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Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa

Giving a Voice to Women: Equal Rights for Women in the Anglican Church **(Part One)**

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Women in New Zealand won the right to vote in 1893 and achieved complete political equality with men in 1919 when they finally became eligible to stand for parliament. (The first woman MP, however, was not elected until 1933.) The struggle in the Anglican Church to gain the ecclesiastical franchise for women began about the same time as the campaign for the parliamentary suffrage but took far longer to achieve. Women did not gain the right to vote at parish meetings until 1919. In 1922 they were finally given full equality with laymen, with the right to hold office as members of vestries and synods. That same year the first woman synod member in New Zealand, and probably in the Anglican Communion, took her seat at the Waiapu diocesan synod.

It is arguable that the gaining of equal rights for laywomen in the church was at least as important as the much more recent recognition of women's right to ordination, and yet virtually no attention has been given to the ecclesiastical franchise in parish or diocesan histories. Morrell in *The Anglican Church in New Zealand* gives a brief summary of the synodical process.¹ The published proceedings of diocesan synods and the General Synod document the slow steps towards legislative change; and both church and secular press frequently reported the church debates on female suffrage, sometimes in detail. This survey is based on these varied sources. Understanding will be helped by bearing in mind these points: 1) in Anglican synods, decisions require a majority

in each of the three houses of bishop(s), clergy, and laity; 2) generally, a vote is taken by voice or show of hands by the whole synod but a division into houses may be called for and there may also be a request for names to be recorded. Motions on women's right to vote usually required a division, often after lengthy debate. Resolutions do not have any binding force, thus when a diocese (or parish) did vote in favour of women's rights it was merely an expression of opinion which could be changed by a later synod. What was required was a change in the canons or church laws which could only be enacted by General Synod. The relevant canon was Title B, Canon V.

At the annual meeting of St Peter's, Onehunga, on 1 February 1884 it was proposed that 'at all General Meetings the ladies shall be invited to attend.'² Reports from a number of parish annual meetings over the next four decades show that at some women did attend. As the agenda usually included items of specific interest to women, such as reports from Ladies' Guilds and other women's groups, Sunday school matters and fund raising, it is not surprising that women were interested. They were not however allowed to vote, particularly when it came to the election of vestry members and synod representatives; neither could they be elected to these positions or be churchwardens.

Synodical debate on the issue seems to have begun at General Synod in 1883 when Archdeacon Govett moved for leave to bring in a

bill which would give female communicants the right to vote at parochial elections. The motion was given scant consideration (Bishop Nevill of Dunedin being one of those who was warmly opposed) and was lost.³ There is no record of further discussion until September 1891 when Waiapu Synod carried, by a narrow majority, a motion introduced by Canon Fox in favour of women's eligibility to vote at church meetings. Two days later in Wellington there was a lay majority for a similar motion, but this was nullified by the opposition of Archbishop Hadfield and a large majority of clergy. In November, Dunedin Synod carried a motion asking General Synod to alter the canons so that women might vote for churchwardens, vestrymen, and synodsmen.

In January 1892 an editorial in *The New Zealand Church News* (a Christchurch publication) noted 'something approaching to an agitation on foot in various quarters in favour of admitting women to the right of speaking and voting at Church meetings', arguing that the question was ripe 'for discussion, though not for decision', and suggesting that a draft canon might be submitted to all the diocesan synods.⁴ The next month a motion was brought to the General Synod in Wellington by Bishop Stuart of Waiapu. While moving to change the canon to allow woman over 21 to attend and vote at parish meetings, it expressly stated that it did not confer on any female member the right to be elected as a member of any vestry or synod. In response to a point of order based on what we now call inclusive language the elderly Primate, Archbishop Hadfield, gave his opinion that the word 'person' used in the Constitution of those permitted to act as electors had to be interpreted by the proviso which stated that 'he must be a communicant of 21 years of age.' Bishop Stuart having been called away, Sir John Hall, a well-known advocate of women's suffrage, then introduced a bill which passed its second reading

