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A Church with Newly-Opened Doors

The Ordination of Women Priests in the Anglican-Episcopal Church of Japan

Voices began calling for the ordination of women in the Anglican-Episcopal Church of Japan (Nippon Sei Ko Kai) in the 1980s. This article examines the worldwide debates on this issue, along with the development of feminist theology, and the responses within Japan. It traces the arguments presented both for and against the ordination of women, and the process that eventually resulted in the actual ordination of a woman as a priest in 1998. This article looks at this issue in terms of a reformation of the structure of sexual discrimination that had been formed in the church in Japan, and how it was the start of a way to revive the church in its mission to truly spread the Gospel of Christ.

KEYWORDS: Anglican-Episcopal Church—women's ordination—ministry—priests—feminist theology—women studies

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THE ANGLICAN-EPISCOPAL Church of Japan (or Nippon Sei Ko Kai [NSKK] 日本聖公会)¹ was established in 1887 through the efforts of missionaries and bishops sent to Japan by the Anglican-Episcopal churches of the United States and England. The Constitution and Canons delineated at that time do not mention male-female gender as a condition for seeking the priesthood (MOTODA 1914). No doubt this was due to the assumption, not necessary at the time to record, that only men could seek such a position. From the early years of this preaching of the Gospel, however, many women missionaries were dispatched to Japan from the home missions, and these women were involved in various evangelical and educational activities. Again, there were many Japanese women who served as evangelists, and many seminaries and schools for nurturing women were established throughout the country. The roles of these women, however, were not considered to be “holy orders” or “ministers” (*seishoku* 聖職), but rather roles of service by the laity who served under the jurisdiction of male priests.² At the time, the way for a woman to become a minister was completely closed. Historical records on the church refer mostly to the activities of male ministers, so it is not easy to find records and related materials that testify to the activities of women evangelists or missionaries. The historical records of the NSKK marginalize the existence of these women evangelists, rendering them powerless and invisible.

Around the end of the 1980s, voices calling to open the way for women to be accepted for the ministry began to be heard within the church. For twelve years beginning in 1986, not only the provincial synod—the highest level of decision-making for the NSKK—but also each diocese, each church, and all related committees, and voluntary organizations such as women’s associations, sponsored active discussions from many perspectives on the issue of ordaining women to the ministry. In May of 1998, after long discussions, the general meeting of the NSKK decided to modify the church Canons to allow women to seek the priesthood, thus finally opening the door to the ministry for women. How-

1. [Editors’ note: This English translation follows the romanization of the official NSKK Constitution and Canons established in 1965. English translation by Paul L. Swanson. The original title of the essay is 「新しい扉を開いた教会—日本聖公会における女性の司祭叙任」.]

2. The Constitution and Canons of the Anglican-Episcopal Church recognize three types of “holy orders” or “ministries” (聖職): bishop (主教), priest (司祭), and deacon (執事). In general, a candidate for these orders will receive education and training at a seminary, seek the role of deacon upon receiving an appointment from the church and, after passing a written exam, be ordained as a deacon by a bishop. A person appointed in this manner is referred to as a “minister.”

ever, due to guidelines that were established in order to avoid a schism in the NSKK, as of 2017 there are still dioceses and ministers who refuse to accept the ordination of women.

As one deeply involved in the movement to realize the ordination of women, including the discussions and consultations within the NSKK, and as one who has been ordained as a priest and is currently serving as a woman priest, I will hereby record the historical background of this reform and the concurrent issues within the church. I will also attempt to shed light on the activities of women Christians that tend to be overlooked, reexamine the significance of the new door that has opened for the ordination of women, and consider what sort of vision should be sought for the future.

*Historical Currents in the Ordination of
Women in the Anglican-Episcopal Church Around the World*

“WOMEN DEACONS”: THE FIRST WOMEN MINISTERS

The first ordination of a woman as a minister in the NSKK occurred in 1978, when the evangelist Shibukawa Ryōko was ordained as a deacon by the Chūbu diocese in central Japan. We must point out, however, that before this ordination was possible, there was a system defining a “deaconess” that served as a basis for the issue of women ministers.

