

Episcopal Church to forgo new bishops for year, leaders say: A time for healing

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Seeking to accompany its apology to overseas Anglicans for the anguish caused by approving a gay bishop's ordination in 2003, the U.S. Episcopal bishops have decided to withhold consent for any new bishops elected by dioceses over the next 14 months.

By a nearly unanimous vote, the denomination's House of Bishops meeting in Navasota, Texas, in mid-March endorsed what they called "a provisional measure to contribute to a time for healing." They also offered repentance "for having breached our bonds of affection by any failure to consult adequately with our Anglican partners."

The moratorium decision came one month after the world's Anglican archbishops had strongly urged the American church to "voluntarily" withdraw from participating in Anglican Communion meetings. The primates have also been unhappy with the U.S. church's lack of regret for approving the consecration of openly gay bishop V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire in light of the weight of Anglican opinion that "homosexual practice" is incompatible with scripture.

In London, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams welcomed the "constructive" step by the U.S. bishops. "They have clearly sought to respond positively to the requests made of them" by the primates' meeting and last year's Windsor Report, a special study that explored ways to prevent schism in the worldwide church.

The Windsor Report had suggested that the U.S. church declare a moratorium on election and consent to any bishop candidate "living in a same-gender union" until such time as a "new consensus" emerges on the issue within Anglicanism.

Saying they do not have the authority to impose such criteria on the dioceses, the U.S. bishops instead declared they would urge the more than 100 dioceses “to delay episcopal elections” altogether prior to the next Episcopal General Convention, which will be held June 13-21, 2006, in Columbus, Ohio.

As for the Windsor Report request that the U.S. church also place a moratorium on public rites of blessing for same-sex unions, the bishops declined to do so. They noted that “some in our church” hold that pastoral care to gay and lesbian members should include such blessings. The bishops nevertheless pledged not to authorize public union rites, or bless such unions, at least not before the 2006 General Convention.

Jon Bruno, Episcopal bishop of the Los Angeles Diocese and one of the 16 members of a bishops’ committee that drafted the “covenant statement” in Texas, told the *Los Angeles Times*, “We’re trying to go the extra mile and pay the price we have to pay.” Bruno reaffirmed his previous commitment not to bless gay unions, but also reiterated that he would not impose his “conscience” on priests in the diocese by prohibiting such acts.

Some conservatives dismissed the bishops’ actions as too little, too late. Kendall Harmon, a conservative leader from South Carolina, accused the bishops of trying to dictate the terms and timetable of their own discipline. “While it’s nice to see movement, the reality is it’s a form of defiance couched as compliance,” Harmon said.