

The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood in Australia

Calendar of Events 6 December 1991 - 7 March 1992

The following chronicles the rapid series of events from early December 1991 to early March 1992 that led up to the first ordination of women to the priesthood in Australia. The details come almost entirely from the "secular press". There has been no room to expand on other key events in the community at the same time, for example the Mike Tyson rape verdict, the debate over women's health services, and a brief controversy in Melbourne about the absence of women from the judiciary. Little wonder events seemed to unfold at a rapid rate - they did!

December 1991

- Fri 6** Appellate Tribunal finding is inconclusive on whether an individual diocese could, depending on its own constitution, authorise the ordination of women. Primate expresses hope that "no one will take precipitate action before General Synod".
- Wed 11** Bishop Owen Dowling of Canberra-Goulburn reported as saying the legislation in his diocese for women priests might have a "presumption of validity" in the absence of an Appellate Tribunal ruling.
- Sat 14** Melbourne's *Age* runs feature on sexual abuse by clergy.
- Mon 23** Bishop Dowling announces plans to ordain 11 women deacons to the priesthood on February 2 1992, following a meeting with the (arch)bishops of Adelaide, Bathurst, Newcastle, Rockhampton and Tasmania. In subsequent days, Archbishop Rayner expresses disappointment but emphasises that the Appellate Tribunal's answer was indecisive. The *Age* said he "appealed for calm until the position was clarified".
- Mon 30** Archbishop Carnley announces the appointment of the Rev Dawn Kenyon, an Australian ordained in New Zealand, as priest in charge of Southern Cross parish in the Diocese of Perth.
- There are also numerous articles in various papers in this period featuring individual women deacons, such as Ruth Mills (Canberra-Goulburn) and Heather Marten (Melbourne).

January 1992

- Wed 1** Archbishop Carnley reported to be seeking legal advice on his power to ordain women to the priesthood; indicates he could recommend Perth's women deacons to go to New Zealand for ordination.
- Editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* strongly supports Bishop Dowling against "the diedhards within the Church".
- Mon 6** Justice Elizabeth Evatt (President of the Australian Law Reform Commission) reported in the *Australian* as saying that "churches should be banned from discriminating against women wanting to become priests".
- Dr Ian Spry writes to AAM members appealing urgently for funds "to enable injunctions to be obtained to prevent Bishop Dowling from carrying out illegal ordinations".
- Fri 10** Phyllis Boyd of Women Against the Ordination of Women says her group is seeking legal advice on how to restrain Bishop Dowling from ordaining women as priests on 2 February; the Association for the Apostolic Ministry indicates it too is seeking advice.
- Sat 11** Bishop Dowling reported as saying he has not been deterred by criticisms that the ordination of women as priests on February 2 could split the church.
- Wed 15** 500 people attend a public meeting in Canberra to support Bishop Dowling; messages of goodwill from around Australia.
- Age* feature article on women who are clergy in the Uniting Church.
- Thu 16** Three members of General Synod (the Revs David Robarts and Dalba Primmer, and Dr Laurence Scandrett - their identities were not made public for several days) serve a summons on Bishop Dowling.
- Fri 17** The three apply for an injunction from the NSW Supreme Court against Bishop Dowling, who indicates he will proceed unless the injunction is granted.



