

Dealing with rebels: Episcopal resistance to women's ordination

by [Jean Caffey Lyles](#) in the [August 2, 2000](#) issue

In the waning days of the Episcopal Church's July 5-15 General Convention in Denver, a weary sense of déjà vu descended on the bishops and the lay and clergy deputies who make up the church's highest legislative body. Twenty-four years ago the General Convention made headlines by permitting the ordination of women as priests. That decision came only after acrimonious debate throughout the church, fueled by the "irregular" ordinations of several women conducted by four bishops who risked their own prestige by the unauthorized laying on of hands.

This year the convention faced the question of how to deal with the bishops and dioceses that have not fully admitted women to candidacy, priesthood or positions of priestly service. Despite the definitive word issued by the 1976 House of Bishops and House of Deputies, resistance to women's ordination remained, for a time, widespread. For some years a "conscience clause" allowed bishops who did not want to ordain women to opt out.

In 1976 advocates predicted that traditionalist bishops who opposed women's ordination would sooner or later retire or die, and that more progressive leaders would replace them. The next generation of women, they said, would not face such barriers to the priesthood. Today the Episcopal Church has hundreds of women priests and more than a half-dozen female bishops.

But the "rebels redux" question recurs triennially. Three dioceses—Fort Worth, Texas; Quincy, Illinois; and San Joaquin, California—continue to be regarded as holdouts on full acceptance of women priests. Legislation adopted in Denver sets a deadline of September 1, 2002, for compliance. The House of Bishops and Executive Council (which acts between conventions) will monitor progress, and a task force is to "visit, interview, assess and assist" the three dioceses in their compliance.

All three dioceses contend that they are in compliance with the canons. Using the so-called Dallas Plan, Fort Worth Bishop Jack Iker sends any woman who aspires to priesthood over to nearby Dallas, where Bishop James Stanton handles the candidacy process. If a parish in Fort Worth should call a woman rector, the parish would remain part of the Fort Worth diocese, but the rector would be “canonically resident” in Dallas and under Stanton’s oversight.

The Quincy Diocese claimed to be in compliance because it has two women deacons. San Joaquin made a somewhat better case, reporting that four women are in various stages of the process leading to the priesthood, in addition to several female candidates for deacon. One woman priest serves as an assistant in a parish but is not licensed by the diocese. The convention commended San Joaquin for its progress but did not deem that it was fully compliant.

Bishop John Howe of Central Florida, objecting to the planned task force, said, “Assistance that is neither requested nor desired is not assistance. It is imposition.” Bishop Chet Talton of Los Angeles compared the rebel dioceses’ “unusual arrangements” to ruses used in another era by “people who didn’t want to receive the ministry of people of color.”

Charles Hough, clergy deputy from Fort Worth, took offense at a Maryland deputy’s suggestion that the rebel dioceses were “practicing local option” on women’s ordination, just as conservatives have accused pro-gay forces of promoting local option by dioceses that favor allowing same-sex blessings in the church. Hough countered that “the majority of catholic Christendom” continues to maintain a male-only priesthood; therefore it is the Episcopal Church that “is practicing local option.”

While some deputies believed that establishing a deadline reflected a “spirit of legalism,” deputy James Bradberry of Southern Virginia warned of the “dangerous precedent” of 25 years of allowing a few dioceses to say, “We’re not going to follow the canons of this church.”

In addition to the Episcopal body’s historic agreement to enter into “full communion” with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (see the report in the July 19-26 issue), the convention took several other significant ecumenical steps (some with virtually no debate, or “flying under the radar” on a consent calendar).

A new bilateral dialogue with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was approved—a step that can only enhance the Episcopal Church’s ambivalent relationship with the

Consultation on Church Union (COCU), a nine-denomination dialogue that has been seeking some form of church unity since the early 1960s. For much of COCU's history, theological impasses have centered on disagreements between Episcopal and Presbyterian bodies. The PCUSA does not have bishops but rather a system of governance that gives corporate oversight authority to elected bodies of laity and clergy, such as regional presbyteries.

The convention committed the church to continue participation in and dialogue with COCU, which in 2002 will become "Churches Uniting in Christ" (CUIC). Episcopal ecumenists believe more talks are needed before the denomination will be ready to join wholeheartedly with its eight Protestant dialogue partners in a relationship tantamount to the "full communion" it has declared with the Evangelical Lutherans. No COCU denomination other than the Episcopal Church has "the historic episcopate" (the tradition dating to the early church of an unbroken succession of bishops ordained by laying on of hands), although some do have a threefold ordained ministry.

The convention also called on the World Council of Churches to explore ways that full WCC membership for the Roman Catholic Church might be made possible. It asked the church's ecumenical relations committee to research the possibility of dialogues with Pentecostal churches, as well as asking for conversations on theology and ethics with the National Association of Evangelicals.

And within the Anglican family, the convention requested a dialogue with the breakaway bodies known as "Continuing Anglican Churches" with an eye to "reconciling" all who stand in the Anglican tradition.

In another action that induced a spell of *déjà vu* for anyone who has watched mainline churches for the past 25 years, the convention mandated antiracism training for church workers in dioceses and provinces and on national committees, commissions, agencies and boards. If antiracism training isn't a sure-fire cure for racism (to judge from the failure to expunge it from all those denominations that have sponsored such sessions over the years), proponents say it does increase sensitivity.

The body expressed support for theological education for Native Americans by granting \$375,000 in funding to the Alaska-based Indigenous Theological Training Institute. It also increased funding for three historic black colleges related to the

Episcopal Church from \$950,000 each a year to \$1.2 million each a year for the next three years.

Some young people represented their provinces of the church as an official “youth presence,” while more than 1,400 youth converged on nearby Boulder for a youth event—Y2K4JC, or “Year 2000 for Jesus Christ.” Keynoter at the youth event was General Colin L. Powell, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who grew up attending an Episcopal church in the Bronx. Meanwhile, back at the convention, decision-makers approved \$250,000 in seed money over three years to launch an Episcopal Youth Corps for young people ages 17 to 30. The funds will be used to fund support and training for volunteers for “servant ministries.”