stage but was deferred until the next session to allow for consideration by diocesan synods. A lengthy editorial in the *Auckland Star* fulminated against the feebleness of the arguments against the bill, particularly those of the Archbishop who was one of the most strenuous opponents and who 'may be taken as the exponent of fossilized tradition . . . his contention . . . simply the peevish utterances of an irascible old man – a display of temper rather than rational argument.'⁵ At one point Hadfield even threatened to resign if the bill went to a second reading, declaring that he would not be a member of a Church which made itself ridiculous by acting counter to Christian tradition.⁶

The editor of *The New Zealand Church News* affirmed the decision to send the bill to the diocesan synods for their consideration, pointing out that the forthcoming annual parish meetings would give an opportunity for parishes to express their opinion before the diocesan synod met, and arguing that the 'great constitutional question' must be discussed seriously on its merits.⁷ It was discussed at a number of annual parish meetings in Christchurch diocese. At All Saints, Prebbleton, a number of lady members were welcomed to the meeting which voted unanimously in favour. At St John's, Hororata, where Sir John Hall was people's warden, there was also a unanimous vote in favour, but it is not known if women were present. At St John the Baptist, Rangiora, where ladies were present, there was a decided negative vote, as too at the Church of the Good Shepherd, Phillipstown, where it was the ladies who decided in the negative. At St Bartholomew's, Kaiapoi, where the parish finances were largely dependent on the work of the Women's Parochial Association, the decision was again negative. In a letter to *The Press* 'Clarissa' wrote of attending a parish meeting at which when the question came of giving women a vote there was a general fit of laughter and no-one would propose it and 'my wearing a bonnet

and dress prevented my speaking.’⁸ In his address to synod in August 1894, Bishop Nevill stated that he saw no reason against women having the ecclesiastical franchise if they wanted it, their invaluable services entitling them to some share in parochial administration. The Rev. R J Thorpe however in moving a motion against the General Synod bill asked the synod to declare that it was ‘highly inexpedient.’ After discussion the word ‘highly’ was removed.⁹ The motion was lost but there was no opposing motion in favour of the General Synod bill. Opinion in the Christchurch parishes seemed to be shifting: during 1895 at the AGM of vestries in the Ellesmere parochial district the vote was in favour of women being eligible to vote at parish meetings and St Mary’s, Merivale, and St Saviour’s, West Lyttleton, were also in favour.

At the Nelson synod in 1893, after a debate of over three hours, a majority of both clergy and laity opposed the General Synod bill. Bishop Mules expressed his opinion at some length in his opening address, admitting the truth of the reasons urged in favour but arguing that woman’s role was essentially complementary to that of man as his ‘helpmeet’; that St Paul would disapprove; that generally speaking women’s strength of understanding was inferior to that of men.¹⁰ The motion was again lost in 1894, after another lengthy debate in which the Bishop was again opposed.

At the annual Anglican Church Meeting in Auckland in 1893, several papers were read to a number of clergy and laity. Mr. J. H. Upton spoke on ‘Women’s Franchise’, regretting that the Church had not followed the State and given the ecclesiastical franchise to women. He was supported by the Rev. C. Nelson.¹¹ At synod a few days later a motion to grant women the franchise caused a lengthy debate. Although Bishop Cowie was in favour the motion was lost. In 1894 the parish of St Paul’s voted in favour of women having the right to vote at church

meetings and asked its synodsmen to support this. It is not known how many other parishes were in favour but there was a lively debate at the 1894 synod. The Rev. Mr. Beatty saw great dangers ahead in church, social and family life if the motion passed. The Rev. Mr. Lush thought the only thing more abominable than a masculine woman was an effeminate man. Mr. Rice said that if women were lowered to equality with men in the Church the few men who were taking an active part in the Church would become fewer. The Rev. Mr. Purchas argued that if women were fit to be deaconesses, they were surely fit to have a voice in the work of the church.¹² (Purchas was the vicar of St Peter’s, Onehunga, which since 1884 had invited women to attend parish meetings and which had as a parishioner Mrs Elizabeth Yates, the first female mayor in the world.) The motion was again lost.

