishops was about to be consecrated as Bishop of Burnley, noted that in England bishops were still making the news. Citing a new report titled '*Talent Management for Future Leaders and Leadership Development for Bishops and Deans: A New Approach*', the writer quoting from the report and commenting on it said, "that that while in future "bishops and other senior leaders in the Church of England will be chosen from a talent pool", the people of God must fervently hope that bishops will not be plucked from the shallow end."¹

We have the same hope. Critics of the Australian theological and cultural Anglican landscape may say that our history of difference and diversity has contributed to a lack of focussed, organised resourcing for such a vocation and ministry discernment and choosing, at both ends of the pool.

Clearly the theological landscape is changing across the country. Besides diaconal and priestly ministry some commentators suggest that the number of dioceses that once would have considered women as potential candidates for senior ministry roles such as bishop is lessening. *Epsicope* – oversight - means being a knot in the net, a shepherd on guard against those who would scatter the flock, and there is plenty of bleating going on right now as we all look for direction and leadership. This ministry is both particular, and shared by all.

Whatever we may say as the church edges forward, seeking to cultivate a unity deeper than differences and divisions, the whole landscape in which we are set has altered, and is changing all the while.

The Royal Commission has been the catalyst for much, but not all, of this changing scene. In the past few years we have heard more and more stories from survivors of institutional abuse, and sought to respond through increased vigilance, stricter screening requirements for clergy and lay people, enhanced safe ministry policies, and professional standards processes. The national church has passed the legislation necessary for a National Anglican Redress Corporation to receive and attend to those who apply for redress through the Commonwealth Government Scheme. One

¹ Lucy Winkett, 'A Continuing Apostolic Succession', *Church Times*, 30 Jan. 2015.

diocese has recently been in the news for selling property to help fund redress payments. Past and present leaders are in the spotlight yet again, but the fact is that we are all exposed.

The 2017 plebiscite regarding same sex marriage in Australia and The *Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017* amending the *Marriage Act 1961* to redefine marriage as 'the union of two people to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life' have pressed the church to address questions of theology, policy and practice once more. It is surely a warning to us that as we struggle for fidelity to the Christ who is coming to meet us, and credibility in our actual missionary context, seeking to proclaim the way of life and love. The statement from the Bishops' Meeting earlier this year has been greeted both as ungenerous and too little and at the same time as not enough by Anglicans and too many others around the country.

Anglicans I know are asking me, now that I have a particular leadership role, if I remember the silence of others, and who gets sacrificed on altars of human unity. Anglicans I know are asking leaders who are women to use the voice the church has recognised and ordained in us, to speak simply of Christ, to always remember that Jesus is our first love, seeking fresh ways into the rhythm of the future rushing to meet us whether we like it or not. Now that women's voices are understood to be 'inside the tent' we are being called to account for the silencing we do of others, consciously or not. It is not comfortable. And it is part of being knot in the net.

The other changes that have been both background and coalface have been well described by many thoughtful observers.² Alan Roxburgh's 2015 book *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, regarding the church and its contemporary mission, uses the phrase "Euro-tribal churches" to describe churches planted by white settlers in the new world of North America. Some of the movements he describes are familiar here also: the golden period of the 1940s and 50s as a time of congregational growth and church expansion; the 60s and 70s renewal and relational revolution which saw both charismatic renewal and the small group movement flourish; the church growth movements of the 1980s, and what he calls the corporate approach of the 90s in which we sought indicators of growth and vitality. The 2000s saw the missional church, emerging church, and fresh expression models, and most of us will have been part of or overseen a MAP process. Mission Action Plans are still in fashion, providing an umbrella for many good things, yet sometimes it remains unclear whether we are seeking to save the world or only the church. 52.1% of Australians considered themselves Christian in the 2016 Census, while 13.3% of that number identified as Anglicans. As we grieve over what we think of as our rosy past, and come to terms with the fact that we, along with all faith communities, are only one minority among minorities, we look for leaders capable of leading us faithfully to tread new and confusing paths. We are ready to hear different voices, both male and female, lay and ordained. We are part of a community which remembers—God and God's dawning Kingdom, announced in Christ's teaching and healing and feeding, in the love fashioning his entire being and displayed most clearly in his total self-giving on the cross. And there is the plan.

