

Episcopalians open doors for gay bishops: The triennial convention

by [John Dart](#) in the [August 11, 2009](#) issue

Only days after Archbishop Rowan Williams of the worldwide Anglican Communion cautioned Episcopalians against making decisions “that could push us further apart,” delegates at their July 8-17 convention in California voted—swiftly and by a large majority—to open the doors for gay and lesbian bishops.

The 2003 Episcopal convention’s approval of an openly gay bishop, V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, had fueled anger in the many Anglican churches in the global South that consider it unbiblical and heretical for homosexuals to serve as clergy.

Under pressure from Williams, Anglicanism’s spiritual leader, and other institutions of the distressed Anglican Communion, the 2006 triennial Episcopal General Convention passed a last-day measure urging U.S. dioceses of the 2.1 million-member Episcopal Church to “restrain” from electing gay bishops for the sake of Anglican unity.

But this year, on July 12 in Anaheim, the clergy-lay House of Deputies approved by a nearly three-to-one majority a resolution that skirted the appeal for restraint, affirming the Episcopal Church’s loyalty to the Anglican Communion while noting that “God has called and may call such individuals [gay and lesbian Christians] to any ordained ministry” in the church.

Within two days, the bicameral convention had agreed on the final version—even while many news reporters were belatedly arriving in Anaheim, knowing from past experience that at church conventions controversial issues usually are not decided until the last few days.

Could the convention have arrived at consensus so quickly because many conservative opponents had been siphoned off by the dissidents who launched the rival Anglican Church in North America June 22-25 in Texas? Bishop John Chane of

the Diocese of Washington did not think so.

“People were here on the floor clearly articulating the views of those who were no longer with us,” Chane said. The bishop also said that the swift action on gay bishops was preceded by three years of discussions among the many bishops who wanted the Episcopal Church’s policy to reflect the already wide participation by gay and lesbian priests and lay officers of the church.

Another difference from past conventions “was the willingness to spend time discussing” the homosexuality issues that have been dividing mainline churches for decades, he said.

The agreement in the House of Deputies was aided greatly, said priest-professor Ian Douglas of the Episcopal Divinity School in an interview, by conversations between individuals who did not previously know each other and who held differing views. They were asked in turn to describe their own stories and their perception of the church’s story, and to discuss “what God wants us to do now,” Douglas said.

Thirteen resolutions were proposed to deal with the 2006 statement that called for a “moratorium” on ordaining gay bishops—a term Douglas and some others said was a misnomer for the appeal for restraint. Six resolutions called for repealing the statement; another six called for strengthening it.

The 13th resolution, Douglas said, included “a description of where we are as a church right now.” It was approved even though some were concerned that it could be interpreted as prescribing a course of action to ordain qualified partnered gay or lesbian bishops. Douglas admitted that the phrase “may call . . . to any ordained ministry” could refer either to future church acts or to permission to ordain at present. “It all depends on what ‘may’ means,” he said.

As to the effect of the approved resolution, which delegates referred to as D025, opinions of bishops varied. Bishop John Jelinek of Minnesota said he voted for it because “we’re looking to go forward.” Bishop Bruce Caldwell of Wyoming said it was “largely descriptive of where we are today” and was therefore an honest statement.

Bishop Philip Duncan of the relatively conservative Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast voted against D025 but also said that he did not see the new measure as overriding the moratorium. Less optimistic was Bishop Mark Lawrence of South Carolina, who

said that everyone reads the tea leaves the way they want to. “It’s very much of an Anglican Communion-breaking issue, and it breaks faith with many of the faithful in the church.”

One proponent of D025 declared in remarks to the delegates: “It’s not an attempt to fly in the face of the Anglican Communion. It’s an attempt to deepen relationships with the rest of the communion, because real relationships are built on authenticity.”

On the convention floor, a youth delegate, Zack Brown of the Diocese of Upper South Carolina, implored the House of Deputies before the vote, “Please don’t vote in any way that makes more conservatives feel the way I do—like I’m the only one left.”

After both the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops approved the resolution, Susan Russell, the outgoing president of Integrity USA, the primary advocacy group for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Episcopalians, said the action was a “historic move forward.” Bishop Robinson, who has been at the center of the storm, said it was time for Episcopalians “to be the church God is calling us to be.”

In preaching to 1,200 people July 10 at a Eucharist service hosted by Integrity USA, retired bishop Barbara Harris, the first female bishop ordained in the Anglican Communion, declared that the die was cast long ago for electing GLBT clergy to the episcopacy.

“If you don’t want GLBT folks as bishops, don’t ordain them as deacons; better yet, be honest and say, ‘We don’t want you, you don’t belong here,’ and don’t bestow on them the sacrament of baptism to begin with,” she said to applause.

The Episcopal Church was forced to cut spending drastically, as many other denominations have had to do. It reduced churchwide spending by \$23 million, adopting a \$141 million budget for 2010-2012.

Among other actions, delegates approved—almost as an afterthought to opening the episcopacy to gay and lesbian candidates—the use of same-sex blessings as deemed appropriate by bishops, especially in states that permit marriage or civil unions of same-sex couples. The House of Bishops, acknowledging these “changing circumstances,” endorsed the measure by a three-to-one ratio. The lay delegates (64 percent) and priests (55 percent) agreed in a vote on July 16. The resolution was vague: bishops “may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs” of

church members.

At the 2003 convention, delegates declined to appoint a committee to formulate such blessings and rites, though the delegates acknowledged at that time that many congregations quietly performed blessings. Bishop Jeffrey Lee of Chicago said the situation has not really changed from that of six years ago, when churches were “responding with a wide range of pastoral responses.”

Asked to evaluate the changed mood this year, Bishop Michael Curry of the Diocese of North Carolina, talking to reporters July 17, attributed it to the Holy Spirit. “We found a lot of common ground” despite theological differences, “and it became hallowed ground.”