

Talk for the fortieth anniversary of the founding of MOW in Sydney

The Venerable Dr Colleen O'Reilly AM

Thank you for the invitation to deliver this Patricia Brennan Lecture. I appreciate the recognition of the role I played in getting MOW off the ground in Sydney, and then nationally. When I unpacked my personal archives to write this talk I found my handwritten speech for the first public meeting of MOW on 28 September 1983, along with the Invitation and the Agenda.

I doubt however, that the late Patricia would be best pleased to know that it is me speaking today. Although in the beginning we could have completed one another's sentences, eventually Patricia the prophet, and I the priest, found we had parted company. Tension between the prophetic and the priestly is an ancient dynamic, present in the Hebrew scriptures, and not unknown in today's church. That should neither surprise nor distress us. We each have our part to play in making changes. Without the efforts of many prophetic women and some men, the ordination of women would never have begun.

The change in our friendship, Patricia's and mine, began with the adoption in 1987 by Sydney Synod of General Synod Canon 18 of 1985. That canon enables the ordination of woman as deacons. Earlier, in 1985 Sydney Synod passed the canon in the Houses of Laity and Clergy but it had failed to gain the assent of then Archbishop Dr Donald Robinson.¹ Meanwhile, from 1986 onwards twenty of the then twenty-four dioceses in Australia proceeded to make women deacons. Though deeply disappointed, Sydney MOW remained hopeful. In 1987 I moved, and Keith Mason AC KC²

¹ Donald William Bradley Robinson AO (1922 – 2018) was Archbishop of Sydney from 1982 to 1992. He was Vice Principal of Moore College in the 1960s and is credited with significantly shaping how Sydney Anglicans think about and preach from the Bible. As a young man Robinson had been involved in code breaking during WW2 which may have influenced his hermeneutics towards reading scripture as a coded document. My own encounters with him were always mutually courteous and respectful. On the morning he ordained the first women deacons I asked if he had a confirmation in the afternoon or if he could go home to rest. He replied that he was going home, to which I responded that he had already done a good day's work. We both laughed.

² Keith Mason AC KC (1947-) was the Solicitor General for NSW, from 1987-1997, before becoming President of the NSW Court of Appeal. He has been a member of the Appellate Tribunal (AT), and a diocesan chancellor, among other roles. The Tribunal is a national body, elected by the General Synod, consisting of three diocesan bishops and four lay people who must be members of General Synod and either judges or practising lawyers. In 2007 the AT ruled that nothing in the 1961 Constitution prevented a woman being elected and consecrated a bishop. Dr Muriel Porter OAM and I led the twenty-five members of General Synod who asked this question of the tribunal, and who

seconded, a return of the GS bill with one amendment that provided for Synod approval before a woman deacon could be ordained a priest in Sydney. Since it is necessary to have women deacons before having women priests, I considered it was a worthwhile amendment. I remain of the view that no Archbishop of Sydney would be prophetic enough to act alone in so significant a matter without first gaining his Synod's assent.

Speaking to introduce the bill, I informed the Synod that 80 women in Sydney, of whom I was one, held the Archbishop's licence for various ministries. Deaconess Margaret Rodgers³ was saying publicly that women trained for ministry were returning to secular work due to a lack of recognition. I told the Synod that Deaconess Rodgers viewed it as 'vital for the church to give recognition to the ministry of women.'⁴ With some legal concerns earlier settled, the 1987 bill passed in both houses and was eventually signed by Archbishop Robinson very close to the expiry of the statutory month he had to decide. The Archbishop thanked me for the manner in which the matter was handled in Synod, which I took to mean not allowing it to become a confidence vote in his leadership. I had urged Synod to vote on the merits of the issue alone.

In February 1989 fourteen women and fourteen men were made deacons in St Andrew's Cathedral. Women continue to be deacons in this diocese, with some moving from here to be ordained priests in other places. Bishop Genieve Blackwell,⁵

fund raised to provide legal counsel for our case, led by then barrister Dr Clyde Croft AM SC, later a judge and currently a member of the AT.

³ Margaret Rodgers (1939-2014) had, among many other appointments in the Diocese of Sydney, been the Principle of Deaconess House (now Mary Andrews College). A very gifted and gracious woman, she was held in high regard by the male leadership of the Diocese, but she may well have functioned as the token woman whose presence excused the men from grappling with the issues raised by the women of MOW.