We are looking for leaders who are hopeful and kind and brave. We are looking for leaders who will stand for us and with us in places of unanswerable questions and unbearable pain. In a word, we are looking for leaders we can partner with who look like Jesus. And, for the most part, people do not care if they are male or female. We want to reconnect with the springs of love and life, and help others do the same, and while we may be hesitant and afraid of what we are being called to

² Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World* (New York: Morehouse, 2015), 14–20

embrace today and tomorrow as the embodiment of Christ's love, we can spot fear in faith's clothing, and smell insincerity a mile off no matter how neatly it is packaged.

Anglicans I talk with are in no doubt that we are in turbulent and uncharted waters right now. Anglicans I listen to tell me that they do not want us to play safe, more committed to club rules and not rocking the boat than standing out and standing up, and speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves. Will our leaders please lead, is what I am hearing wherever I go. Where I live and work they are talking to *me*.

We know the end goal cannot be a journey back in time when everything was supposedly settled and easy. That has never been possible for Jesus' friends and followers. The commitment is to travel on unmarked roads together into the unknown. Like those in Luke's gospel we can take nothing with us except eyes willing to see, ears to really listen, and hearts beating in common with Jesus' wide-open heart of love and generosity and welcome and peace, as awkward and sometimes clumsy disciples, deeply conscious for our own need to repent, sharing the word of hope and bread for the journey with everyone we meet.

After six months listening as carefully as I can to God's people in Perth, at least some of the questions among many that I hope we are asking come down to these—how can we help each other be all we can be for this time?; how can we share with our deacons in serving the least and the last without any ulterior motive?; how can we encourage priests to be prophets; how can we set free our bishops to see visions and dream dreams?

People are rightly feeling dismayed and disoriented and deeply ashamed of the institutional church. The many good clergy and Christian lay leaders carry much of the weight of that shame as representatives of Christ, identifiable and easy targets for those so shockingly hurt, while showing by word and deed that the community of faith can yet be a place of goodness and welcome and selflessness and hope. What story do we tell about the church of God as we keep knowing Jesus and making Jesus known? What voice do we use? Can we shut up for God's sake and hold our tongues when the occasion demands? How can what J B Phillips referred to long ago as "poor little talkative Christianity" stop chattering, anxiously promoting itself in place of the Man for Others? I'm looking to leaders who model sitting in silence, not because it is the better path, and not as a vulnerability forced upon them, or used as a weapon, but as a way of kenosis, of waiting on God in the tradition of Mary of Bethany and Julian of Norwich and of the expectant silence of the Spirit overshadowing.

The age of entitlement for all leaders is over. The good news for women leaders and potential women leaders is that we are such a very recent afterthought. We have not been permitted to enter, let alone really inhabit this space until very recently, so any loss we may feel is merely prideful. Entitlement, of course, is not necessarily helpful, let alone essential, for good leading.

As mentioned earlier the Church of England is attempting to get serious about this change. From afar there are things about their Reform and Renewal agenda which look like a plan. For all that, however, critics like Dr Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church Oxford, suggest that even in the midst of a busy and praiseworthy agenda there are important matters that should not be overlooked. Most particularly, questions of ecclesiology and of theological vision or narrative.³ It is precisely this language, the language of our daily bread, that people fear is missing from the leadership

³ Martyn Percy, *The Future Shape of Anglicanism: Currents, Contours, Charts*, 119.

table. Thank God for the academics among us who help uncover new understandings in biblical and theological scholarship and invite us to new conversations, conversations that live not only for today but help take us into God's future.

Navigating leadership pathways, discernment, and roles has required us all to be attentive to language. The language of inclusion or not; the language of thinly veiled disapproval; words which say one thing but no longer mean what they used to. Language is a constant, yet it shifts and changes. As a chaplain in a girls' school I was always astonished that 'guys' actually meant girls, and that this was taken as read. I have recently been surprised to hear someone describing sisters and brothers in Christ gathered with us around the family table as 'un-biblical' Christians.