In the Anglican Church of England, the category of a “deaconess” as an ancient role was revived in 1862, more than a hundred years before the first ordination of a woman as a deacon in Japan. At this time a deaconess was ordained by the London bishop (see HEIWITT and HIATT 1973). A woman was ordained as a deaconess also in the United States in the late 1880s. At the General Synod of the NSKK in 1891, a committee to study the development of a Canon concerning women deacons was established. The Lambeth Conference of 1920 determined that the ordination of a woman deacon was equivalent to the role of a minister.

In the same year (1920), the NSKK also decided at its General Synod to recognize women deacons, and a Canon defining women deacons was established three years later.³ This Canon refers not merely to a “ceremony of ordination” (按手式), but specifically to a “ceremony for the appointment of women” (女執事任命式). The liturgy contained in the NSKK *Prayer Book* approved in 1959 for the ceremony for the appointment of women states that these orders or ministries are based on the letters of St. Paul. In a letter to the Romans, St. Paul commends to his readers the deaconess Phoebe from the church at Cenchreae (Romans 16: 1–2), and in his letter to the Philippians he asks for support for two women who “have labored side by side with me in the gospel” (Philippians 4:3). Again, the

3. For details on the Canon concerning women deacons in the NSKK, see MIKI (1999).

liturgy states concerning the ministry that “along with the leadership of a priest you should visit the sick, help the poor, teach the way to women and children, and spread the Kingdom [of God].” The Constitution and Canons require such a minister to be unmarried, and to work as an “instrument” of the church. These types of responsibilities were already borne by women evangelists. However, there are no records of an ordination ceremony for a deaconess to have been performed in Japan. It is also not clear why such a ceremony has never been performed.

The debates concerning the ordination of women deacons in the Anglican-Episcopal Church around the world begin with this system for deaconesses. The issue of whether or not to recognize women deacons as ministers was hotly debated at the Lambeth Conference of 1920, and the decision to recognize women deacons as ministers in 1920 was overturned at the Lambeth Conference of 1930. Later, in the 1968 report on the Lambeth Conference, the interpretation of 1920 was reaffirmed and it was declared in favor of the ordination of women to the ministry (see NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KYŌMUIN 1969, 128). In the General Conference of the Episcopal Church in the United States in 1970, the Canon concerning the ordination of deacons was modified to state that the regulations apply equally to both men and women.

In Japan, the Canon concerning women deacons had existed already for fifty-four years, but had never been actually applied. Neither was there any evidence that there were any questions concerning this system. In 1977, at the General Synod of the NSKK, the Canons were modified to recognize that the ordination of deacons should be the same for men and women, and the regulations concerning women deacons and women evangelists were deleted. There was no opposition to this affirmation of the ordination of women as deacons, and the Canons were modified through the leadership of the bishops. About ten years later, however, when discussions began concerning the ordination of women as priests, a number of male bishops and priests declared their opposition, despite the changes in the Anglican-Episcopal Church around the world.

THE FIRST ORDINATION OF A WOMAN MINISTER

The first ordination of a woman priest in the Anglican-Episcopal Church was performed by Bishop R. O. Hall in the Hong Kong diocese in 1944, for the deacon Li Tim Oi. This ordination was undertaken as an emergency measure in the midst of World War II, in the face of severe restrictions imposed by the Japanese army, making it difficult for male priests to travel. An overwhelming majority in the Hong Kong diocese approved this measure. The Anglican Church of England, however, refused to recognize this ordination; Reverend Li was asked to resign, and she gave up the role. Later, at the Lambeth Conference of 1948, the

Hong Kong diocese repeated its request to ordain women and priests, but again it was denied.

At the Lambeth Conference of 1968, in response to a recommendation from the Episcopal Church of America, all Anglican-Episcopal dioceses were encouraged to set up committees to study the issue of ordaining women priests, and the principle that deaconesses were part of the general ministry of deacons was affirmed. On this basis many women around the world were ordained as deacons and admitted to the ministry in the same way as men.

