

Archbishop Woods, Fr Taylor, Women's Ministry, and Leadership in the Church  
Philip Nicholls, VAT Treasurer

In June and July 1976, the then staunchly Anglo-Catholic parish Christ Church Brunswick hosted a series of events, advertised with the following poster:



women and the ministry

studies in judaeo—  
christian male prejudice  
and primal fears?

Feast of St Barnabas: 15 June 1976: 6.30 pm  
Sung Eucharist followed by a light meal  
President and speaker: the Rt Revd G. Muston,  
Bishop in the Southern Region

1 July 1976: 8 pm  
Dr Barbara Thiering, lecturer, University of Sydney,  
and author of *Created Second*

6 July 1976: 8 pm  
The Revd Dr J. Gaden, Chaplain, Monash University

13 July 1976: 8 pm  
Address by Mr R. Grove,  
lecturer, University of Melbourne,  
and discussion led by panel of  
theological student, deaconess, and  
Sister of the Community of the Holy Name

Feast of St James the Great  
27 July 1976: 6.30 pm  
Sung Eucharist followed by a  
light meal. President and speaker:  
the Most Revd Dr T.T. Reed,  
sometime Archbishop of Adelaide

All inquiries to the Vicar,  
the Revd R.D. Farrer, 3A 1064  
8 Glenlyon Road, Brunswick 3056

Registration fee: \$4 all sessions,  
\$1 individual sessions

CHRIST CHURCH  
BRUNSWICK

Advertisement for Christ Church seminars, by Robert Langsford

Source: *Women and the Ministry* (Christ Church Press: Brunswick, 1976)

(Sherlock 147)

Shortly after, a few days before Sunday 3 October 1976, 'the Synod of the Diocese of Melbourne passed a resolution which reads as follows:

"This Synod considers that there are no fundamental objections to the ordination of women to the priesthood, and urges the Australian Church through General Synod to take whatever steps are necessary to authorise the admission of women to the ordained ministry. Further, this Synod asks for a Diocesan Committee to consider ways in which such a ministry may most effectively be implemented in our Church at the present time.'" (Woods 90)

One can sense the tension between at least some Anglo-Catholics, opposed to the ordination of women, and the majority of the Diocese. There were some conservative Evangelicals – who have come to be called Complementarians – in Melbourne, also vehemently opposed to women's ordination. One wonders whether they ever caucused with the conservative Anglo-Catholics to attempt to scarp progress on this issue. In any case, the 1976 Resolution left a disaffected minority at both ends of the Anglican breadth – one suspects these are the same minorities that thwart progress still.

Archbishop Frank Woods presided over the Synod. He had been archbishop for almost 20 years and knew well his diocese and its breadth. I believe that he knew that the vast majority of his see was in favour of women's ordination, as was he, and that it was his responsibility to try to bring the outliers into the middle of the debate.

Everybody loves a drama ...

*2pm Friday 1 October 1976*

*The Vicar's Study, St Peter's Eastern Hill (another staunchly Anglo-Catholic Melbourne parish)*

*The Vicar, Fr Geoffrey Taylor, sits at his desk*

*The telephone rings. The Vicar answers.*

VICAR: *[a powerful and booming, yet attractive voice]* Father Geoffrey speaking.

ARCHBISHOP: *[a quiet, friendly voice]* My dear Geoffrey, Frank here.

VICAR: Good afternoon, my Lord. I trust you have survived the synod?

ARCHBISHOP: Thank you, yes. And I trust you are well?

VICAR: Well enough, yes, but concerned at new directions for our diocese.

ARCHBISHOP: *[genuinely concerned]* Yes ... yes ... We must all continue to pray for one another that we can keep the family together.

VICAR: Sadly, I fear this family might be headed for a breakdown.

ARCHBISHOP: You know I will do all I can to prevent that, Geoffrey. *[silence]* With that in mind, I've telephoned this afternoon to ask a favour.

VICAR: Certainly, Archbishop, I'll help in any way I can.

ARCHBISHOP: May I preach in your parish on Sunday? I feel that many of your flock might share your concerns about the future of our church and I want to assure them that they'll not be left comfortless. *[more silence]*

VICAR: May I speak frankly, my Lord?

