

HARSH REALITIES FOR THOSE WHO OPPOSE WOMEN PASTORS

In various church bodies there are struggles about ordination of women. The New Testament says clearly that it is a command of the Lord that women should not speak in the churches in an individual leading way while the rest listen. It says that if anyone does not acknowledge this, he is not acknowledged (1 C 14:26-40). So the question may be asked, What are the future prospects for people in a church body who continue to oppose women pastors once a majority of the church has consented to them? The experience in the Church of Sweden provides an example.

The Church of Sweden is officially Lutheran, but embraces a high church element, a conservative low-church element, and pietistic elements. Women's ordination was forced on the church by the Swedish government in 1957. When the bishops voted against it, the government dissolved the synod. After new and politicised elections, the first women were ordained in 1960. From 1958 to 1975 a conscience clause, with firm guarantees, still allowed candidates to be ordained if they were opposed to women's ordination. When bishops held separate ordination services for male candidates, many lay people attended and took part enthusiastically in the services, and the bishops did not like that. In 1982 the law was changed. On the principle of equality, women could be priests, and the conscience clause disappeared. When the church tried to keep its promises about guarantees it had made about conscience, protests from women pastors prevented any action.

This report is based on an article by William Tighe, in *Touchstone, A Journal of Mere Christianity*. He wrote after two interviews with Reverend Dag Sandahl, who had been ordained in 1971, and has held various important positions in the Church of Sweden. He became rural dean at Kalmar in 1989, but was removed in 1999. He has been against the ordination of women for theological reasons. Such men have not opposed women pastors because of equality between men and women, but it is a theological question for them. They did not question the validity of a Lord's Supper in which a woman officiated. They simply refused to attend there because of the disobedience that it involved. Many church leaders of the older generation refused to answer questions about the issue from journalists, and were badly treated. Dag Sandahl, however, liked to discuss questions freely as rural dean, and raised questions for discussion about people who were bitter and frustrated because of the practice. After the papers featured him prominently, he was fired.

He spoke in the interview about the prospects for students of theology in Sweden, who are now refused ordination if they oppose women in the ministry. Candidates for the ministry must sign a paper that they will work with all priests, men and women. Unless they do, they are not eligible for election. Practical tests are applied. For example, a bishop might send a candidate to work with a woman priest, in order to find out what their real views are. One bishop called a woman priest into his office and asked her to celebrate the Lord's Supper there to test whether a candidate would receive it from her. Now women pastors can be installed in parishes against the will of the people in the parish.

The experience in Sweden illustrates that, once there are women pastors, they protest so loudly at any attempt to discuss the theology of the practice that further debate on the theology of it is no longer possible. However, since about 1994 it is absolutely impossible for an opponent of women in the ministry to be ordained in the Church of Sweden. For some years there has been talk in Germany also about denying the Lord's Supper to people who protest about women pastors.

Although in earlier years a number of bishops were opposed to women pastors, after only six years almost all now support it. The reason is that, for a bishop to be elected, three names must be put forward, and a strong opponent is simply not appointed as bishop. Dag Sandahl commented, "Once I heard two deans say, laughing bitterly, 'If they put me and you on that list and a monkey is third, they will appoint the monkey.'"

One popular bishop at Gothenburg, Bertil Gaertner, has been a popular leading opponent of women pastors. However, there have been press campaigns against him. Even when he has been invited to speak at various functions, local politicians have said that he was not welcome.

Although the Church of Sweden was officially removed from state control in 2000, state laws and the Church's own regulations still mean that political parties determine what happens in the church.

There was an attempt in 1999 to hold a meeting of various conservative groups at Rome. However, the low church and Pietist elements of the orthodox opposition were interested only in their own organisations within the Church of Sweden. The confessional Lutherans (often called the "old church" element) were interested only in their confessional Lutheran organisations. Only the high church people really cared about the Church of Sweden. So two of the three parties wanted to act as little churches within the church, and ignore the Church as a whole.

The high church has lost some of their better pastors to the Roman Catholic Church. Those who remain have a "life-sentence." They cannot transfer to other positions in the church, and often become victims of stress, frustration, anger, and hatred. Clergy like Dag Sandahl who oppose the practice of women pastors have no prospect of accepting calls elsewhere. He has been in the same parish for over forty years.

About six per cent of the population vote in church elections. The church officially has 7.6 million church members. About a quarter of a million go to church every Sunday. About one fifth of these, 50,000, are strong conservative people and look to Bishop Bertil Gaertner as a leader and figurehead. However, several activists of the orthodox opposition have already been victims of crackdowns.

The bishops in the church are lame ducks. Many people do not want them to speak or vote in assemblies. The Church has simply taken the role of "walking alongside" society, sharing its questions and discussing them, but giving no firm guidance from the Word of God. The archbishop is a full-fledged postmodernist and his views are proclaimed as the path for all.

About his own group, Dag Sandahl said, "We have about 40 qualified candidates who have been refused ordination because of this issue." Later he commented, "We have 1,500 members, down from a high of 1,700. A lot of these are dying off, and the fight has gone out of them; they have no chance to work with us. Perhaps we had better admit that we have been defeated, as I think we have been. The organisation was created in 1982 for a task that is not ours any longer, because our candidates will not be ordained and our priests will not get fair promotions. Their skills will not be used and their gifts cannot

be lived out in the service of the Church.” He commented that the new church order has whole paragraphs that say, “You’re not wanted.”

The Church of Sweden has the salaries of its clergy paid through a tax raised by the state. Since the official removal of state control of the church in 2000, Dag Sandahl said, “we will have members leaving the membership rolls to save money from the church tax. And people hate to pay money for an archbishop arguing for same-sex marriage. And then who will be prepared to take care of the Church? The whole system could collapse. I can see the Church imploding — just falling down. We’re a heavy organisation, not very efficient, suffering from a lack of confidence, with tired and confused priests. There’s no future for such a Church. But the Church doesn’t exist for itself. It has the purpose of giving the Gospel to the people. We had that debate back in the 1950s, and then they said, “This isn’t a missionary church” — and I regret that deeply. Perhaps there will just be a tiny minority left to do that work. God could create a miracle, and that is what we pray for.”

The whole article of seven pages is available for those who would like to check it. So is it possible in a church for two groups to coexist when some want women pastors, and some say it is contrary to the command of God? Is a compromise possible? Will a group survive that opposes the practice and stays inside a church once a majority is in control and the leadership is against them? People must profess their faith as before the judgment seat of Christ. How will those advocates of women pastors answer His question, “Why did you ignore and disobey My command?”

On the positive side, those Lutherans who oppose this practice, which is contrary to God’s Word, should quickly recognise where other Lutherans across the world hold views like their own, and begin to support and encourage each other. What has to happen is a regrouping of confessional Lutherans around the globe, and what is needed is a new *Formula of Concord*, which addresses modern questions such as this one, in theses and antitheses, on the basis of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, and looks with respect at what the church of twenty centuries has been saying about such questions.