⁴ Notes for my First Reading speech introducing the Bill. While it is unusual to speak at that stage of debate, I considered it necessary to assure the Synod that legal objections had been resolved, the bill had been adopted in other dioceses, forty women were now deacons elsewhere, and that it was not to be treated as a confidence vote in the Archbishop but considered on the merits of the question before Synod. The First Reading was the time to make these matters clear. The Second Reading speech addressed the substantive issue of ordaining women to the historic diaconate.

⁵ Genieve Mary Blackwell (1962 -) was made a deacon in Sydney in 1993, ordained a priest in Bathurst in 1998 and has served as an assistant bishop in the Diocese of Melbourne since June 2015, following the retirement and death of Bishop Barbara Darling, Melbourne's first woman bishop and the second in Australia. Bp Blackwell was previously an assistant bishop in the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn from 2012 to 2015. She was the first woman to be consecrated a bishop in the Province

with whom I work is one, as is Archdeacon Vanessa Bennett, ⁶Vicar of Moonee Ponds, also in the same episcopal area as me. So much for the hope that they were to be 'permanent deacons'! I have my handwritten speeches and other Synod papers from this time, and again am wondering where to deposit them.

I suspect that my decision to accept appointment as Associate Dean in the then Melbourne College of Divinity, which enabled my ordination as deacon and priest in 1995, seemed to Patricia to be a defection. It was an irresistible invitation to lead Australia's oldest ecumenical theological college in a diocese where it was possible to test my vocation.

I have not offered this story to discredit Patricia in any way. She was a force to be reckoned with; clever, witty and with boundless energy, she was an insider whose prophetic critique bore truths which those with the authority and power to change things ignored or discounted. Patricia was impatient with the pace of change and frustrated that clergy she knew well, and who had been her contemporaries at university, were intransigent in their opposition. Women deacons was not enough of a step forward for her prophet's sense of urgency. Patricia paid a high price in her eventual sense of alienation from the Diocese and the Church, but her key role in changing the Australian Church is ever to be acknowledged and honoured.

MOW was launched in a time of great hope and a heightened expectation of imminent change. The Invitation to the official launch said,

If you believe that God gives women gifts and calls them to use those gifts fully as servants within the Body of Christ, then we invite you to join with others who believe the same.⁷

Dinner at the Crystal Ballroom, a meeting chaired by Stuart Barton-Babbage⁸, the very progressive but by then former Dean of Sydney, and entertainment by singer Peter

of New South Wales (the provincial bishop declining to participate, the bishop of Newcastle obliging) and the third in Australia.

⁶ Vanessa Bennett, Archdeacon of Essendon, Melbourne was made a deacon in Sydney in 2003 and ordained priest in Canberra-Goulburn Diocese in 2010; she was appointed to Moonee Pond's parish in 2016.

⁷ Invitation to the Inaugural Meeting of the Movement for the Ordination of Women, 28 September 1983 in the Crystal Ballroom, 2 Station Street, West Ryde in Sydney. The business was then owned and operated by Jill and David Cheetham. Dinner cost \$10, but the menu is now lost to memory.

⁸ The Very Reverend Dr Stuart Barton Babbage AM (1916-2012) was Dean of Sydney 1947-1953 and Dean of Melbourne 1953-1962. He held many other significant academic and ecclesial posts in

Campbell⁹ was all on offer for \$10. It cost \$4 to join the new MOW. And join people did, although my files have no record of how many.

By 1983 when MOW was launched, debate about the ordination of women had been going on in the Australian Church, in and out of Synods since 1976 when Melbourne Synod called on the national church to move ahead. Legislation, brought on the advice of the Appellate Tribunal, to make two amendments to the 1961 Constitution had passed in General Synod in 1981 and would have cleared the way for ordination to all three orders. The bill failed in Adelaide the following year and so did not gain the support of all metropolitan dioceses necessary for it to become a General Synod Canon.¹⁰

Women were active in various ministries in Sydney, even in 1983, though they were limited by custom and legislation. However, the future looked promising. The year before, 1982, I had been licensed, on the nomination of the Rector of Paddington, later Bishop Bruce Wilson¹¹, as a Parish Reader with authority to preach and assist in the administration of the sacraments. I was later to become a Diocesan Reader. By 1987, when moving the adoption of the bill to make women deacons, as I said earlier, eighty women were in what I called de-facto diaconal roles. Now is the time to make honest women of them, I told Synod!

Many, but not all were deaconesses, and the women's ministries included parish work, assisting in worship and lay administration of the cup, preaching, pastoral work

Australia and the USA. Well respected by evangelicals, he was a supporter of MOW's vision, and a good choice in the context of conservative Sydney Anglicanism.

⁹Peter Campbell was a parishioner of St Stephen's Newtown at the time, a Sydney parish well known then for its support of women clergy and attended by some of those involved in the formation of MOW.

