

Episcopalians won't reverse pro-gay stances: A clear rebuff to conservatives

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In a clear rebuff to conservatives in the global Anglican Communion, Episcopal Church leaders have rejected a September 30 deadline set by overseas Anglicans to roll back their church's pro-gay policies, arguing that such decisions can be made only at the U.S. church's triennial conventions—the next one being in 2009.

The church's 40-member Executive Council, headed by Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, also on June 14 declined a proposal from Anglican archbishops to create a separate church structure for conservatives who reject her leadership.

The panel, meeting in Parsippany, New Jersey, questioned the power of overseas archbishops to "impose deadlines and demands upon any of the churches of the Anglican Communion or to prescribe the relationships within . . . our common life."

The Executive Council declined to give a "yes-or-no, up-or-down decision" to all of the archbishops' demands, said Lee Alison Crawford, a council member and rector of St. Mary's Parish in Northfield, Vermont. But Crawford said the council provided "a strong affirmation that the Episcopal Church is not going to go backward from the commitment to our [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] brothers and sisters."

Last February, primates—or top archbishops—in the worldwide Anglican Communion demanded that Episcopalians pledge to stop consecrating gay bishops, halt blessings for same-sex unions and cede some authority to overseas Anglicans to minister to disaffected U.S. conservatives. The U.S. church was told to agree to those conditions by the last day of September or face consequences.

Generally, the Executive Council is charged with making decisions for the 2.2-million-member church between its triennial General Conventions. But on June 14 the council said the archbishops' demands could only be considered at General

Convention, thus essentially putting off the primates' demands.

"It's neither go back to the drawing board nor a complete rejection," Jefferts Schori said at a teleconference, adding that although the Episcopal House of Bishops could take up the demands at its meeting in September, at the General Conventions both clergy and lay delegates are involved in the legislative process.

At its 2006 General Convention, the Episcopal Church voted to "exercise restraint" by not consecrating bishops "whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on the communion." Some church leaders have interpreted that as prohibiting noncelibate gay bishops.

The recent Executive Council statement said, "We strongly affirm this church's desire to be in the fullest possible relationship with our Anglican sisters and brothers, but in truth the only thing we really have to offer in that relationship is who we are—a community of committed Christians seeking God's will for our common life."

Adding to the ongoing tension between the Episcopal Church and others within the Anglican Communion was the announcement that Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi, the leader of the Anglican Church of Kenya, would consecrate Bill Atwood, a former Episcopalian, as a suffragan bishop of All Saints' Cathedral Diocese in Nairobi.

The move would, Nzimbi said, "support the international interests of the Anglican Church of Kenya, including support of Kenyan clergy and congregations in North America," the Episcopal News Service reported.

Episcopal leaders already have decried the action in May of Archbishop Peter J. Akinola of Nigeria of installing Martyn Minns of Virginia as missionary bishop for the Convocation of Anglicans in North America. *-Religion News Service*