In 1970, a committee of the Episcopal Church of America on the issue of the system of ordaining ministers recommended to the Provincial Synod that all ministerial roles (bishop, priest, deacon) be immediately opened to women, but this recommendation was rejected. In 1971, the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) announced that it would recognize the ordination of women as priests by the bishop if approved by the respective dioceses. In the same year, the bishop of the Hong Kong diocese ordained two women as priests. The Episcopal Church of America saw the ordination of eleven women as priests in 1974 by retired Episcopal bishops in Philadelphia, without waiting for approval from its provincial synod. The General Convention in Minneapolis gave its approval belatedly in 1976, and the ordination of women to the priesthood became official.

Eventually the ordination of women as priests was performed in the Episcopal Church of Canada in 1976, in New Zealand and Puerto Rico in 1977, in Brazil in 1980, in Myanmar in 1981, in Uganda and Kenya in 1983, around 1984 in Burundi, Rwanda, and Zaire, in Cuba in 1984, in Ireland in 1991, and in Australia and South Africa in 1992 (JOSEI GA KYŌKAI O KANGAERU KAI, KANSAI 1993).

The Movement to Achieve the Ordination of a Woman Minister

EARLY AWARENESS OF THE ISSUE IN THE NSKK

The revision of regulations concerning the ministry in the Anglican-Episcopal Church ultimately requires a discussion and decision by the highest decision-making bodies of each diocese. And, it is said, the NSKK did not have even one officially-chosen woman lay representative at their General Synod until 1992 (see *Seikōkai Shinbun*, June 1992). There was one bishop, two representative ministers, and two representative lay persons from each of the eleven dioceses, for a total of fifty-five representatives with voting rights at the General Synod. Even though 65 percent of the church members were women, over 90 percent of the representatives chosen from each diocese were men.

In this situation, the woman who first declared the need for women to be ordained priests was Okamoto Chiyoko 岡本千代子, the chair of the NSKK Women's Association (日本聖公会婦人会会長). A proposal by a representative minister to "establish a committee to consider women priests" had been put

forward at the May 1986 NSKK General Synod. Okamoto, who had attended this Synod as a non-voting observer, reported back to the Women's Association that a voice had been heard supporting women ministers, and expressed hope that the situation of women priests in the Anglican-Episcopal Church around the world would be studied and that progress would be made to address this issue (see NIPPON SEIKŌKAI FUJINKAI 1991, 229). The proposal, however, was rejected without much discussion (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1986, proposal no. 51, rejected agenda no. 37). Again, at the General Synod two years later in 1988, a proposal was made to establish "a committee to consider women ministers," but this was also rejected (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1988, proposal no. 48, rejected agenda no. 30).

Around this time the social situation with regard to women in Japan was beginning to change drastically. In May 1984 the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (男女雇用機会均等法) was passed by the Japanese National Diet and, in June of the same year, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was also passed by the Japanese Diet. This was a time when the worldwide trend toward gender equality—the equality of men and women—began to have its influence felt in Japan. The time had come for a reappraisal of gender consciousness and gender role differences.

THE ORIGINS OF THE MOVEMENT AMONG WOMEN TO REFORM THE CHURCH

For the women seeking reform of the church, one example that served to energize this movement was the history of the movement for the ordination of women as priests in the Episcopal Church of America (for details see HIATT 1983).

In April of 1970, a meeting was held at Graymoor (near Garrison, New York) to discuss discrimination against women in the Episcopal Church. The meeting was called by women who had been involved in the anti-racist and peace movements of the 1960s. The participants consisted of a wide variety of women: young feminists, nuns, clergy wives, seminary-educated women, and those who felt a call to the ministry as priests. The meeting ended with the proclamation of "the Graymoor Resolution," that the institutional Episcopal Church was "racist, militaristic and sexist. Its basic influence on our own lives is negative," and resolved "that women as well as men [must] be accepted and recognized as equals so that they may function in proportion to their numbers in all aspects of the Church's life and ministry" (HIATT 1983, 577; 2014, 8). This resolution was widely distributed. Women were able to more openly share the pain they had suffered through sexual discrimination, and received the strength to raise their voices against the ongoing discrimination against women in the church. In October of that year, however, a proposal to ordain women for all roles of the ministry was rejected

at the General Convention in Houston. Preparations went forward to present the same proposal at the next convention, but in 1973 the proposal was again rejected.