ARCHBISHOP: Certainly, Geoffrey.

VICAR: I'm concerned that any attempt to change hearts and minds in my parish might create more disharmony. I think it's too early. They need time to consider the outcomes of the Synod before they're addressed by their Archbishop.

ARCHBISHOP: As I say, Geoffrey, I want to reassure them, not further upset them. Not that I need your permission to preach in your parish, but I have telephoned to ask it out of the great respect that I hold for your parish and its churchmanship, and for you personally, dear Geoffrey.

VICAR: I understand, Archbishop. I will expect you before the 11am Mass on Sunday morning.

ARCHBISHOP: Thank you, Geoffrey. You know you can trust me.

VICAR: It's not a matter of trust, Archbishop, but rather one of pastoral concern for my parish.

ARCHBISHOP: I understand, Geoffrey. Good bye.

In the event, the sermon Woods preached was a powerhouse of tact, theology, scriptural exegesis, and pastoral care. He begins by naming the immediate controversy, but wishes 'to speak not directly about whether or no women should be ordained, but whether or no it is possible that widely held beliefs in our church, beliefs that have been confirmed by its practice, may still be open to question and eventually to change.' He goes on to demonstrate that 'even within the pages of Scriptures tremendous changes in the beliefs of those who were the people of God are very evident.' He argues that the baptism of Cornelius and his family (Acts 10) marked a watershed moment in the life of the early Church: 'Circumstance had changed. It was right for our Lord to confine himself almost entirely to Israel. But now the *Kairos*, God's time, had come and the Church was led by the Holy Spirit to take the first steps towards true Catholicity.' (Woods 90-91) He concludes:

I am not at this point pleading for the ordination of women to the priesthood. I am pleading with Christian people, clergy and laity, to keep their minds and hearts open to the influence of God the Holy Spirit and to be assured, and to be willing to proclaim, that they mean what they say when they declare in the Creed that they believe in the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. Those words in the Creed are consequent on the belief of the Church in God the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit has never been confined by the rules and regulations that men and women make for themselves. He has led the Church on from truth to truth and will surely continue to do so. 'When the Spirit of Truth is come, he will guide you into all truth' (John 16.13)' (Woods 940)

Woods saw division in his see. With tenacity and tact, he took himself to a hotbed of disaffection and sowed the seeds of change with cogent theological arguments and genuine respect and pastoral concern. He understood that if hearts and minds were to change, they needed to resolve to change themselves through thought, prayer, and the ministrations of the Holy Spirit – there was nothing he could do to change their minds, but just to ask them to be open to the Holy Spirit would lead them and the whole Church in God's Way. There was no 'quick fix' for this disaffected minority, rather change needed to be led by the *Kairos*, God's time.

Woods laid up his episcopal staff on his 70th birthday, 6 April 1977, six months after preaching this sermon. St Peter's appointed its first female associate priest in 2023.

What can we learn about Christian leadership from this vignette? First, that shepherds can never be absent from their flocks; that even in the midst of deep division, a good shepherd must be able to be with, and pray with and for all sides. Second, that sound theology and prayerful consideration must be the primary informers of decision making. Third, that good outcomes follow the brave and tenacious – but never the foolhardy – even if they do take two generations. And fourth, that wisdom does not only favour the experienced, but can attend she or he who studies the ways of the wise. Let us look for evidence of these qualities in our new Archbishop of Melbourne, to be elected in 2025.

Philip Nicholls  
2 April 2024

Philip is a graduate of the Arts and Music Faculties of the University of Melbourne, and holds a Master of Philosophy degree in Anglican Liturgy from Trinity College, the University of Divinity. He is Director of Music, Lay Minister, Child Safe Officer, and Reconciliation Working Group Convenor at St Paul's Cathedral, Secretary of the Australian Hymn Association, and Treasurer of VAT.

Cited

Sherlock, Peter. 'Australian women priests?: Anglicans, feminists and the newspapers.' *Lilith* 10, 2001, 137–152. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.497647840589602> accessed May 2024.

Woods, Frank. *Forward in Depth. Sermons and Addresses*. Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1997.