

Episcopal Church given deadline to bar gay bishops definitively: A tense standoff in Tanzania

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Anglican leaders from around the world have told the Episcopal Church's bishops they must declare unequivocally that they will not authorize same-sex blessings and that no one living in a same-sex union will be made a bishop.

Failure to give such assurances by September 30 would leave the Episcopal Church's relations with the Anglican Communion "damaged at best" and would have "consequences for the full participation" in the 77-million member global body. The Anglican leaders, known as primates, delivered this message at the end of a February 15-19 meeting in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Behind the tense standoff in Africa is the 2003 election of V. Gene Robinson, an openly gay divorced father, as a bishop in New Hampshire. At the Episcopal General Convention in 2006, the bishops, clergy and lay delegates approved a measure to "refrain" from electing any more gay bishops, but the resolution lacked the wording sought by conservative Episcopal parishes and by many bishops in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

"At the heart of our tensions is the belief that the Episcopal Church has departed from the standard of teaching on human sexuality," stated the primates.

Episcopal Church presiding bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, who has backed inclusion of gay clergy and bishops, was snubbed in the meeting when seven archbishops from the Southern Hemisphere refused to receive communion with their fellow Anglican leaders, including Jefferts Schori. "To do so would be a violation of scriptural teaching," they said.

Another recommendation from the meeting was to form a five-member pastoral council to act on behalf of the bishops in dealing with the 2.2-million-member Episcopal Church. That council would appoint a "primate vicar" to oversee the small but vocal band of conservatives in the U.S. church. Seven Episcopal dioceses and a number of dissident congregations have refused the leadership of Jefferts Schori.

It remains to be seen just how the plan would be enacted. "When it comes to the scheme, the devil will be in the details," said Ian Douglas, a professor at Episcopal Divinity School in Massachusetts.

The primates also urged that lawsuits in the U.S. over property and other matters be dropped. The national church recently joined the Diocese of Virginia in a suit to retain a number of churches whose leaders pronounced themselves under the authority of an African archbishop. —*Ecumenical News International, Religion News Service*