As these historical events were going on, theological studies by feminist authors began to appear one after the other in the 1960s and into the 1970s and 1980s, giving rise to the field of “feminist theology.” Male-centered theological ideas and interpretations of the Bible were challenged, and the patriarchal structure of the church and discriminatory practices were pointed out and clarified. By reinterpreting the Bible from a woman’s perspective, they built up a theology that truly offered liberation for women. This theology had a great impact on the world of Christianity as a whole, and in particular provided a firm theological basis for those seeking women’s ordination in the Anglican-Episcopal Church.

The influence of this feminist theology began to be seen in Japan around the beginning of the 1980s, as the translation of these works on feminist theology began to be published in Japanese. In 1984 an “Association for Women and Theology” (女性と神学の会) was formed in Tokyo, where participant Christian women could study feminist theology and share their own experiences and impressions (see JOSEI TO SHINGAKU NO KAI 1985). The members of this group formed the core of the first “Conference of Church Women” (教会女性会議) which met in September 1988 (see KYŌKAI JOSEI KAIGI 1988).

The women’s movement seeking a reform of the church in the NSKK can be said to have begun in 1988, with the launch of the “Association for Considering Women in the Church” (女性が教会を考える会) in Tokyo. In September of the next year (1989), in response to the call to discuss the issue of discrimination against women in the church and the issue of women’s ordination to the ministry, around ten to fifteen women gathered for a meeting at the Ikebukuro Anglican-Episcopal Church in Tokyo. The participants included wives of clergy, former nuns, and women with theological training, all of them having doubts about discriminatory gender roles in the church. They confirmed a shared belief that the consciousness of established gender roles in the church was biased, and that as a result the roles for women in the church and the extent that they could serve their vocation from God was limited, and thus confirmed the need to reform the church. In order to follow up on this conviction, they planned to submit a proposal at the next Provincial Synod to set up “a committee to promote the ordination of women to the ministry” (女性聖職実現を促進する委員会), and ask that the Province seek to increase the number of women serving on their various committees. They also sponsored symposiums and printed and distributed leaflets to all NSKK bodies calling for efforts to reform the church.

At the Synod held in May 1990, the proposal was submitted with the backing of six social activity committees, including the Committee on Justice and Peace (正義と平和委員会) (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1990, proposal no. 23).

The official representatives at the Synod were all men, but the members of the Association for Considering Women in the Church in the auditorium were given special permission to speak, and opinions for the acceptance of the proposal were presented. There were also strong opinions against the proposal stated by some ministers, and in the end an amendment allowing a change in the name of the committee, to “examine” (検討) the issue of ordaining women as priests, was approved. As for increasing the number of women serving on committees, a revised statement calling for appointing more women “as much as possible” (可能なかぎり), was also approved. With this, it finally became possible to officially examine and discuss the issue of women’s ordination in the NSKK.

THE VARIOUS ACTIVITIES OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR CONSIDERING WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

The Association for Considering Women in the Church produced a pamphlet (entitled “A New Partnership for a Rich Life and Work in the Church 新しいパートナーシップを通して教会に豊かな生命と働きを) in 1990 to explain their purpose and proposed activities, and sent copies to every place associated with the NSKK, including all of the representatives of the General Synod. This pamphlet presents a new vision for the church:

1. That a new way will be opened so that all people, without regard to male or female, can respond to their call from God in all the work of the church.
2. That a way can be opened so that ministers and lay people can positively and creatively act within the structure of the church.
3. That a new life and power will be given to the church so that we can serve God together in society and the church with all people who are placed in a weak position.

These statements show that the association aims not only to gain equal rights and status for women in the church, but has the wider goal of creating a new and lively partnership between men and women, and between ministers and lay people, in order to more fully realize the mission of the Anglican-Episcopal Church. Achieving the ordination of women to the priesthood is one of the essential changes necessary to reform the mission of the church.

The Association for Considering Women in the Church is a group of volunteers who gathered freely and have planned activities in their respective locales for a common goal. After 1989, similar gatherings were held in Osaka and Kyoto and, with the cooperation of mission-related groups of each diocese, sponsored lectures and symposiums to study and discuss the issue of women ministers.

