

NSKK NEWSLETTER

日本聖公会管区事務所だより

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To all members of the Anglican Communion from the Nippon Sei Ko Kai (NSKK/Anglican Church in Japan)

Revd. Jesse Shinichi Yahagi
Provincial General Secretary

First of all, we remember and pray for all around the world who are forced to live in fear due to wars and disasters. May God protect them and enable them to enjoy lives of security and safety.

The NSKK today has about 300 churches in 11 dioceses, with about 13,000 active communicant members and around 230 clergy responsible for their pastoral care. 20 years ago, there were about 20,000 communicant members and around 300 clergy, but these numbers are gradually decreasing due to the aging of the congregation. Some dioceses have fewer than 10 active clergy and a number of churches have fewer than three communicant members.

Against this backdrop, the NSKK Provincial Synod in 2020 amended the Canons of the NSKK to allow for the establishment of 'Missionary collaboration areas' and 'missionary dioceses', and is also working to reinvigorate the mission within the church. Specifically, the 11 dioceses will be divided into three 'Missionary collaboration areas' (East, Central and West Japan) in order to aid cooperation in mission, evangelization and pastoral care; and to support each other beyond the individual diocesan unit. A 'missionary diocese' is a diocese which, with the approval of the diocesan Synod and the Provincial General Synod, chooses not to have a diocesan bishop. Under a Bishop in Charge, the individual dioceses in the same missionary collaboration area will work together to support each other, with the ultimate aim of restructuring – including merging with other dioceses – in principle within a five-year period. This recently initiated framework of collaboration across diocesan boundaries is a major change from the way things have been done in the past, and one diocese has already become a missionary diocese and is about to merge with a neighbouring diocese to establish a new diocese.

April this year was full of grace and blessings as the NSKK saw the consecration of its first female bishop; this marks another milestone for the church in Japan.

The NSKK is planning a Mission Consultative Forum to be held in 2023, in order to share the fruits of the work since the last forum held in 2012, and also to discuss the plan for the next ten years. We hope to reaffirm the missionary tasks that the Church must carry out, including such issues as gender justice, global environmental care and energy conservation, human rights, and peace, so that we can continue to walk carefully along the path of 'life'.

We believe that when we are not afraid of difference and change, but rather try to serve God and his people faithfully by joining hands with those from different walks of life where the church is, then we will be given abundant blessings and guidance in those tasks.

Please remember and pray for the future of the Anglican Church in Japan.

'In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness.'

(John 1: 4-5a)

Blessed to welcome Bishop Maria Grace Tazu Sasamori

The Most Rt. Revd. Luke Kenichi Muto
Primate, Nippon Sei Ko Kai

“Hallelujah, Sing to the Lord a new song” (Psalm 149:1)

On April 23rd, the consecration and installation ceremony of the Bishop of the Diocese of Hokkaido was held at the Cathedral of that diocese.

The Revd Maria Grace Tazu Sasamori was installed as the 9th Bishop of Hokkaido.

That day the congregation was small because we were unable to welcome guests from overseas due to Covid-19 restrictions.

However, many people joined and prayed with us through online streaming.

I sincerely thank you all for your prayers.

The creation of a new bishop is a great joy, not only for the clergy and people of the Diocese of Hokkaido; but also a great blessing for the whole NSKK, for which I am genuinely thankful to the Lord.

Tazu Sasamori is the first female bishop in the NSKK and also the first female Anglican bishop in Southeast Asia. This means her consecration is a very historic matter for the church in Japan.

Many people are very pleased she has become a bishop and look forward to her ministry in the years to come.

She was not elected as a bishop because she is female. I believe she is worthy bishop and has been led to this role by the Holy Spirit; she is responding to her calling from God.

It has been 24 years since the NSKK approved the ordination of female priests, although there do still remain some people who do not acknowledge this. As guidelines concerning female priests in the NSKK state: the whole of the clergy and laity should work together in regard to priests' ordinations overcoming individual differences.

Bishop Tazu Sasamori herself has a deep comprehension of this issue, and though she may struggle with this in her heart, her new ministry in the NSKK will allow her to work with others and together overcome differences and difficulties.

I am sure Bishop Tazu will fulfill her mission using her abundant gifts from God as the Bishop of the Diocese of Hokkaido and also as a member of the House of Bishops.



Eucharistic celebration at Bishop Sasamori's consecration

A message of blessing to Bishop Maria Grace Tazu Sasamori

The Rt. Revd. Gabriel S. Igarashi

I am delighted that the consecration and installation of Bishop Maria Grace Tazu Sasamori has taken place.

