

Has the Episcopal Church been plutoed?

By [Charles Hefling](#)

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What really happened at Canterbury this month, nobody knows. Nobody *can* know, because it hasn't finished happening.

Even what seems to have happened so far isn't easy to describe in brief. There was a "gathering" of 30-some "primates" of the "Anglican Communion." (The scare-quotes are deliberate, for reasons that will appear.) From this assembly there went out a communiqué that may or may not portend significant changes in what is for the moment the only officially Anglican church in the U.S., namely the Episcopal Church. According to early reports, and not a few recent ones, TEC has been demoted, plutoed as it were. It may still orbit the Canterbury sun, but it doesn't count as a genuine Anglican planet.

That reading is vastly oversimplified.

To begin with, the gathering at Canterbury was explicitly not a Primates' *Meeting*. That name refers to one of the "instruments of communion" that are supposed to promote institutional unity among the various churches around the world that began as branch offices of the Church of England. Forty years ago, when it was first set up, the Primates' Meeting was welcomed as a way for the chief bishops of these various Anglican-identified churches to confabulate and cooperate. It has never been accorded any legislative or executive authority.

In that respect the Primates' Meeting resembles the Lambeth Conference, the older, much larger, and much less frequent assembly of bishops that is another of the "instruments of communion." As the Lambeth Conference is not a synod, much less an ecumenical council, so the Primates' Meeting is neither a curia nor a college of cardinals.

There are, however, those who would like it to be. Arguably, the almost haphazard aggregate of ecclesiastical entities that came to be called the Anglican Communion needs *some* institutional structure, some formal means of governing itself and regulating its teaching. In particular—so it has been urged—there ought to be some

way to rein in churches that push the envelope too far in matters of doctrine or practice, thereby distorting the identity of Anglican Christianity.

Concretely, this has meant reining in TEC. TEC has long been ordaining women as presbyters and to the episcopate. It was a TEC diocese that chose the first openly gay bishop; now TEC is building marriage equality into its polity. Each of these innovations in turn has been condemned in some quarters. But on women's ordination the Communion has managed to maintain a fragile unity by agreeing to disagree, whereas accepting gay and lesbian people as such is another matter, a bridge too far—especially though not only for most of the big African churches. From that standpoint, TEC has added blasphemy to immorality.

Evidently, though, there is nothing the Communion as such can do about it. Each of the Anglican churches now governs itself. They could, in principle, agree to surrender some of their independence to some sort of central authority. This was the idea behind the Anglican Covenant, which would have established a governmental structure not unlike the one the American colonies had under the Articles of Confederation. There would be, notably, a way to impose “relational consequences” on member churches that got out of line. As everyone knew, though nobody said, it was TEC that the framers of the Covenant had in mind. In any case this as-it-were constitution for Anglicanism has not been ratified, nor will it be in any foreseeable future.

Yet at Canterbury the assembled primates behaved pretty much as though it had. They endorsed, by a strong majority vote, a list of requirements that amount to taking privileges away from a misbehaving child until acceptable behavior is demonstrated. Among other things, TEC is to withdraw from participation in certain committees and deliberations, intra- and extra-mural.

The disconnect here is that even an officially convened Primates' Meeting has no authority to impose, let alone enforce, sanctions or consequences or penalties of any sort. The canon lawyers (who appear not to have been consulted ahead of time) have weighed in, and their judgment is unequivocal. It is as though the National Governors Association had declared that one state, Vermont say, must stop sending representatives to Congress until stipulated conditions are met. The primates, in short, are bluffing.

At the same time, even if they have no juridical say-so, what the primates say may nevertheless carry moral authority. Some of them exercise nearly autocratic powers in the churches they head; others, including TEC's presiding bishop, are in effect moderators, subject to checks and balances. But collectively they do in some sense represent the mind of the Anglican Communion as a whole, in so far as that is possible.

And on some such basis it could turn out that their recent directives are, in fact, carried out. TEC could voluntarily choose to take the consequences prescribed in the primates' communiqué and go about its own business despite plutonic status. Or the Anglican Consultative Council, which is the only one of the "instruments of communion" with executive clout, could determine at its meeting in April that TEC may take no active part in the meeting. Either way, the result would be in effect an acknowledgment that the primates do play *de facto* an authoritative role that has never been assigned to them *de jure*. A precedent would be set. There would be facts on the ground.

Something like that may happen. If it does, it would somewhat ironically be in keeping with the Anglican ethos. The history of Anglicanism has typically been one of *de facto* improvisation rather than *de jure* regimen; this is one reason the Anglican Covenant failed to win approval. The Communion itself came to be by fits and starts. Perhaps it is defining itself in the same awkward, empirical way.

*This post was corrected on January 29, 2016. It originally stated that the Episcopal Church was the first Anglican province to ordain women; in fact it was the Anglican Church in Hong Kong and Macau.*