¹⁰ See Porter, Muriel. *Women in the Church. The Great Ordination Debate in Australia*. (Penguin Books, 1989), pp 93-4. Dr Muriel Porter OAM, a licensed lay reader in Melbourne, has been a leading supporter of women's ordination from the outset and as an historian has documented the protracted, highly politicised debates and manoeuvres that took place over the frustrating years before women were made deacons and priests. Porter and I were the organisers of the question concerning women bishops taken to the Appellate Tribunal who ruled in favour, and from which followed the consecrations of the first two women bishops, Kay Goldsworthy and the late Barbara Darling in 2008.

¹¹ Bruce Wilson (1942 - 2021) was a very early supporter of women's ministry and the first bishop in NSW to ordain three former Sydney deacons to the priesthood in All Saint's Cathedral, Bathurst in December 1992. Having studied sociology and psychology following his ordination to better engage with contemporary issues, Bishop Wilson presented the Anglican way as a welcoming, intelligent and life-giving expression of the Christian faith. A charismatic leader, he inspired many people to embrace a joyous, fruitful membership of the Body of Christ.

in prisons, aged care homes and the courts, two women taught at Moore College, and one was in diocesan administration within the Registry. Everyone agreed that it was good to see women in these 'coalface' ministries. That was not the problem. Not everyone could imagine giving these women equal standing with men. 'Same duties,' I said, 'so why not the same name – deacon in the Church of God?'

In 1983, it seemed we were about to be on a roll as diocesan synods slowly affirmed ordaining women but struggled over the real and alleged legal issues. Little did we know the depths of opposition to the full equality of women. In truth I came to believe the debate amongst conservatives – Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholic alike – was really a question about the full *humanity* of women. The implicit, and in practice, answer was more often, 'not quite as fully as we men' rather than an affirming 'yes'.

Those of us who had earlier formed Anglican Women Concerned in 1975¹² were both naïve and realistic. We were naïve in that we thought since women had been ordained in Philadelphia in 1974,¹³ and western societies were enabling women greater opportunities than previous generations, the Church would follow. We were realistic in that we knew it was a huge change for women to be ordained. Zandra Wilson and I used to say we might see women deacons if we lived long enough.

Now I rejoice to see the statistics Melbourne's Colin Reilly has compiled. He writes that,

analysis of the active clergy listed in The Anglican Church of Australia Directory 2022-23 shows that there are now four dioceses with equal or greater numbers of female to male clergy: Bunbury in WA, Gippsland in

¹² Zandra Wilson, a primary school teacher married to Bruce Wilson, and I called this group into existence and brought the Church's attention to the issue of ordaining women. We first met in 1975 and organised street theatre outside General Synod's Opening Eucharist twice as well as being active at Sydney Synod. We were initially unaware that a group with the same hopes, Women in Holy Orders? (WHO?), was forming in Adelaide at the same time. When NZ woman priest Margaret Marsh was in Sydney she presided at a Eucharist around the coffee table at our meeting in 1981.

¹³ Elven women were irregularly ordained by a retired bishop in Philadelphia 29 July 1974. Though it was a struggle, the Episcopal Church eventually recognised these women's orders. Among them was an Australian living in the USA, Alison Cheek (1927-2019) who became well known to the members of MOW on her trips to Australia.

Victoria, Grafton in NSW and Willochra in SA. Overall, though, the proportion is 25% active female clergy in Australia.¹⁴

The picture is not all rosy, as many women can give witness. Colin Reilly's research reveals that across all Australian dioceses which permit female clergy to be vicars, ordained women tend to be in parishes which are further from the central cathedral than men. On average, women are ordained at an older age than men, and tend to take parishes – surely more accurately, *only be offered* parishes – in more difficult socio-economic areas or on a part-time basis.

The context is now also very different to those hopeful days of the 1980s. Now, Anglicans are 9.8% of the population, and all mainline churches are in institutional decline. Funding full stipends and filling vacant parishes is increasingly difficult everywhere, with women more likely than men to bear the weight of this reality.

The most entrenched and seemingly intransigent opposition to women priests and bishops is here, in the Diocese of Sydney. Will it ever change? Never, say never, but given the current situation it is hard to believe the shift in biblical hermeneutics, ecclesiology and engagement with cultural change that would allow for changed attitudes and practices is likely to happen anytime soon. In many ways, Sydney Diocese has painted itself into a corner and lives in an echo chamber. By elevating opposition to women priests and bishops to a key component of so called 'orthodox faith' they give themselves no room to move. It seems to me, now an outsider who makes occasional border crossings, that the attitudes of Sydney's leadership are harder held and more vehemently defended than previously.

