

Authority figures: Resolving ecclesial issues

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There's an old bumper sticker with the words "Question authority." To which the proper response, of course, is: "Says who?" As that reply suggests, suspicion of authority, however well advised, does not solve or clarify the problem of authority. Whenever we want someone to heed what we're saying, we end up invoking or assuming some kind of authority. Even the antiauthoritarians occasionally like to speak with authority.

These days, an exercise in word association would probably elicit *abusive*, *oppressive* and *misused* before hitting upon any benign terms to go with *authority*. We instinctively tend to regard authority as something that constrains people, not as something that empowers them. But clearly authority does both—and it empowers precisely because it also constrains.

Consider the effort by the Episcopal Church to enforce churchwide acceptance of the ordination of women. Several dioceses were judged to be dragging their feet on accepting female candidates for ordination, and last month the church's General Convention decided to nudge the rebels into compliance (as reported in the August 2-9 issue of the *Century*). Though such an exercise of ecclesial authority was judged to be an unnecessary imposition by some dioceses, which would have preferred that they and their churches be allowed a "local option" on the matter, the convention's move was doubtless an empowering act for those women whose ordinations have been delayed. If you are a woman aiming for the priesthood, it surely helps your cause that the church as a whole has marshaled its authority on your behalf.

The idea of resolving debate by allowing "local option" on a controverted question inevitably calls to mind the discussion of another issue in the churches: whether gays should be ordained as ministers and whether ministers may formally bless the partnerships of same-sex couples. This summer both the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) issued negative verdicts on those questions

after yet another round of dramatic and painful debate. One obvious solution to the controversy in the various church bodies would be to move to a “local option”: to leave decisions on homosexuality up to local organizations of the church—to regional conferences, presbyteries or synods. Perhaps the national church body needn’t exercise its authority in this case.

But with the example of women’s ordination in mind, it’s clear that the “local option” solution also has problems. Most people who believe women should be eligible to be ordained do not think that it’s a matter to be left up to local churches to decide. Indeed, we suspect that most people willing to accept a “local option” on homosexuality issues would not want to grant “local option” on women’s ordination. Why not? Which questions are appropriately decided locally and which by the entire church?

To ask such questions is to inquire not only about the limits of diversity in the church but about the churches’ ability to articulate a clear understanding of authority and how and when it should be exercised. We realize that questions about the nature of authority are not uppermost in the minds of those debating homosexuality these days, but we think they deserve some attention by both sides in the debate. After all, there may well come a time when the advocates for gays and lesbians in the church find that they control the national assemblies. They will probably also find that questions of authority have not gone away.