

2018 likely to be another tough year for the archbishop of Canterbury

A breakaway Anglican church in England appears to be forming as conflict over same-sex marriage continues.

by [Catherine Pepinster](#) in the [January 31, 2018](#) issue



Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Foreign and Commonwealth Office](#).

If 2017 was a tough year for Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby in keeping the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion together, 2018 promises to be tougher still.

The past year was marked with conflicts over same-sex marriage and headlines about declining congregations. But this year Welby faces particularly testing issues:

- Response to the appointment of a woman as the bishop of London, the third most senior cleric in the Church of England.
- The gathering of the Global Anglican Future Conference, the international conservative faction also known as GAFCON, in Jerusalem in June.
- The likelihood of a breakaway church in England.
- The threat of a financial strike by some parishes.

A moment in 2017 confirming sharp divisions in the church was the release of a report on same-sex marriage that Welby praised as a “road map.” It was narrowly rejected by the Church of England’s General Synod because the report urged that marriage should remain between one man and one woman.

Then the Scottish Episcopal Church voted for same-sex marriage.

At the meeting of primates of the Anglican Communion in October, Welby’s fiercest critics from Africa boycotted the gathering. They and fellow opponents of liberalizing church practice on marriage will be heading to Jerusalem in June for GAFCON’s tenth anniversary meeting. There they will be joined by similarly disaffected Anglicans from North America and Britain.

Part of the problem for Welby is that the archbishop of Canterbury has no papal-like power; he cannot punish provinces by expelling them from the Anglican Communion. With unity so hard to achieve, he appears to have made avoiding greater disunity his goal. In the Church of England, the phrase “good disagreement” is often used to describe the current situation.

This approach has prompted derision from Welby’s toughest critics at home. Among their biggest publicity coups in recent months was the posting of a declaration on cathedral doors around the time of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The public display of documents denouncing the Church of England’s “corrupt” stance on same-sex relationships mimicked the popular story about Martin

Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of a chapel.

The statements, affirming the supreme authority of scripture and signed by more than 60 priests, claimed that while the church had not changed its doctrine, in practice it was allowing clergy to adopt unorthodox lifestyles. One of the protesters, Stephen Rae, vicar of St. James, who posted the declaration on the doors of Canterbury Cathedral, complained of the church's revisionism and said Canterbury had become "synonymous with abdication and dereliction of duty." Rae is highly critical of the idea of "good disagreement."

"Our bishops have shifted from being our leaders to being referees," he said. "We are deeply concerned about the recasting of teaching. If the trajectory doesn't change, there will be a massive split in the Church of England."

Dissenters have already carried out ordinations under the auspices of the Anglican Mission in England, which was established as a mission society by the Nairobi Conference of GAFCON in 2013 to support traditional teaching. The consecration of Andy Lines as a bishop earlier in 2017 and then his ordination of nine men to serve in church plants supporting GAFCON in England make it appear to many that the Anglican Mission in England is effectively a breakaway church.

Archbishop Nicholas Okoh, chairman of GAFCON, described the ordinations as part of a plan "to help evangelize a nation that was once one of the greatest centers of Christian mission the world has ever seen but is now one of the most secular."

"How can a church be effective in mission when it has muddled the truth of the gospel?" he asked.

Then there is the conservatives' reaction to the recent appointment of a woman to one of the most important positions in the Church of England. The next bishop of London, the third most senior position in the church after the archbishops of Canterbury and York, will be Sarah Mullally, currently bishop of Crediton.

The appointments panel for the bishopric will have been aware that the Diocese of London encompasses a wide range of views, from conservatives who object to women priests to particularly liberal congregants.

Mullally's gender pleases those seeking evidence of growing equality for women in the church. Her predecessor, Richard Chartres, did not ordain women priests. While

Mullally supports traditional church teaching on marriage as being between a man and a woman, she is said to be supportive of greater equality for gay people.

Welby might well have to face another kind of protest in 2018: some parishes and their clergy are considering withholding their diocesan contributions over the controversies in the church, which would add financial headaches to the church's theological ones.

But 2018 could bring comfort as well as consternation to the archbishop of Canterbury. While church data published this autumn revealed that Church of England attendance has dropped below the 1 million mark—[there are 55 million people in England](#)—it also shows that those who do go to church are strongly committed, rather than nominal, Anglicans.

“There is a move away from faith by inheritance to faith by choice,” said Martin Bashir, the religious affairs correspondent for the BBC, who has traveled regularly with Welby. “People are much more committed if they belong, rather than being just nominal Christians.”

[On January 4, the Church of England announced grants of £24.4 million (\$33 million) in the latest portion of its Renewal and Reform program, [the Anglican Communion News Service reported](#). The Diocese of London will receive the biggest grant, valued at £4.8 million, as part of plans to open 100 new churches in Britain's capital as well as to revitalize churches and train leaders. Other grants will focus on areas such as engaging youth and younger adults.] —Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on January 12, appears in the January 31 print edition under the title “Archbishop of Canterbury faces another tough year amid Anglican conflicts.”