On November 3rd last year, at an extraordinary synod of the Diocese of Hokkaido, 'Tazu' was elected to be the next bishop. When I was informed about that, I thought of the shock she must be experiencing. Obviously, the heavy responsibility of being bishop itself, but added to that, the pressure of being the first female bishop not only in Japan, but in East Asia. Tazu has been serving as a priest for 21 years, and this must have given her so much joy. But at the same time, being the first ordained female priest in male-dominated Japanese society, she had to experience all sorts of pain, regrettable feelings and days of patience. There must have been fear, that this might repeat in the path of her serving as the first female bishop. Even so, in tears of suffering and pain, Tazu has accepted God's calling.

When I heard of her decision, I was reminded of the Annunciation. For Mother Mary, who was not married at the time, the words of the angel Gabriel must have been unacceptable. Even so, Mary, in suffering and pain, answers "May it be to me as you have said." Mary accepted the Annunciation, but with restless feelings, visits Elizabeth, because Gabriel mentioned that "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." Mary must have wanted to see if the words of the angel Gabriel were true. Is Elizabeth really expecting? Is my Annunciation really true? Then, when she met Elizabeth and said greetings, it is said that, "Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you

among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!” These words of blessing must have encouraged Mary so much, but even so, she must have been anxious, because it is written in Luke 1:56, “Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.”

Likewise, even though Tazu has accepted her calling, and is now consecrated as bishop, she might still often experience anxious feelings. At those moments, I would like her to remember that, like Mary had Elizabeth, she has so many ‘Elizabeths’ in the diocese of Hokkaido, all over Japan and all over the world. I too, from the day Tazu was elected to be bishop, have been praying every day for her, and will continue to pray.

Chosen by God, and with so many people’s prayers and many bishops’ hands, the Holy Spirit has been poured into Tazu with the words: “Send down the Holy Spirit on your servant Maria Grace for the office and work of a bishop in your church”

Tazu, you are filled with the Holy Spirit through your consecration, and that is all you need. Please feel relieved and continue to walk on the path God has called you to.

Path to the Ordination of Female Priests and Bishops in the NSKK

Revd. Cecilia Sayoko Ooka
NSKK Women’s Desk

On April 23rd, 2022, Sapporo Christ Church – the Cathedral of the diocese of Hokkaido – was filled with a tremendous joy at the consecration and installation Mass of the ninth bishop of the diocese. It was 24 years since the Nippon Sei Ko Kai (NSKK) first saw a woman ordained priest and now Maria Grace Tazu Sasamori has been installed as the first female bishop not only in Japan but also in the entire east Asia region. Due to concerns surrounding Covid-19, the number of people who could attend the service had to be limited. However, since the service was broadcast online, a great number of people inside and outside Japan were able to pray together and share the joy.

The NSKK celebrated the 20th anniversary of the ordination of women to the priesthood in 2018. At the reception after the service, we performed a comical skit titled “Back to the Future 2028→2018,” which included a line saying “we will see a female bishop in 10 years.” The day last April proved that we have moved forward much faster than we anticipated.

Upon the consecration of Bishop Sasamori, the Revd. Ajuko Ueda says, “It is true that we now have the first female bishop, for east Asia as well as for Japan, and we do hear that we should simply celebrate this as ‘the beginning of a new era.’ But we shouldn’t forget it has been made possible thanks to all the prayers of those who never succumbed no matter how bitterly criticized, those who never questioned their faith even when their dignity was impaired, and those who had no fear of people but just faithfulness to God. To put it differently, a hand was simply laid upon a person blessed by God, as it should be, and that is what makes me most delighted.”

In the NSKK, Revd. Margaret Yoshiko Shibukawa was the first female ordained priest (in December 1998). It took the NSKK 20 years to see their first female priest since the Committee of Doctrine, Service and Organization of the NSKK replied to the question from the House of Bishops on 'The Ordination of female priests' at the 34th General Synod in 1977. At that assembly, the committee concluded that: "There is no biblical or theological reasoning to oppose the ordination of female priests. However, it is one thing to admit there is no theological reason to dispute it, but to institutionalize it is another thing." This was approved by the House of Bishops at that time, and was almost equivalent to saying there was no biblical or theological basis for refusal of female priestly ordination.