I am shocked to think that anyone who is happy to hold my licence might do so with a kind of 'the end justifies the means' attitude. The truth is that female leaders flush out such attitudes. The language of the ordinal still has currency too. For those women in Episcopal ministry the choosing and ordaining of clergy is both deeply satisfying and quite terrifying. As a leader, celebrating with communities as they explore how God is shaping them as people of generosity and thanksgiving is good news. As a leader, being alongside people who have turned to Christ or returned to Christ is the alleluia of any week. As a leader, providing the environment for people to grow into the contours the ordinal maps out for each of the three orders of ministry, means learning together how Jesus calls us to serve both God's and God's church. The language of the ordinal is both broad and particular.

I began by speaking about popular ideas of leadership. The question I am putting to myself about leadership-speak is, "how do the values and attributes of a good leader popular right now, often defined as judgement, courage, drive, collaboration, integrity, temperance, accountability, justice, humility, humanity and transcendence⁴ sit alongside the words and actions of Jesus, my Lord and Saviour and your own—he who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as ransom for many; he who made bold decisions welcoming every person into God's love; he who had the courage to stand against the injustice of rulers; he who kept on faithfully; he who saw others as allies of God not enemies; he whose life showed congruence day after day after day; he who gives us the gift of temperance through the Holy Spirit, and stands tall before his accusers; he who is dependable, completely dependable for those of us who are not; he whose judgement is that of the One who sends him; he who humbles himself; whose compassion cannot be shouted down, whose words of forgiveness are words of life and hope; who sees possibilities where others can see only failure and futility, especially in relation to themselves.

There are some stories we do not forget. One of these for me, and that I have spoken of in other settings, is told by a priest about her ministry and leadership, in the 2010 book *Presiding Like A Woman*.⁵ The story that Lucy Winkett tells in that book is titled 'Why is that priest singing in a woman's voice?' It is taken from her experience of overhearing a man in St Paul's Cathedral London, where she was Canon Precentor, speaking of her in those words as she presided at the liturgy of the Eucharist. "Why is that priest singing in a woman's voice?" In her essay, attention is drawn to the issues of register, of tone, and to tradition both in relation to the songs in which women's voices are raised throughout scripture, women like Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, and of course Mary and how and by whom these same songs have been sung in the Western Church across the centuries. Lucy asks how women's voices sound in public, and how they are heard?

⁴ 'The 11 Characteristics of Great Leadership', *Journal of Management Studies*; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 Feb. 2017.

⁵ Lucy Winkett, 'Why is that Priest Singing in a Woman's Voice', *Presiding Like A Woman*, ed. Nicola Slee and Stephen Burns (SPCK 2010), 94–100.

Such questions can and should be asked of us all. What do we sound like to ourselves, and how might others be hearing us? Discordant sometimes and harmonious at others? Part of the chorus or a solo voice? Same music, same words, but in a different voice.

The quick response is of course, that a woman can use no other voice but her own. But there are at least two matters to pause over and consider as we continue to live into the new day of women's leadership, lay and ordained, exercising it, receiving it, allowing it, celebrating it, putting up with it, or denying it in the Australian church right now.

In the matter of voice, we are, if not consistent, at least constant in the deliberations we make about leadership. Who has a voice, and who does not? When is a voice or voices heard, and by whom? Which voices are authorised, legitimised, and which are not? What are women's voices allowed to speak about, and to whom? Who decides? Who do we speak for, and about? What do our words, or our silences do for God's people, and God's church?

And what place does the church have in Australia now? What place do leaders, female and male, inhabit now? What are women bringing to the Church's current leadership table that we would want to celebrate? And, what place do we give to leadership as integral to the church's witness to Christ?

While we might rather it not be the case, the fact is that the conversation about women as leaders in the church seems to roll endlessly on. Have we found our voices, and are they distinctively female, or have we borrowed the voices of those who have gone before us, attempting to tweak tone and register, if not lyrics and music which our forebears taught us, and have sung us into? And how might the voice and place of women's leadership be grace for all of us, and not just for those who welcome this advent?

I hope and pray that these learnings, grist, gaps and mis-steps might be helpful, but one thing at least is sure: no matter who we discern and authorise as leaders, none of this ever rests on leaders alone. We can be and do what God needs us to be and do only together, never alone. As Pope Francis memorably puts it: sometimes the shepherd must go ahead of the flock, at other times the shepherd's task is to follow behind, and then there are those many occasions when the shepherd must be in the middle, walking hand in hand with all God's daughters and sons.