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The resignation that rocked the church: How the C of E reacted to Philip North's decision

Philip North has stepped back from his appointed role as Bishop of Sheffield amid a furious row over women bishops, writes Harry Farley.

The current Bishop of Burnley's stance on not ordaining women prompted outrage from campaigners within the Church when his promotion to the more senior see of Sheffield was announced.

An article by senior theologian Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, prompted an intense campaign against his nomination.



Philip North, an Anglo-Catholic bishop opposed to women's ordination and Libby Lane, the Church of England's first female bishop, meet regularly to pray. Fr Philip North will return to being Bishop of Burnley.

Percy in particular criticised North's membership of a traditionalist grouping known as The Society which only recognises male clergy, referring to its views as 'fogeyish sacralised sexism'.

In a pointed statement announcing he would withdraw, North said the 'highly individualised nature of the attacks upon me have been extremely hard to bear'.

In a direct rebuke to his opponents, he said: 'If, as Christians, we cannot relate to each other within the bounds of love, how can we possibly presume to transform a nation in the name of Christ? I hope though that this conversation can continue in the future without it being hung upon the shoulders of one individual.'

He hinted the pressure of the campaign against him has left him reflecting whether to continue as a bishop, saying that 'the pressures of recent weeks have left me reflecting on how [God] is calling me to serve him'.

Percy said in response: 'I have written to Bishop Philip privately in the light of this very difficult decision. My thoughts are with everyone involved at this testing time.'

WATCH (Women and the Church), a campaign group for women's ordination, expressed 'compassion and concern for

all involved' and a statement they realised the debate had 'been deeply painful and divisive'.

It added: 'We have always been clear that this is a theological debate and not personal, yet we know that this is not always how comments are heard.

'It is our role in WATCH to ask the question 'how do women flourish in the Church?' and we have done so mindful of the mission of the Church and its witness to the wider community.'

The Society, the Anglo-Catholic grouping at the heart of the row, responded with a statement from the Bishop of Wakefield, Tony Robinson, who expressed 'publicly our sympathy and concern for Bishop Philip' after his resignation.

'The implications of what has happened for the stability of the settlement that enabled women to become bishops in the Church of England, and also for the

integrity of the whole process whereby the Church of England discerns that God is calling someone to a diocesan see, are a cause of grave concern,' he said.

'As we enter more deeply into Lent, a period of prayer and self-examination, we call on all concerned to engage not in mutual recrimination but in a period of calm reflection about how our church can recover from this wound.'

The Church of England's hierarchy, although largely in support of women bishops, has strongly supported North throughout and reacted with dismay at Thursday night's announcement.

The Archbishop of York chastised North's critics and told them to learn to 'disagree Christianly, remembering at all times that our identity is in Christ alone'.

He said in a statement on Thursday: 'What has happened to Bishop Philip clearly does not reflect the settlement under which, two and a half years ago, the

Church of England joyfully and decisively opened up all orders of ministry to men and women. It also made a commitment to mutual flourishing.'

Critics of North pointed to strong opposition to his arrival in Sheffield, where at least one-third of clergy are women.

A local campaign group for gender equality in Sheffield called for a 'period of reflection and/or prayer, personally and corporately' after the resignation.

'We lament the church's lack of understanding of the depth of concern which people around the diocese have felt over this appointment,' a statement read.

'We also sense an invitation from God for all of us in the Church of England to take responsibility for our part in a process that has caused such pain for so many people.'

They added: 'This is a sad moment for the Church of England but we hope and pray that, in time, greater wisdom will emerge.'

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