Around the same time, Anglican churches in other parts of the world were beginning to approve ordination of female priests (Hong Kong in 1971, Canada in 1975, the US and Tanzania in 1976 respectively). But things were not easy in the NSKK. Proposals to begin discussions about female priests were submitted twice, at the 1986 and 1988 General Synods, but both were rejected. At the 1990 General Synod, the House of Bishops decided that the canons of the NSKK could allow female bishops and priests from other provinces to take the position of deacons in the NSKK and that they respected the fact that different provinces had different stands on the issue. The ambivalence between what they called mutual understanding of each province and the limited responsibilities they allowed for female bishops and priests tells us how hard it was for the NSKK to accept female priests. At the same Synod in 1990, however, a proposal to establish a committee 'To consider the introduction of female clergy' was approved, though with partial modifications. That was the moment when official discussions on female clergy finally started in the NSKK. Incidentally, 1990 was also the year when Barbara Harris – who had been ordained as Suffragan bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts – came to Japan. We held a symposium featuring Bishop Harris, which was full, mainly with a female audience.

At the 1992 General Synod, the committee made an interim report, according to which there were 65.5 % of church members in favor of female priests, 8.2% against, and 20% who abstained. It also reported 80% of the church members thought it was 'acceptable' to have female priests. Two years later, at the 1994 General Synod, when the four-year term given to the committee ended, they agreed to establish a new committee 'to consider the introduction of female priests,' again with some modifications on the original proposal.

In the meantime, the NSKK Women's Association – which consists of women's associations from each diocese across Japan – supported a movement to realize female priests in the NSKK. It decided in 1984 to give a one-million-yen scholarship to Toshiko Okamura, then a theological student, and to Tsuma Onuki, then a preacher. The NSKK Women's Association provided both financial and mental support to women wishing to join the clergy, including intensive study seminars for female students and female clergy. In 1985, they concluded that it was desirable to move toward realization of female clergy and priests from the viewpoint of women in the church and that they should share this message with the bishops of each diocese as well as to the House of Bishops as a body, in order to bring about reformation of the NSKK. In the same year, Chiyoko Okamoto – the President of the NSKK Women's Association at the time – sent an official letter to the House of Bishops, which led to seminars on female priests being held annually in each diocese on the day of the Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple. Chiyoko Okamoto was the first woman to raise her voice at

the 39th General Synod in 1986, where she stated that the “Women’s Association has heard a voice from our members expecting female clergy, based on the purpose of our association, which is to preach. We have seen it to be a huge problem that women are being denied priesthood just because of their gender. We are learning about this issue and learning from what is happening outside Japan. As a female member of the church, I pray that we will keep thinking about the ordination of female priests and that this issue will progress in a better direction, with the global trend in our minds.”

Movements toward the ordination of female priests developed at various levels, including at the aforementioned women’s association, provincial, diocesan, as well as at grass root level. Through these movements, those interested were able to deepen their understanding of, and share discussions about female priests, regardless which part of Japan they were from, and whether they were clergy or laity. Especially, the fact that Ajuko Ueda – then a lay preacher – lost her chance to be ordained when she got married, triggered the formation of ‘Concerned Women’, a group of women thinking about the church, which is still active. Why did she have to give up being part of the clergy? How can marriage be a reason to deny a woman the path to the priesthood? – these questions, anger, grief and pain were shared by a great many, and became a driving force toward the ordination of female priests. Since its start in 1988, the Group of Women Thinking about the Church has been working on not only the realization of female priests but also various gender issues in church. In 1992, the group started the 1st Women’s Forum of the Anglican Church, which has been held almost annually up until now and has provided important opportunities for women in the NSKK to interact with one another.

In 1993, a questionnaire conducted by the ‘Committee for Examining the Realization of Female Priests’ reported the opinions of those who opposed and those who supported female priests. The main opinions were as follows:

<Opposing opinions>

- Performing the sacraments is a man’s job. (Jesus was a man, and the disciples at the Last Supper were men, so it must be a male who performs these sacramental ceremonies)
- This issue can’t be answered logically; the opposition is my faith.
- Men and women are equal, but men are more powerful and convincing.
- It goes against the Bible. It also goes against the tradition of the corporate church, on top of that, it goes against the nature of the created woman.
- The Lord chose only male apostles and built the church from one of them. A human level of thinking should not be used to change holy things.
- A woman came from the rib of a man.
- The difference in roles for men and women is determined by the difference in gender. The division of roles within the church, society, and household should also be distinguished by gender.
- Based on the teachings and principles of the entire Bible, women should not become priests or bishops.

<Supporting opinions>

- The gift of being a woman, given by God, shall be put to good use with women in the same position as males in the priesthood.
- The calling to ordination is not a matter of gender, but rather the person’s availability for God’s

purposes, sense of vocation, sense of mission, and the other qualities of that person.