- Tue 21** Archbishop Robinson reported by the press as saying Bishop Dowling is defying his direct order not to proceed with the ordination on 2 February. Announced that the ordination is expected to attract 5000 and be broadcast live around the country.
- Age* reports the appointment of the Rev Charity Majiza as chaplain of Wesley College Melbourne. She was the first black woman to be ordained by the Reformed Presbyterian Church in South Africa.
- Wed 22** Archbishop Ian George's intention to ordain women to the priesthood before the end of the year, but after General Synod, reported in the press.
- Thu 23** The injunction hearing begins in the NSW Equity Court before Justice Andrew Rogers. Archbishop Donald Robinson claims Bishop Dowling's decision was a "recipe for short-term chaos and long-term disintegration", and denies women have left the Church because of the opposition to women's ordination.
- Archbishop Carnley announces in Perth he intends to ordain up to 10 women as priests on 7 March. The announcement seems to be ignored in the Eastern states, where the news is dominated by the court hearing.
- Bishop Wilson of Bathurst announces a special session of diocesan synod to vote on regulations to ordain women as priests to be held on 29 March, six months earlier than usual.
- Age* editorial says "whether the church acts now, or waits until July in the hope of achieving unity, it cannot afford to delay much longer".
- Fri 24** The second day of the court hearing. Justice Rogers reserves his final decision until after the holiday weekend, but says he believes he should refuse to grant the injunction.
- The Rev Dawn Kenyon is inducted as priest in charge of Southern Cross parish in the Diocese of Perth.
- Tue 28** Justice Rogers rejects the application for the injunction. The plaintiffs immediately lodge an appeal against the decision.
- Wed 29** The Primate, Archbishop Rayner, states that the best way forward is for General Synod to commit authority to diocesan synods to ordain women.
- Wendy Fatin, Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, issues a press statement in which she says that Bishop Dowling and the eleven women "have captured the hearts and minds of ordinary Australians".
- Plans continue for the ordination ceremony.
- Thu 30** The NSW Court of Appeal hears the appeal in a seven and a half hour hearing, and reserves its decision until 1pm the following day.
- The eleven women to be ordained begin their retreat.
- Fri 31** The Court of Appeal grants an interlocutory injunction against Bishop Dowling proceeding with the ordination of women until the full case has been heard. Justice Rogers' judgement was deemed "erroneous". Bishop Dowling indicates the ordination will proceed but it will be only for six men.
- February**
- Sat 1** Newspaper headlines describe the Anglican Church as being in disarray; editorials in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Age* lament the court action. The *Age*: "The irony is that in seeking to prevent or delay the ordination of women the conservatives may well have hastened it."
- Sun 2** The ordination ceremony in Goulburn is marked around the country in various ways - 11 red roses in most cathedrals, "no church" Sunday in Adelaide with a "liturgy of chains", a rally in Sydney Square, prayer vigils, protest sermons, a special service in Perth...
- In Goulburn, six men are ordained priest in the presence of the women who could not be. The service was preceded by a rally, addressed by women priests from the US and NZ, and MOW(UK), as well as Bishop Dowling.
- Mon 3** The newspapers are dominated by reports of the non-ordination. The Archbishop of Perth reiterates that he plans to ordain women to the priesthood on 7 March, after confirming with the women that they wish to proceed.
- Wed 5** The *Age* continues to print feature articles on the controversy. It reports a group of Melbourne clergy led by Dr Ian Spry organised and financed the legal challenge. "The Victorian chairman of the Melbourne-based Association for the Apostolic Ministry, Father John Potter, of All Saints, St Kilda, said he was incensed by reports that Sydney Diocese was behind the challenge".
- Archbishop Rayner holds a press conference at which he puts forward the "Primate's Peace Plan" to hold until General Synod in



July. He proposes no further ordinations of women, and a cessation of legal proceedings.

- Thu 6** The Rev Bruce Ballantyne-Jones, speaking for the three plaintiffs, rejects the Peace Plan and states that cessation of the hearings would not be acceptable to them.
- Fri 7** The NSW Court of Appeal publishes its reasons for overturning the Supreme Court decision.
A challenge is launched to the 1991 decision by the Presbyterian Church to ban women from the ordained ministry.
- Wed 12** Bishop Dowling speaks at the National Press Club, and announces a fund to finance future legal defences.
- Mon 17** The *Australian* reports a letter to clergy from Archbishop Robinson defending the civil court action as "biblically justified".
- Tue 18** The *Australian* reports that Bishop Hearn of Rockhampton has "reluctantly agreed" to the Primate's plea to defer ordinations of women until after General Synod.
The Association for the Apostolic Ministry national conference rejects the Primate's proposal that individual dioceses decide on the issue. The conference elected four presidents and three chairmen.
- Wed 19** The *Age* publishes two feature articles, one on the feminist theology program at Deakin's Women's Studies summer school, the other an extended interview with Phyllis Boyd (WAOW) and Janet Scarfe (MOW).
- Fri 21** The *West Australian* reports that Archbishop Carnley is confident in the legal advice he has for the ordination of women on 7 March. The Rev David Roberts says a similar injunction to that in NSW would likely be sought in Perth.
- Tue 25** The *Australian* reports that "conservative forces within the Anglican church will decide this week whether to block the proposed ordination... Dr Spry said there were a number of possibilities to stop the West Australian ordinations..."
- 29- 3 March** The *Age* runs three feature articles on the place of women in Christianity, Judaism and Islam.
- March**
- Wed 4** Four plaintiffs file an application for an injunction against Archbishop Carnley in the WA Supreme Court (the three NSW plaintiffs plus one from WA), after the archbishop declines to give an undertaking he will not proceed with the ordinations on 7 March.
- Fri 6** The application for an injunction is rejected by Justice White, after an all day hearing. The refusal comes at 4.30pm, only hours before the ceremony at 10am the next day. Application for an appeal is refused.
- Sat 7** The first ordination of women to the priesthood in Australia, at 10am at St George's Cathedral, Perth

Janet Scarfe