Waiapu clergy and laity were again in favour in 1893 but, unlike Bishop Stuart his successor, Bishop Leonard Williams, was opposed so the motion was lost. After much discussion with many speakers the Dunedin synod in 1893 passed an amendment setting up a committee to consider the matter and present a report to the next synod. The following year the synod voted in favour of requesting the General Synod to make provision for women voting in church matters.

By the time General Synod met in Nelson in 1895 the results from the dioceses showed that in Auckland and Christchurch the clergy were against and the laity for the bill, while in Waiapu and Dunedin both houses were in favour. The matter had not been considered in Wellington. Sir John Hall reintroduced his bill giving women the right to vote, pleading hard for women as equal to men in intelligence and influence. He argued that it was essentially a matter for the laity, the great majority of whom were in favour in the diocesan synods. Bishop Julius (Christchurch) seconded the motion, saying that

the church must go with the times, and he could find no scriptural warrant for not allowing women to vote. The Rev. Mr. Beatty of Auckland made a vigorous speech against, stating that there was no such thing as equality of the sexes as each sex had its peculiar constitution and, according to Scripture, complemented each other to make one whole. The giving of the franchise to women had not led to political purification. Bishop Cowie (Auckland) was in support while the other four bishops were opposed. After a long debate the motion was lost although a majority of the laity was in favour. There was a large attendance of the public at the debate which was reported at length in several daily papers. One commented that the arguments against the bill were in many cases 'silly, narrow-minded, and ungenerous' and concluded 'it remains to be seen whether the Laity will tamely submit year after year to be thus thwarted by a handful of ecclesiastics.'¹³ A rather cautious editorial in *The New Zealand Church News* argued that 'the Church is somewhat unreasonable in denying to women an ecclesiastical enfranchisement' when the State had conferred on them the right to vote. While the Synod may have been right in allowing time for further consideration, the arguments against lacked validity and the wisdom and justice of depriving them of the right to vote, when 'they actually take a most prominent part in Church work', was open to question. There should be a limit however and 'no-one who sought to give her the franchise has thought of conferring with it any position or privilege other than that of recording her vote at Church meetings.'¹⁴

At the Dunedin synod in 1897, Archdeacon Gould moved an alteration in the canons which went further, proposing to allow women to exercise the same privileges as men in parochial government. Gould, a long-time advocate for women, acknowledged that similar motions had been defeated in the past but 'nothing was more

difficult to move than the inert mass of ecclesiastical conservatism.'¹⁵ The motion was lost on the clergy vote and an amendment to hold a plebiscite of women over 21 was lost on the voices. Three years later the synod carried a more restrictive motion moved by Gould, recommending to the General Synod a change in the canon to give women the right to vote.

At the Auckland synod the same year the Rev. Mr. Fendall argued that a great number of women wished to have the vote in return for the work they did, but the Rev. Mr. Averill was opposed on the grounds that the logical outcome would be to allow women to sit in the General Synod. Once again, the motion was lost on the clergy vote, although there was a majority of only one in the house of laity. At Christchurch after a lengthy debate interrupted twice by adjournments the motion was defeated on voices. One male correspondent described this as 'a barefaced, deliberate insult [to women] that they are not fit to vote or speak at parish meetings in spite of all the work they do for the Church.'¹⁶