In July of 1990, the Right Reverend Barbara C. Harris, a Suffragan Bishop of the Episcopal Church of America, visited Japan and participated in a common Holy Communion service and a symposium on women and the ministry (JOSEI

GA KYŌKAI O KANGAERU KAI 1990). Reverend Harris was the first woman in the world to be ordained a Bishop of the Anglican-Episcopal Church. On this occasion she stated:

If we ask what is at the root of discrimination, I think that it is fear. When women are ordained to the ministry and serve the church, there is a fear that the power and qualifications of women will overshadow the power and qualifications of men. I think that this fear is present among men. A demonstration of leadership in the church by women is a threat to the feeling of security among men. [Retranslated from the Japanese]

This psychological problem among men pointed out by Reverend Harris was also a thick yet invisible wall in Japan.

In September of 1992, Reverend Suzanne Hiatt of the Episcopal Church of America was welcomed to Tokyo and Osaka, where she celebrated Holy Communion and gave lectures. Reverend Hiatt has contributed greatly to realizing the ordination of women as priests in the Episcopal Church of America. In her lectures she spoke of the current situation in the Anglican-Episcopal Church around the world with regard to the issue of women ministers, pointing out that most dioceses have women deacons, eleven dioceses have ordained women priests, and the remaining twenty-nine dioceses are debating the matter and headed in the direction of reform. She also commented on the situation in the United States after the birth of women priests:

Once women are ordained as priests, there is a tendency for the once-complicated debates to just disappear. It is surprising how quickly even the memory of what was considered the problems of women priests disappear. [Retranslated from the Japanese]

Again, on the issue of mission and pastoral care, Reverend Hiatt added:

What I wish to say is to ask what the church can say, and what the church should say, about society at the end of the twentieth century and about the changing roles of women. We need to remember that Christ came also to serve women. It is necessary to reconfirm the fact that we can see the work of Christ within both men and women. [Retranslated from the Japanese]

(JOSEI GA KYŌKAI O KANGAERU KAI, KANSAI 1993, 16–20)

The members of the Association for Considering Women in the Church were encouraged by these messages from a woman bishop and a woman deacon from the Episcopal Church of America, and received courage and strength to promote their movement to realize the ordination of women as priests in Japan. These members have sponsored an Anglican-Episcopal Women's Forum every year since 1992 to discuss various issues, including the ministry of women. In April 1994, the Association for the Ordination of Women Priests (女性の司祭按手を

めざす会) was formed. About half of the forty-one founders of this group were male lay people and ministers, or candidates for the ministry (JOSEI NO SHISAI ANSHU JITSUGEN O MEZASU KAI 1994).

On the other hand, a group of people who were opposed to the ordination of women as priests and deacons was also formed. The Japanese branch of the Association for the Apostolic Ministry (a group in England opposed to women's ordination) formed its own Association for Considering Faith and Ministry in the Anglican-Episcopal Church (聖公会の信仰と職制を考える会) (a.k.a. AAMJ). In September of 1992 they promoted a statement and began to publish newsletters and pamphlets in opposition (MIKI 2003).

In November of 1992, the General Synod of the Church of England passed a resolution for the appointment of women as priests. At this time George Kerry, the Archbishop of Canterbury, commented to the effect that “if we do not recognize the appointment of women as priests in this age where women are active in all areas of life, then the church is not listening to the voice of society” (see *Asahi Shinbun*, 12 November 1992 [evening edition]). In response to this decision, some members of the opposition in England announced that they would leave and convert to the Catholic Church.

Thus the issue of women ministers became a spark for arousing a schism in the church. As the ordination of women has become a reality, the question remains how Anglican-Episcopal members who have different opinions on the matter can coexist in the church.

The Discussions and Examinations Within the NSKK

Examining the question of ordaining women priests within the NSKK took place among various groups: groups of sympathizers, volunteer organizations, individual churches, and individual dioceses and provinces. The discussions held within provincial committees, however, can be summarized as follows.

