

# THE END FOR WOMEN MINISTERS IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH?

**Can you defrock a minister because she is a woman? This is the issue which is presently dominating the Presbyterian Church of Australia. By PETER BENTLEY, Australian church affairs editor.**

**D**uring the 1980s, the validity of the 1974 Presbyterian General Assembly resolution allowing the ordination of women to the ministry of the word and sacraments, began to be questioned. Apart from the theological objections, legal questions have also been raised.

Essentially, the legal dispute centred around the decision by the Presbyterian General Assembly to allow the ordination of women. That decision was made after the vote to unite with the Methodist and Congregational churches.

One group of Presbyterians walked out of the Assembly and gathered in another location to continue their denomination. Consequently they believe that any decisions taken after the vote to unite are not binding on the continuing church.

This matter is further complicated because a majority of those Presbyterians who decided to continue did not walk out, but stayed to finish the business of the Assembly. Thus eventually two sets of minutes with significant differences were circulated as the 1974 Assembly minutes. Some states have followed one set only, while other states have followed property matters and rejected church changes.

Significantly, New South Wales was the centre of the action to ordain women and thus will face the most bitter battle over any moves to change the status quo.

In September 1988 the General Assembly met to look at the question of the date of the actual continuation of the Presbyterian Church, which would have bearing on the decision and continuing practice to ordain women.

Rather than make a decision there and then, it was decided to follow the

usual procedure and remit to the lower church courts (state assemblies and presbyteries) the issue for wider decision. These decisions will be reported to the 1991 General Assembly. If a sufficient majority approve of a change to the rules concerning the ordination of women, then it is likely that the General Assembly will follow through, approving any change. (Note: in 1974 the decision to allow for the ordination of women was approved by the six state assemblies and 50 out of 53 presbyteries.)

Already two state assemblies, Tasmania and Queensland, have approved the deletion of the rule allowing for the ordination of women. In Queensland, the mover of the motion, the Rev John Langbridge stressed the following arguments:

- Creation - order by natural headship and then legislated headship.
- The Old Testament precluded women from authoritative roles in religion and ceremonial office.
- Christ did not make any women apostles.
- 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 - the primary issue of authority.
- 1 Timothy 2:8-15 - the order of creation and women being deceived.

The Queensland motion was passed 96 to 24.

Still, the real test will be at the NSW Assembly in June 1990. Some people still remember the controversy surrounding the ordination of Theodora Hobbs about two years ago. This was only the starting point.

Leading up to the state assembly there will be a public church debate and also the provision of discussion

papers (For and Against) to clarify the issues for formal debate. The decision of the NSW Assembly will be critically important for the 1991 General Assembly. Which way will matters be decided?

Because of the complexity it is not easy to say. What is very evident though is the dominance of the conservative evangelical group in the Presbyterian Church today. Presbyterianism has been strongly influenced by the dominant Sydney Anglican position on the ordination of women. Many of the younger ministers trained at Moore Theological College during the period the Presbyterian Church in NSW was without a college.

There are a large number of traditionalists and conservative evangelicals in the continuing church and the conservative element has been growing since then.

What about the position of women? Well. Of course, many are outraged and hurt by these moves, but a large group would be quite sympathetic to any move to remove women from the position of the teaching elder or minister. The conservative Christian womens groups, Christian Women Communicating International and the Philosophy of Christian Womanhood have a reasonable following in the Presbyterian Church.

If the Church decides to disapprove the ordination of women, it will be difficult for any women already ordained to have any future as a Presbyterian minister. They would probably not be eligible for appointment or would at least not be called and technically they would be invalid ministers, historical anomalies which the Presbyterian Church may find an albatross in the future.