At the launch of MOW I said,

one of the most consistent features of God's ongoing revelation is that it brings us new insights which challenge or disturb us. There is no doubt that on this matter [ordaining women] the Anglican Church is disturbed and is being challenged to implement profound change in its ministry.

At that time, none of us imagined decline in church attendance and influence, and the percentage of people identifying as Anglican, would occur as it has. Since those heady days, some things then hidden have been brought to light and rightly, though sadly, damaged our credibility. Most importantly the uncovering of the abuse of children

¹⁴ Colin Reilly, a statistician by training, is a long-standing leading layman in the Diocese of Melbourne, a member of the General Synod, and served in multiple key diocesan roles over some decades.

and vulnerable people by clergy and church members, and the reality of domestic abuse, most often intimate partner abuse (IPV) has come to the foreground of the institution's focus and reputation. Parish clergy and lay leaders now spend much of their time on compliance with the regulation of child safety, health and occupational safety, and professional standards taking its toll on time, energy, and morale. Truth to tell, I doubt the national church would now 'risk' taking a decision as momentous as ordaining women, quite apart from lacking the voting numbers. I only hope no one attempts to take it back, that is to rescind in canon law what had been accomplished.

With hindsight I can now see that Patricia Brennan was aware of domestic violence among her patients, including Christians, decades before the Church was ready to admit it. She saw the damaging results of the teaching called 'biblical headship' and knew it to be destructive of women's well-being and the equality of women and men to which MOW is committed. What she saw in her consulting rooms motivated her to oppose the false teaching that women are not equal to men in both being made in the image and likeness of God.

More recent research has shown that intimate partner violence (IPV) is no less present in all faith communities than the wider society, surely a giveaway that it is the patriarchal devaluing of women which causes this entitlement and its suffering. General Synod now has a Commission on Families and Culture whose purpose is 'promoting violence free families in the church and community'¹⁵. Their work is significant, supported by excellent research, and aims to provide insight, response, and prevention. Among the recommendations are changes in pastoral education and pastoral practice to better equip clergy and others to respond. Earlier research had reported that most clergy felt that having women on the pastoral team equips the Church to better respond to IPV.

The Anglican Church in many provinces, as here in most dioceses, has discerned that there is no better way to image the full equality of women and men than honouring God's call to women to lead the church. It's biblical, a powerful symbol, and a life-giving experience. Those wedded to conservative views of fixed gendered roles will never be convinced. Those defending closed views of God's revelation will never be open to the disturbing, energising new reality that the Church is still learning to fully

¹⁵ <https://anglican.org.au/our-work/family-violence/> The Reverend Tracy Lauersen chaired the working group who brought *The National Anglican Family Violence Report 2021* to the General Synod. Lauersen has recently been appointed National Program Manager for the General Synod Families and Culture Commission.

embrace. We ordained and active lay women are fresh expressions, incarnations in ourselves of a radical new creation in Christ.

The full equality of women is still very much a work in progress, and progress is being made. Yes, too slowly, but change continues. Recently three women deacons were ordained priests in the Diocese of the Murray,¹⁶ leaving only three of the twenty-three dioceses in Australia without women priests, that is Sydney and two satellites. I am afraid there is no such good news yet for you who live and worship in Sydney.

Your vision must be sustained by occasional glimpses of what is possible when women clergy visit, or when you are elsewhere. However, do not lose heart. By keeping alive the hope of change you are honouring the prophetic work launched with the founding of MOW forty years ago, though in different times when so much seemed possible. We are marking that launch today knowing that there are now bishops, priests and deacons who are women, in almost every diocese in Australia; that women bishops in England were among those taking part in the recent Coronation, the highest cultural performance of church and state there, and that around the Communion more and more places are – often surprisingly given the context – heeding God’s call of women to ordained ministry.

I have always said that those who should despair are those opposed. Eventually they will either need to retreat into a small enclave of yesterday’s patterns of living, a kind of ultra-orthodox, Amish type response, or embrace change and join the rest of us. I would like to think that on that Patricia Brennan, and I would agree.

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Archdeacon of Stonnington
Diocese of Melbourne.

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
17 September 2023.

¹⁶ Three deacons, Carol Cornwall, Margot Holt and Alison Dutton, were ordained as priests at Christ the King Cathedral, Mt Barker on 12 August 2023 following a vote by the Synod of the Murray 57-4 in favour of women priests. The Murray’s decision leaves only Sydney, Armadale and North West Australia as dioceses that have not ordained women priests.