

Division looms for Episcopal Church: U.S. decisions bring strong international reaction

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Signs of a full-blown split between the Episcopal Church and most of the worldwide Anglican Communion appeared only days after the U.S. church's General Convention refused to renounce the election of gay bishops.

The 2.2-million-member Episcopal Church would be reduced to nonvoting "associate" status in a proposed two-tiered membership policy for the 77-million-member communion that was announced June 27 in London.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said those national churches that sign a covenant affirming Anglicanism's traditional stance on homosexuality could be full members of the communion, while other churches would be relegated to associate status.

Outgoing presiding bishop Frank Griswold of New York welcomed the as-yet-unwritten covenant and said he expected the process would reflect the Anglican "habit of cultural sensitivity and intellectual flexibility that does not seek to close down unexpected questions too quickly."

However, Williams, speaking about the 2003 consecration of New Hampshire bishop V. Gene Robinson, who lives with a male partner, and about the support for that action that prevailed at the recent General Convention, commented, "There is no way the Anglican Communion can remain unchanged by what is happening at the moment."

One day after Williams announced his proposal, the Diocese of Newark, New Jersey, said it is considering an openly gay candidate for bishop, despite the General Convention's last-day resolution urging the church to "exercise restraint" by not electing any more homosexual prelates. Newark will choose its new bishop from a

slate of four candidates on September 23.

Some traditionalist leaders in the Episcopal Church, saying their patience was at an end, took initial breakaway steps shortly after the General Convention in Columbus, Ohio, concluded on June 21. Five of the Episcopal Church's 110 dioceses said they were disappointed with the church's newly elected presiding bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, who said she had favored Robinson's election.

Central Florida, one of the five, aired its grievances in a statement June 30, saying it was "deeply saddened" at the election of Jefferts Schori because of her support for the "blessing of same sex unions in the Diocese of Nevada, and who, in her first sermon following the election, spoke of 'Jesus, our mother.'"

Added the statement: "We believe her actions as a diocesan bishop call into question her ability to lead the Episcopal Church in the process of healing and restoration."

The dioceses of Central Florida, Pittsburgh, South Carolina, Fort Worth and San Joaquin, California, all asked to be put under the oversight of a foreign primate. The Texas diocese made the request on the morning after Jefferts Schori's election at the triennial convention.

The appeals from diocesan standing committees, directed to Williams and other primates, asked for immediate alternate episcopal oversight. But the Episcopal News Service noted at the end of June that none of the requests had yet been ratified by a diocesan convention.

San Joaquin and Fort Worth are two of three Episcopal dioceses that do not allow the ordination of women—an issue that was most divisive when the General Convention in 1976 voted to put an end to an all-male priesthood.

The five oversight-requesting dioceses belong to the Pittsburgh-based Anglican Communion Network, a group of ten dioceses and about 800 parishes formed after the consecration of Robinson. Many "orthodox" Episcopalians in the Anglican Communion's 38 geographic provinces consider homosexuality sinful.

In related announcements, three large Episcopal parishes—Falls Church and Truro Church, both in Virginia, and Christ Church in Plano, Texas—have indicated that they may soon leave the Episcopal Church. Together, Sunday attendance at the three

parishes surpasses the entire membership of the Diocese of Nevada, where Jefferts Schori has been a bishop since 2001.

“We think an extended period of study, prayer and deliberation about how we are to respond to the serious rift in our denomination is wise,” said Falls Church leaders in a statement, “and we are hoping to engage in such a time this fall.”

Meanwhile, in an unusual move, a conservative American priest, Martyn Minns, was named a bishop June 28 by the Anglican province of Nigeria. Minns—pastor of Truro Church in Fairfax, Virginia—will oversee the Convocation for Anglicans in North America, which includes about 20 churches in which many Nigerian immigrants worship.

Minns has been a close ally of Nigerian Archbishop Peter Akinola, who has likened Robinson’s consecration to a “Satanic attack upon God’s church.” Minns said that he was “truly humbled” by the election.

Virginia bishop Peter Lee has written to his diocese that Minns’s election as a bishop of the Church of Nigeria is “an affront to the traditional, orthodox understanding of Anglican Provincial Autonomy.” Lee added: “Archbishop Akinola acknowledges as much in his letter to Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams.” Lee said it is impossible to honor Akinola’s request that Minns remain rector of Truro Church while serving as a Nigerian bishop.

Last year Akinola said in a letter that the Nigerian church’s intent is not to challenge or intervene in the affairs of the U.S. or Canadian church bodies, “but to provide safe harbor for all those who can no longer find their spiritual home in those churches.” But on July 4 the Nigerian church issued a statement calling the U.S. church “a cancerous lump” that “should be excised” from the worldwide Anglican Communion.

The election of Jefferts Schori drew praise in other quarters. Retired archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa exclaimed “Whoopee!” in a videotaped interview at Trinity Church, Wall Street. “I am thrilled to bits and so deeply thankful that this has happened,” said the Nobel Peace Prize laureate as he noted the advance of women in ministries.

When asked how her election might affect reconciliation efforts in the Anglican Communion, Tutu responded, “Why can’t we say we want to give the world this particular gift: We are different, but so what?”

Not all the focus was on the Episcopal Church's first female presiding bishop, however. The stated intent of the archbishop of Canterbury to redesign membership in the Anglican Communion drew widespread scrutiny.

Williams spelled out the potentially reduced role that the U.S. church faces. "The 'associated' church would have no direct part in the decision making of the 'constituent' churches, though they might well be observers whose views were sought or whose expertise was shared from time to time," Williams wrote.

On homosexuality, Williams noted: "It is imperative to give the strongest support to the defense of homosexual people against violence, bigotry and legal disadvantage, to appreciate the role played in the life of the church by people of homosexual orientation." But on the issue of "practicing gay bishops," he said it is "not unreasonable to seek for a very much wider and deeper consensus before any change is in view, let alone foreclosing the debate by ordaining someone, whatever his personal merits, who was in a practicing gay partnership."

To questions of how dissident dioceses and congregations might leave the New York-based Episcopal Church, however, communications deputy Jan Nunley said that those entities cannot officially "leave" the denomination. "Parishes are created by dioceses and dioceses are created by action of the General Convention," she said. People are free to leave but dioceses and parishes continue to exist within the denomination.

Nunley envisioned a scenario in which Episcopal officials could declare a diocese vacant, and the presiding bishop would call for the election of a new diocesan bishop, according to the Episcopal News Service.