

# Episcopal bishops nix foreign oversight: A declaration of independence

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Episcopal bishops have brushed off an attempt to give overseas Anglicans a role in governing the Episcopal Church, saying such a move would be “injurious” and could lead to a permanent division of the U.S. church.

At their annual spring retreat in Navasota, Texas, the bishops on March 20 defended their turf and asserted their independence while acknowledging that their liberal stance may alienate the U.S. church from the worldwide Anglican Communion.

“We proclaim a gospel that welcomes diversity of thought and encourages free and open theological debate as a way of seeking God’s truth,” the bishops said in a statement. “If that means that others reject us and communion with us, as some have already done, we must with great regret and sorrow accept their decision.”

The bishops were responding to demands from Anglican leaders that they adopt new structures to oversee the small but vocal conservative minority in the 2.2-million member Episcopal Church. The Anglican primates, or top bishops, also told the U.S. church to promise not to consecrate gay bishops and that they must stop blessing same-sex unions by September 30 or face “consequences.”

The bishops will not take up those requests until their next meeting, in September, Episcopal presiding bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori said at a March 21 news conference.

Meanwhile, the bishops said there is “an urgent need to meet face to face with the Archbishop of Canterbury . . . at the earliest possible opportunity.” As head of the Church of England, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams is the de facto leader of the world’s 77 million Anglicans.

Though each of the 38 regional churches in the global Anglican Communion is autonomous, the primates in February proposed a plan to inject a new “primatial vicar” and “pastoral council” into the Episcopal Church to oversee dissenting conservatives. Under the Anglican plan, three of the five members of the council would be appointed by non-U.S. clergy.

But the U.S. bishops said the plan overreaches and “violates our founding principles . . . following our own liberation from colonialism and the beginning of a life independent of the Church of England.”

“There was a some belief in the House [of Bishops] that other parts of the communion do not understand us very well,” Jefferts Schori said.

According to the Episcopal bishops, the pastoral scheme also:

- violates church law and compromises the church’s autonomy;
- changes the process of writing a covenant, or agreement, among all the Anglican Communion members;
- takes power from the laity and gives it to high-ranking bishops; and
- encourages breaking off relationships, “one of the worst tendencies of our Western culture.”

“These resolutions make clear that in spite of our differences on human sexuality and other issues, a solid majority of the House viewed the [primates’] recommendations . . . as offensive to our Church and disrespectful of the way that we discern and respond to God’s will,” said Washington bishop John Chane. —*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*