

Church of England approves process to ordain female bishops: Vatican warns of disruption in unity talks

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After deciding that ordaining women bishops is theologically justifiable, the Church of England on July 10 adopted a plan to explore the practical and legislative steps to make it happen.

The Church of England July 8 affirmed at its General Synod at York University that admitting women to the episcopate “is consonant with the faith of the church.” The motion passed with majorities in each house—bishops (31 to 9), clergy (134 to 42) and laity (123 to 68). The enabling motion adopted two days later invites dioceses, deaneries and parishes “to continue serious debate and reflection” on the issues.

Clergy and parishes opposed to women as bishops may threaten to withhold funds and seek enclaves of male-only clergy and like-minded bishops. One opponent of female bishops, David Houlding, said the vote was a “huge insult to the Roman Catholic Church.”

The Vatican’s top ecumenical official, Cardinal Walter Kasper, in June warned Church of England bishops against introducing women bishops. Kasper said such a move would render any hopes of Catholic-Anglican unity “unreachable.”

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams had responded to Kasper, saying that “nothing is served by avoiding these hard questions.” After the General Synod approved women bishops in principle, Williams said that what remained was “the question of how and when.” Many officials predict the election of women as bishops will not be canonically possible before 2012.

N. T. (Tom) Wright, bishop of Durham, who coauthored another response to Kasper, expressed relief that the stage of theological and practical debate is at hand. Upholding the place of scripture in the debate, Wright said that Mary Magdalene was

the first person entrusted by Jesus with the Good News. “The Anglican tradition needs to go back to scripture and read it afresh with respectful engagement.”

The Church of England first ordained women priests in 1994. Only three other Anglican bodies—those in the U.S., Canada and New Zealand—have women bishops, though another 11 of the Anglican Communion’s 38 regions have accepted women bishops in principle. In June, Episcopalians elected Katharine Jefferts Schori to a nine-year term as their presiding bishop.