At the General Synod in 1898 Sir John Hall once again introduced a bill to amend the canon to allow women to vote. Once again there was considerable public interest in the bill, especially among women. Just prior to the debate several prominent members of the suffrage movement wrote strongly in support in an article published in the *Star*¹⁷ and *The White Ribbon*, a newspaper published by the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and sent a special correspondent to the debate. Once again, the bill was defeated by a majority of bishops and clergy. Hall thought the clergy were obstructive over an issue which concerned laywomen, and which had strong lay support, writing to a friend that he grieved that the 'most obstinate opponents are found in the ranks of those who must know best the value of woman's work and should be the most foremost advocates of justice for them.'¹⁸ The bishops in

favour were the Primate, Cowie of Auckland, Wilson of Melanesia, and Julius of Christchurch. Bishop Julius commented that in listening to the debate 'he seemed to be wafted away from our New Zealand shores to those of the Bosphorus, where women were shrouded and kept out of sight.' He thought it utterly unreasonable to say to a woman 'You shall not vote at parish meetings' and then say, 'We owe 300 pounds on our organ, go and collect it.'¹⁹

The debate continued without significant change. At Waiapu Synod in 1899 a motion was lost by one vote, that of Bishop Williams. At the Wellington Synod in June 1900 Bishop Wallis expressed some misgiving over the issue his opening address and appeared to have not quite made up his mind. He thought it important to know what women wanted and asked clergy to ascertain the views of women church workers.

In 1901, no bill on the matter was brought to the General Synod and a motion by Mr. Thomas Tanner and Dean Hovell, both from Waiapu, to introduce such a bill on the grounds that as women did most of the work it would be justice to enfranchise them, was lost by a narrow majority in the house of clergy. The Observer, an Auckland journal, noted that though Auckland diocesan synod had voted in favour the strongest opposition at the General Synod came from Auckland clergymen, namely the Revs. McMurray, Calder and Beatty 'who no doubt influenced the adverse decision very considerably.' Noting that 'the Church in the colonies depends almost for its existence on women' the writer argued that 'it should at least give women a voice in the management of its parochial affairs.' The policy of the Anglican Church towards its women was 'narrow-minded and strangely opposed to the progressive spirit of the age.'²⁰

In 1902 at the Nelson synod a motion to recommend a change in the canon was lost, 'the

stock argument of pointing to her late Majesty as evidence of the capabilities of a woman to fill any office was no argument in favour, but rather against, since her late Majesty was well known to utterly oppose the idea of the female franchise.'²¹

At the 1904 General Synod in Auckland Mr. Tanner again introduced a bill allowing women aged 21 or over to vote at parish meetings. A large number of women in the audience heard a speech described as 'somewhat disconnected' in which Tanner argued that women would manage many things better than men, that in the American and Canadian churches women already had the franchise while in England both houses of convocation had admitted the principle, and that women themselves had asked for this act of justice.²² Archdeacon Grace thought men were motivated by selfishness in opposing female suffrage in church affairs and Mr. Fielder thought it insulting to women to deny them the right to vote. Archdeacon Harper said that what he had seen of the franchise of women in political life did not incline him to the measure and New Zealand had no need to look to other countries for guidance. Archdeacon Averill also opposed the bill, saying that in his parish all the funds were raised by men and the majority of workers were men. At 10pm, after an adjournment, Canon McMurray moved to pass to the next order of business, and this was carried on division.

At the Wellington synod in 1906 a motion to allow women to vote carried while Christchurch in 1908 sent resolution asking for change to the General Synod. At the 1910 General Synod in Wellington however the matter was again disposed of by a motion to pass to the next order of business. At Nelson synod in 1910 a motion moved by Archdeacon Gould on women's right to vote was the only item that excited any particular interest and was carried on voices with only one member speaking strongly in

opposition. In 1913 and 1915 the motion was carried by large majority.