THE COMMITTEE TO EXAMINE THE REALIZATION OF WOMEN MINISTERS (1990–1994)

The task of the Committee to Examine the Realization of Women Ministers (hereafter “Committee to Examine”) set up by the NSKK in 1990 was to “study and discuss various problems and shed light on the issue of establishing a system for ordaining women to all the ministries of the NSKK, especially of women priests.” Rather than being limited only to discussion and study by the committee, it was tasked to convene public meetings and consider programs that would bring attention to this topic among many ministers and laypeople of the church. (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1990, proposal no. 29). This committee on

the ordination of women priests was composed of many laypeople and ministers of varying opinions.

In order to get on with their work, this “Committee to Examine” decided that they would proceed on the basis of four common understandings, the most important of which was that reevaluating the question of women ministers in the present situation was an urgent task that cut to the core of the essence of the Anglican-Episcopal Church: what are “holy orders” or “ministers,” what are their responsibilities, what are the roles of priests and deacons, and what is the mission of the church (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1992, 85)?

The committee decided to translate and publish the document “Women Priests: Which Way Will You Vote?” that had been prepared by the Church of England in 1990 to encourage discussion. They also conducted a questionnaire concerning women ministers and sponsored public hearings, and published the results to reflect various opinions concerning women ministers. The questionnaire was conducted from October to December of 1991 by sending copies to all ministers of the NSKK, and to laypeople chosen by random sampling. Approximately six hundred and ninety responses were received. Again, public hearings were held twice in different locales.

A summary of the discussions in the public hearings and a report on the results of the questionnaire were submitted to the 45th General Synod as a separate volume appended to the committee’s report, and many copies were printed and distributed (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1992). There were seventeen questions in the questionnaire, such as “Do you wish to see the birth of women priests and deacons in the NSKK?” The answers to this question were “Yes” (62%), “Either is OK” (14%), “Don’t know” (10%), and “No” (10%). If we take “Either is OK” to be a kind of passive acceptance, this means that 77% of the people were in favor of having women ministers. Nevertheless it was clear that 10% of the respondents were opposed to the idea.

Again, in order that the importance of this issue be understood more broadly, and that the responses reflect a variety of viewpoints, the committee organized the questionnaire into the following categories: 1. Questions concerning the NSKK; 2. Questions concerning the relationship of the church to society in general; 3. Questions concerning the Lambeth Conference and other international Conferences; 4. Questions concerning the Bible and theology; 5. Questions concerning the structure, organization, and tradition of the church; 6. Questions concerning ecumenism; and 7. Others (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1992, 87). This content and an analysis of the results of the questionnaire were edited and published by the “Committee to Examine” as “The Ordination of Women Priests? An Examination from Various Perspectives” (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1993) in September of 1993. Yamano Shigeko 山野繁子, at the time a

member of the faculty at the Anglican-Episcopal Seminary, commented as follows on the section on questions concerning the relationship of the church to society:

The issue of women ministers should be considered from the basis of our faith that all people are created in the image of God, rather than as an issue to correct discrimination in the general workplace. Rather than thinking “Men are priests so it should be the same for women,” it should be an issue based on the Gospel, the good news proclaimed by the church of the love and healing of God for all people. This is a challenge for the church to live out its own “good news.”
(NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1993, 11)

Again, the Reverend Seki Masakatsu 関 正勝, at the time a professor at Rikkyō University, made the following comment to explain why the ordination of women priests had not been recognized in Japan:

We must face the fact that until now our theology (including Biblical studies, tradition, doctrine, and experience) itself has become hardened, ideological, and normative, and has been confined within a narrowly institutionalized church.... Traditional and orthodox theology has given rise to a negative attitude toward ministry for women, and resulted in a failure to reform itself, making it unable to criticize “sexual discrimination in society,” and thus consigning it to a merely subsidiary role.

(NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1993, 14–15)

This first Committee to Examine the Realization of Women Ministers ended its tenure in May of 1994, and its new proposal to establish a “Committee to Examine the Realization of Women Priests” 女性司祭の実現を検討する委員会 was presented to and approved by the 46th General Synod. The aim and duty of this new committee was to examine how to maintain unity in the NSKK while ordaining women priests, to determine the future posture of the NSKK, and to prepare guidelines for institutional and practical reforms in the NSKK in light of anticipated opposition to the ordination of women priests (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1994, proposal no. 31, 163).

