



# SUB-ORDINATION – 21 YEARS LATER

BY COLIN FONG\*

In 1992, Julia Baird<sup>1</sup> and I wrote an article titled ‘Sub-ordination’,<sup>2</sup> which outlined the background to the struggle in enabling women to be priested in the Anglican Church in Australia.

Since then about a quarter of all Australian Anglican priests are female. In one sense a wag could suggest: “You’ve come a long way, baby!” From the middle of 2013, there are now four female Australian Anglican bishops.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately and ironically, there are no practising female Anglican priests in the dioceses of Sydney, Ballarat, The Murray and North West Australia. Many capable Sydney women have left Sydney and gone to be priested elsewhere in Australia.<sup>4</sup> Some people have become disenchanted with the church on this subject, they have left the church completely.

One Anglican male priest once suggested that to ordain a female was akin to ordaining a meat pie.<sup>5</sup>

The irony hinted at earlier is poignant since a lot of lobbying from the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW) originated in Sydney and one of its founders was Dr Patricia Brennan, died on 6 March 2011.<sup>6</sup> Last year, a book was published outlining the history and struggle for Anglican women's ministry and dedicated to Brennan.<sup>7</sup>

In November 2013, MOW held a conference to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the 1992 priesting of Anglican women in Australia.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately during the conference we heard the English synod rejected the proposal for female bishops, by the narrowest of votes.<sup>9</sup>

If you believe you have gifts, but cannot exercise them, how would you feel? The scriptures already suggest that individuals should utilise the gifts we are given.<sup>10</sup> However the ability of being a priest has resistance within some parts of the Australian Anglican Church.

Our prime minister, Julia Gillard scored enormous kudos by labelling the leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott, a misogynist.<sup>11</sup> I would like to suggest perhaps this label might be appropriate to parts of the Sydney Anglican Diocese.

I receive an unsolicited publication of Moore College, the Anglican college for training future priests in Sydney. It is called *Moore Matters* and in the past year and a half I have received about four issues. Yet in not one of these issues have they acknowledged one of their graduates, Genieve Blackwell has been made a bishop. I am sure if one their male graduates was made a bishop, this would be yelled from the rooftops! Blackwell's appointment has been noted in the secular media<sup>12</sup> and even in the New South Wales parliament.<sup>13</sup>

In the early years of MOW's foundation there was a bit of pushing and shoving. Some MOW members demonstrated outside and within synods with some singing and chanting, some Australian members travelled to London and demonstrated at the Lambeth Conference which are decennial assemblies of bishops of the Anglican Communion convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>14</sup>

Some church people argue about the centrality of scripture in the way they conduct their lives. Yet we all like to select the bits which suit us. The scriptures talk about divorce and for centuries the church has censured divorcees, yet today even in Moore College you have divorcees on staff. Leading evangelical Sydney churches have had divorced priests. Senior evangelicals have had gay offspring yet the church regularly pillories the existence of gays.

In 2011 Moore College established the Priscilla and Aquila centre which aims to encourage and promote further thinking about the practice of Christian ministry by women, in partnership with men. Is there anywhere a debate about the possibility of female priests? This is almost akin to the contemporary debate we are having in Australia about tax reform without considering an increase in the Goods & Services Tax (GST). Increasing the GST is pivotal to increasing revenues. Presently both major political parties are excluding increasing the GST. The federal opposition is prepared to discuss it and if it is an option, claim to take it to the next federal election in 2016.

Why have a Priscilla and Aquila centre without considering the full roles women can play in church needing women's gifts?



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## REFERENCES

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3. Kay Goldsworthy (Perth, 2008), Barbara Darling (Melbourne, 2008), Genieve Blackwell (Wagga Wagga, 2012), Alison Taylor (Brisbane, 2013)
4. Diane Nicolios was appointed in charge of women's ministry within the Sydney Diocese, and within a number of years resigned to become a priest in Melbourne.
5. Attributed to Father Ian Herring and the title of a film: *Fully ordained meat pie*, Film Australia, 1987  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5HSFvCLyS0>
6. Apart from her involvement with MOW, Brennan was in charge of the Sexual Assault Unit at Liverpool Hospital and subsequently renamed in her honour as the Brennan Unit. Part of the plaque installed in the Unit reads: "Dr Patricia Brennan had boundless energy and fierce drive and determination. She campaigned vigorously for social justice and prevention of interpersonal violence. She had a creative mind and a quirky sense of humour which enabled her to overcome obstacles others would find insurmountable."
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*Parliamentary debates* 6 March 2012 p 9021 [https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LA20120306052?open&refNavID=HA4\\_1](https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LA20120306052?open&refNavID=HA4_1)
14. See the front cover of Lindsay, E & Scarfe, J (ed) *Preachers, prophets & heretics: Anglican women's ministry*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2012