At Waiapu Synod in 1912 the motion was carried. The Rev. Kohere (the only Māori mentioned by name in any reports) said that the idea of excluding women was 'a relic of the dark ages ... [S]ince the Māoris had become Christianized they had learned that women were equal with men.' He expressed surprise that the Church was reluctant to follow the example of the State.²³

At Christchurch in 1912 a motion requesting General Synod to alter the legislation to allow women the right to vote was again lost, the combined votes of clergy and laity showing 47 for, 50 against. During the debate one speaker wondered what Sister Edith would think. Sister Edith responded by a letter to The Press, stating her opinion that 'every woman communicant has as much right as a man communicant, an opinion held for the last eighteen years, a matter of right and wrong and not a matter of expediency.'²⁴

At General Synod in Nelson in 1913 to a bill to provide for 'womanhood suffrage on the same basis as that of men' was once again passed over without a vote being taken. Successive General Synods were no more successful in legislating for change although several dioceses continued to press for it. The arguments continued on the familiar lines. Women were praised for their charitable and social work for the church, for their fundraising efforts and their attendance at worship. For some, it was only just that they should also have a voice in church affairs. Some argued that it was anomalous that women should have the parliamentary franchise and not be able to vote at parish meetings. Others maintained that women were by nature too emotional and unfit for business affairs. Some thought the parliamentary franchise had had negative results. Probably the most common argument was that allowing women more responsibility would mean less participation by

men. A few saw it as the thin edge of the wedge though those promoting the change insisted that they did not want to extend women's rights any further.

At General Synod in Christchurch in May 1916 the decision was for the proposed Bill was very close with laity and bishops in favour while the clergy vote was split evenly with eight for and eight against. The Bill was rejected as when the division was taken, Archdeacon Cowie who was in favour, was improperly excluded, the doors being closed too early. The Primate later admitted the mistake, but Cowie did not press for a further division. While acknowledging that the motion had been lost by only one vote, one editorial was outspoken in its criticism of 'the ingratitude and meanness' of 'this stupid, typically Tory discrimination against women [which] is out of accord with the spirit of the times' when women were making 'splendid sacrifices for their country.'²⁵

When General Synod met at Napier 1919 a Bill introduced by Mr. J. White (Nelson) was finally passed. This was seconded by Mr. Birch representing the diocese of Wellington which the previous year had unanimously passed a motion in favour of women having the vote. Title B, Canon V, was amended by the addition of a new clause 21, to permit women aged over 21 to attend and vote at parish or parochial district meetings and to vote for the election of Churchwardens, Vestrymen and Synodsmen. Archdeacon Williams introduced a further resolution that every person entitled to vote at a parish meeting should be eligible to serve as a churchwarden or vestryman, arguing the Synod should be 'logical, chivalrous, and consistent.'²⁶This was also passed, but as it merely expressed the opinion of the Synod it could not over-ride the exclusionary canon. The passing of the canon after decades of debate received hardly any attention in both church and secular press, presumably because the debate itself had not

been contentious and because the overwhelming concern was with issues related to the war.

The following year the Sixth Lambeth Conference brought together bishops from the whole Anglican Communion. Present from New Zealand were Bishops Averill, Auckland; Julius, Christchurch; and Sedgwick, Waiapu. One of the issues at the conference was the ministry of women, the subject of considerable debate in the Church of England for some years. A report had been prepared on 'The Position of Women in the Councils and Ministrations of the Church' and one section of the Conference was devoted to this. The result was eight resolutions, six of which dealt with the Order of Deaconesses, recognised as the only order of ministry for women. In the context of debate over women's ministries the question of women's representation caused little interest and Resolution 46 stated unequivocally that 'Women should be admitted to those Councils of the Church to which laymen are admitted, and on equal terms. Diocesan, Provincial, or National Synods may decide when or how this principle is to be brought into effect.'

Lambeth resolutions are not binding unless adopted by individual Anglican Churches but are nevertheless influential and act to an extent as guidelines. In his charge to the General Synod in 1922 Archbishop Julius acknowledged the services of women to King and Country during the 'Great War', referred to the decisions of the 1919 General Synod and to the 1920 Lambeth resolution, and said it was time the whole matter 'was settled once and for all.'²⁷ He gave notice that with the approval of the bishops he would move that the principle of equality be adopted. In so moving he admitted that men 'were not so wise' and had made rather a mess of things, demanding that 'if women could bring something ... that was lacking, in God's name, let them come

in!'²⁸ The motion was seconded by Bishop Averill and passed on the voices, without dissent and to applause. Standing orders were then suspended to enable the Bill to pass immediately through all the necessary stages. After a thirty-year struggle, on 8 May 1922 General Synod had at long last passed a statute amending Title B by adding a clause stating that 'the terms Layman, Vestryman, Synodsmen, Parishioner and man, shall be held to include persons of either sex.'