The Association for the Ordination of Women Priests, in preparation for the Provincial Synods of 1994, began gathering signatures of those in favor of revising the church Canons to make it possible for women to seek ordination as priests. Within a space of about two months, they gathered 1,108 signatures. However, the proposal to reform the Canons was shelved for continued deliberation in two of the dioceses, so the proposal required continuing discussion as a topic in each of the individual dioceses until the next General Synod (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1994, proposal no. 28, 161).

In the meantime, the Association for Considering Faith and Ministry in the Anglican-Episcopal Church published their views in various journals and pamphlets, and distributed them widely to garner support for their opposing view.

Various reasons were given for their opposition, such as “the fact that Christ and his twelve disciples were men was not a product of their age but was ordained by God, so it is not proper to object to the will of God on the basis of current feelings.” Thus they absolutized patriarchal values and promoted a rejection of women’s ordination (MIKI 2003).

THE COMMITTEE TO EXAMINE THE
REALIZATION OF WOMEN PRIESTS (1994–1998)

In order to realize the ordination of women deacons and priests, it was necessary first to delete the words “a male of” from the first requirement for ordination as stated in the Canons of the NSKK: “1. A male of at least twenty-four years of age” 満二十四才以上の男であること. Such a revision required the votes of a two-thirds majority of the representatives who were bishops, as well as two-thirds of the representatives who were ministers or laypeople. At the time there was still strong opposition to the proposal among the bishops.

The newly-established Committee to Examine the Realization of Women Priests soon began its activity to fulfill its duty, and prepared a list of items to be discussed. They proposed six items (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1996), but the most important item concerned the response to those in opposition to the proposal.

Reports from each diocese concerning the issue of women ministers were distributed for reference at the General Synod in May 1996. Three of the dioceses had approved a proposal to accept the ordination of women priests. Both groups—those in favor and those against—were given an opportunity to present their opinions through their representative to the Synod. After deliberation and voting, the motion to revise the Canons was rejected. The motion failed to receive a two-thirds approval by the bishops.

The Committee to Examine then did further studies and discussions in order to prepare guidelines on how to maintain the unity of the church (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1998a). The preparation of these guidelines was delayed, and the final version presented to the committee was not ready until a mere month before the deadline for submitting proposals for the next General Synod, leaving little time for discussion on its content. These guidelines were submitted as a proposal “to approve guidelines for realizing the ordination of women priests” (女性司祭の実現に伴うガイドラインを承認する件), and at the same time another proposal to “establish a coordinating committee to handle issues related to the ordination of women priests” (女性の司祭按手に伴う諸問題を取り扱う調整委員会設置の件) was also submitted.

Achieving the Ordination of Women Priests

THE DECISION BY THE NSKK GENERAL SYNOD IN 1998

After the 1996 General Synod, voices calling for the ordination of women priests were heard more and more within the NSKK. Five of the dioceses passed a resolution calling for the ordination of women priests (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1998b, proposal no. 26).

A motion to “revise a section of the NSKK Canons” (日本聖公会法規の一部を改正する件) was submitted with the sponsorship of seventeen representatives, including five of the diocese representatives, at the 51st General Synod of the NSKK in May 1998. The discussions and deliberations on this motion continued for many hours, with much confused debate, but it was eventually approved. The votes among the bishops were ten in favor and one against, and among the representatives of ministers and laypeople, thirty in favor and thirteen against. Most of the bishops who had voted against the motion in the past had retired.

Here is an excerpt from the “reasons for submission” for the motion to revise the Canons:

In order to truly realize the mission from God to spread the Gospel in contemporary Japanese society, it is required that both men and women can fully participate in all activities of and service to the church. Opening the way for women priests is an urgent task and a concrete expression of the church’s responsibility to offer hope for peace, cooperation, and shared living, and to address issues such as the alienation between human beings experienced in daily life and to overcome discrimination and oppression.

(NIPPON SEIKŌKAI KANKU JIMUSHO 1998b, 271)

The first ordination of a woman as a priest in Japan took place at the Chūbu Diocese in December of 1998, with the ordination of the deacon Shibukawa Ryōko 渋川良子. This was followed in January 1999 with the ordinations of the deacons Yamano Shigeko and Sasamori Tazu 笹森田鶴 by the Tokyo Diocese. However, the diocese whose bishop was opposed to the ordination of women as priests still does not recognize the ordination of women. In this way, despite continued problems, the way has opened for women to be ordained as priests, and the NSKK has finally taken the first step in a new direction.

THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN AND THE ISSUE OF GENDER

Women who have become pastors through their ordination as priests have experienced various challenges as pioneers, but gradually have become widely accepted. As pointed out by Suzanne Hiatt, the various disputes have for the most part disappeared. The guidelines that recognize the presence of opposition are still in effect in 2017, and there are still three dioceses that have not ordained

even one woman as a deacon or priest. According to statistics published by the NSKK in 2015, there are currently two hundred and eight people who serve as priests or deacons in Japan, of which nineteen (less than 10 percent) are women. There has yet to be a woman bishop. The percentage of women as representatives at the Diocese Conference is still less than ten percent.

The need for a transformation of consciousness concerning gender in the NSKK has been recognized, and a Committee on Gender has been established under the jurisdiction of the Committee for Justice and Peace in 2002. This committee sponsored a conference for Anglican-Episcopal women in 2003, which discussed the theme of “Spreading the Gospel in the 21st Century from the Perspective of Women” (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI SEIGI TO HEIWA-JENDĀ IINKAI 2004). Again, the first NSKK Women’s Conference was held in 2006. A wide range of topics were discussed, resulting in the publication of a statement on a vision for spreading the Gospel from the perspective of women (NIPPON SEIKŌKAI SEIGI TO HEIWA-JENDĀ IINKAI 2006).

In the meantime, it became clear that a major scandal had happened within the NSKK. A male priest was taken to court, charged with the sexual abuse of a young girl, a child of one of the laypeople. He was found guilty in 2005. The ministers of this diocese denied the charges and believed in the innocence of the male priest, and published a statement in the newspaper claiming that the charges were groundless. Later, however, after the bishop of this diocese had an interview with another victim, he realized that the victims’ claims were true, and called a press conference (MIKI 2006).

In response to this scandal, the NSKK established a Committee for the Prevention of Sexual Harassment in each diocese, and began to build a structure to prevent such scandals in the future. This was one event that made it clear that the church was lacking with regard to the perspective of women and those in a weak position.

Conclusion

For around a hundred years after the establishment of the NSKK, the ordination of women to the ministry was not discussed in public. All of the church activities were conducted through an organization centered on male ministers, and women evangelists and lay women were seen as assistants to men and marginalized far away from any decision-making role. The realization of the ordination of women as priests opened a new door that, in effect, broke down the wall of a strong male-centered structure that had been built up over a long history. In the background leading up to the opening of this door we find the movements within the Anglican-Episcopal Church around the world, and the development of feminist theology. There was also a rapid transformation in gender consciousness within Japan, which gave impetus to voices calling for reformation within the

NSKK and gave birth to a result that was like climbing over a thick wall. The original driving force for this reformation, in Japan as well as in the United States, was the painful experience of women, and the sharing of this painful experience among women. A new path began as women clearly became aware of, and raised their voices against, marginalization due to sexual discrimination in the church.

The ordination of women priests is not merely a matter of acquiring equal rights since “women and men are the same in being a priest.” It meant a reformation of the structure of sexual discrimination that had been formed in the church, and was the beginning of the search for how to revive the church in its mission to truly spread the Gospel of Christ.

Much of the debate disappeared after the women priests were actually ordained, but there are still many people who do not recognize women priests. This situation is not unique to Japan; the same is also true in England and the United States. As Barbara Harris has pointed out, there is still psychological resistance among some men who do not want to recognize the leadership of women. It is possible that the debates will flare up again in the future when a woman is selected as a bishop in Japan.

The most important issue for the NSKK is how to spread the Gospel in Japanese society, to witness to the love of God to all people as the “body of Christ.” Our greatest mission is to overcome barriers between male or female, ministry or lay, central authority or marginalized and weak, and work together in an equal partnership to continue to seek the way to revitalize the community of believers to love their neighbors with joy, and to truly serve God.

[Translated by Paul L. Swanson]

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