- Since the duties of the priest / bishop are considered to have been originally entrusted to the entire people (community) of God, the exclusion of females may be seen as a crime against that original plan.
- There is no problem for women to take responsibility for celebrating Communion, or with church management, however, care must be taken regarding the effects of marriage, childbirth, or childcare, upon her ministry.
- Religion itself is not for institutions, beliefs, or rituals, but is for the act of love, and Christ teaches in the Bible that there is no discrimination between men and women.
- Women's participation in mission is indispensable in this era. There are many difficult tasks for men alone, and women are required to work also. The participation of women would make the work of the church complete.
- I agree, but since there are many conservative men, both men and women need to change over time.

These are comments from thirty years ago, yet the opinions of those who are still persistently against female priests have almost not changed. The opinions of those who agree are also almost the same. It seems that this consciousness of gender role division is based on the gender dichotomy and also a sense of misogyny.

It was at the 51st General Synod in 1998, when 'being a male' was deleted from the requirements for candidates of the priesthood, that women were finally allowed to apply for the priesthood and a path to the ordination of women priests opened. This change of the canons also meant it was now possible to elect bishops regardless of their gender. At the same Synod, though, the 'Guidelines concerning the Introduction of the Ordination of Female Priests' were adopted in consideration of those who were against the decision. The guidelines emphasized the importance of understanding differences in views, but eventually were used to defend those who opposed the decision.

The December 1998 ordination in the Diocese of Chubu was the first case, then in January 1999, Revd. Shigeko Yamano and Revd. Tazu Sasamori were ordained priests in the Diocese of Tokyo. Some female clergy serving as deacons in the Diocese of Hokkaido were also ordained priests. Bishop Toshiaki Mori, who ordained the first female priest in the NSKK in 1998 said, "People often regard me as the first Bishop who ordained a female priest in NSKK, but I did so simply because we had Deacon Shibukawa, who was ready to serve her calling." We saw Rev. Maria Grace Sasamori ordained bishop this time, not because she was a woman but because she was ready to serve her calling.

The guidelines on the 'Introduction of the Ordination of Female Priests' were abolished at the 64th General Synod in 2018, in which the 'Guidelines for the Ordination of Female Priests' were instead adopted. What the new guidelines emphasized most was that "We recognize the holy orders of those who have received ordination according to the NSKK Prayer Book retain their validity" and that "We reconcile at Communion beyond our differing views on all issues." As of June 2022, there are 26 female clergy in the NSKK, one bishop, 17 priests, seven deacons, and one postulant, which accounts for roughly 16 % of the entire clergy in the NSKK. In reality, not all the incumbent bishops in the NSKK are in favor of ordaining female priests, which means women hoping to work as clergy still find it difficult to apply for the priesthood in certain

dioceses. It cannot be denied that these realities do have a great impact on church life of those who wish for female priests in that diocese. There are also some church members who insist “the role of priests must be played by men,” “female priests would be acceptable if you think our service were just an entertainment experience” or “bishops are icons of the living God.” Every time we hear such remarks (disappointedly), we are told that we need to respect different viewpoints since respecting diversity is important for Anglican churches. However, it needs to be discussed whether it is a part of diversity to exclude someone based on their gender, something they are not capable of choosing themselves.

A great many in the NSKK do pray and hope that more and more people will be invited to join its ranks of clergy regardless of their gender and that our community can fulfil its mission in better ways. It is also true that our journey to this day has been accompanied by so many male laity and clergy. Female clergy still face painful experiences just because they are female. Their pains, however, have been shared with other members of our community, which has encouraged them to follow the way Jesus has shown us. I believe all these painful memories and experiences will be a step of hope that can someday change despair into joyful dancing. NSKK Primate Luke Kenichi Muto said at the installation of Bishop Maria Grace Tazu Sasamori, “Sufferings and troubles that she may face in the coming years will not be solely in her hands; instead, the House of Bishops as a whole will work to address these problems,” and this gives us a great hope.

The gift of ordination is a joy for our entire community and a gift from God. Whether they are the clergy or laity, everyone in our community will trust God and participate in our mission together. In so doing, we the NSKK believe we can be truly used as a vessel to preach the Gospel in accordance with God’s will.

The Nippon Sei Ko Kai has consecrated two new bishops during the years 2020-2022:



The Rt. Revd. Francis of Assisi Renta NISHIHARA
Diocese of Chubu
Consecration: 24th October 2020



The Rt. Revd. Maria Grace Tazu SASAMORI
Diocese of Hokkaido
Consecration: 23rd April 2022

Members of the English Version of NSKK Newsletter, Spring • Summer 2022 are as follows:
The Revd. Paul Tolhurst, Ms.Toshiko Yoshimura, Mr.Soichiro Ooka
Editor-in-Chief: Hajime Suzuki