There was little public response to the passing of this 'momentous measure.'²⁹ There was much more interest in the debates on Bible in Schools and divorce law. Probably most would have agreed that it was an inevitable consequence of the 1919 decision to enfranchise women. According to the Auckland Star, always a critic of the Church, 'Notoriously conservative, the Anglican Church has at last bowed to the force of public opinion.'³⁰

The Waiapu Synod met a few months after the General Synod, in September 1922. In his opening address Bishop Sedgwick gave considerable attention to how the General Synod had dealt with the pressing questions of the day covered by the Lambeth Resolutions of 1920. In his final comment on the Position of Women in the Church he noted that judging by the unanimous passing by General Synod of the Bill admitting women to the Councils of the Church on equal terms with men it would appear that this was no longer a debatable matter, adding that: 'It is significant of the progressiveness of our Māori people that the first female representative of our Diocesan Synod should be a Māori.'³¹ He did not however name her.

Who was this woman?

See *Giving a Voice to Women - Part Two*

Endnotes

- ¹ W. P. Morrell, *The Anglican Church in New Zealand*, Dunedin, 1973, 130-1.
- ² Edna Soar, *History of the Anglican Church of S. Peter's, Onehunga*, Auckland, [1948], 11.
- ³ *Daily Telegraph*, 13 April 1883, 3.
- ⁴ *The New Zealand Church News*, January 1892, 8.
- ⁵ *Auckland Star*, 20 February 1892, 4.
- ⁶ *Auckland Star*, 16 February 1892, 5.
- ⁷ *The New Zealand Church News*, April 1892, 9.
- ⁸ *Press*, 2 May 1892, 6.
- ⁹ *Star*, 1 September 1894, 6.
- ¹⁰ *Nelson Evening Mail*, 4 November 1893, 5.
- ¹¹ *Auckland Star*, 23 October 1893, 5.
- ¹² 'The Anglican Synod of Auckland has a Tussle with the Woman Question' [cartoon], *Observer*, 27 October 1894, 12.
- ¹³ *Feilding Star*, 24 April 1895, 2.
- ¹⁴ *The New Zealand Church News*, March 1895, 3-4.
- ¹⁵ *Otago Daily Times*, 31 December 1897, 4.
- ¹⁶ *Star*, 25 October 1897, 4.
- ¹⁷ 'Women and the Church', *Star*, 8 February 1898, 3. Writers included Mrs K.W. Sheppard, Mrs E. W. Cunnington, Mrs Ada Wells, and an anonymous 'Churchwoman.'
- ¹⁸ Jean Garner, *By his own merits: Sir John Hall – pioneer, pastoralist and premier*, Horoarā [N.Z.], c.1995, 268.
- ¹⁹ *The White Ribbon*, February 1898, 8.
- ²⁰ *Observer*, 2 March 1901, 2.
- ²¹ *Colonist*, 13 November 1902, 4.
- ²² *Wanganui Chronicle*, 8 February 1904, 2.
- ²³ *Waiapu Church Gazette*, 1 November 1912, 63.
- ²⁴ *The Press*, 21 October 1912, 8.
- ²⁵ *Free Lance*, 19 May 1916, 8.
- ²⁶ *Evening Post*, 7 May 1919, 9.
- ²⁷ *Evening Post*, 8 May 1922, 8.
- ²⁸ *Auckland Star*, 8 May 1922, 2.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Auckland Star*, 8 May 1922, 2.
- ³¹ *Proceedings of the Synod of the Diocese of Waiapu*, Napier, 1923, 34.