

Push Is On for Women Bishops in Anglican Church

The Church of England must follow through on plans to ordain women bishops, its spiritual head said on Friday, as talks on the issue that have divided the church were set to re-open.

In his first address to its national assembly, the General Synod, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby said the Church must adapt to a changing society in which congregation numbers are falling in many increasingly secular countries.

“Let’s be clear, pretending that nothing has changed is absurd and impossible. In times of revolution we too in the Church of England must have a revolution,” said Welby, a former oil executive who was named successor to Rowan Williams as the head of the Anglican church in late 2012.

In November, reforms to allow women bishops fell at the final hurdle. Despite receiving support from 73 percent of Synod members, a vote narrowly failed to attain the necessary two-thirds majority in one of the Synod’s three houses.

Bespectacled and with his dog-collared clerical shirt rolled up to the elbows, Welby told the Synod at the University of York that the Church must get rid of its “baggage” after it came under sharp criticism in November for failing to push through gender reforms.

“If we say we will ordain women as priests and bishops, we must do so in exactly the same way as we ordain men,” he said.

On Monday, the Synod will take the first tentative steps to restart talks on the issue, but the full process will take around two years, meaning female bishops would not be permitted in the Church until 2015 at the earliest.

The archbishop looked to placate reformists as well as conservative factions, talking about healing the mistrust in the Church and not directly mentioning the issue of women bishops until over halfway through his speech.

While he is supportive of female bishops, Welby has opposed bills for gay marriage, with the first civil ceremonies in England and Wales set to be carried out in the spring next year. But he said he was “appalled” by homophobic behavior.

“We may or may not like it, but we must accept that there is a revolution in the area of sexuality,” he said.

A positive debate on Monday on the issue of women bishops would be a boost for Welby, as he looks to make his mark as the spiritual head of the 80 million-member Anglican church.

The Church approved the ordination of women priests in 1992, but delayed making them bishops because of opposition within its previously all-male clergy. Bishops play a key role in many Christian churches where only they can ordain new clergy.

Editing by Robin Pomeroy

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