

Episcopal bishops hold fast against demands: An answer to the Anglican Communion

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Expressing their “passionate desire” to remain a full partner in the worldwide Anglican Communion, U.S. Episcopal bishops late last month essentially reiterated an earlier statement of their intent to “exercise restraint” regarding the consecration of more gay bishops and to stand firm against authorizing public blessings of same-sex unions.

Months before the September 30 deadline issued by overseas Anglican bishops for the U.S. church to rule out leniency on gay issues, the U.S. bishops had said that only the church’s triennial convention can make such blanket decisions. Unauthorized same-sex blessings continue in some parishes. Conservatives doubt that the carefully worded September bishops’ statement will be satisfactory abroad.

The bishops also condemned a move by African bishops to provide outside leadership for parishes that no longer accept the U.S. hierarchy. They endorsed a plan to appoint “episcopal visitors” from within the church instead.

“We call for an immediate end to diocesan incursions by uninvited bishops,” the bishops said. “Such incursions imperil common prayer and long-established ecclesial principles of our communion.” Some see the seeds of schism taking tangible shape with such “incursions.”

The bishops, by promising not to endorse gay bishops or same-sex blessings as a group, appeared to leave themselves significant wiggle room on how their policies would be implemented on the local level.

Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori acknowledged that the statement was mainly a “clarification” of the bishops’ previous positions, but said it was a full response to what was asked of them.

“We treasure our membership in the Anglican Communion,” she said, adding that the measures to pull back on the church’s gay-rights positions were “sacrificial.”

The statement was approved by a voice vote—with only one resounding no—following five days of meetings that included three sessions with Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and a delegation of other Anglican prelates.

The bishops, the statement said, “expressed our passionate desire to remain in communion. It is our conviction that the Episcopal Church needs the Anglican Communion, and we heard from our guests that the Anglican Communion needs the Episcopal Church.”

In addressing the question of gay bishops, the prelates reiterated a resolution passed at the denomination’s 2006 convention calling on church officials “to exercise restraint by not consenting” to bishops whose “manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church.” In a footnote, the bishops specifically said that includes “noncelibate gay and lesbian persons.”

In making a “pledge not to authorize for use in our dioceses any public rites of blessing of same-sex unions” at this time, they noted that the church has never adopted any rite for such blessings.

Whether the bishops' response will satisfy either the Anglican primates or dissident Episcopalians remained highly questionable.

"It's a great example of apostolic leaders acting like lawyers," said Kendall Harmon, a conservative theologian from the Diocese of South Carolina. "They're hiding behind language that's parsed and insulting." The bishops' "reluctant bargaining effort to keep their foot in the door" of the Anglican Communion will just lead to increased chaos in the U.S. and abroad, Harmon said.

Some bishops considering leaving the Episcopal Church were not at the meetings. Bishop Robert Duncan convened a meeting September 26 in Pittsburgh to seek more cooperation among the several splinter groups that have formed.

Jim Naughton, a spokesperson for the Diocese of Washington, said that the New Orleans statement seemed to have overwhelming support. "Much of the church would like to move forward on issues of full inclusion," he said. "We would like to authorize blessings for gay relationships, we would like to say that all orders of ministry in our church are open to our gay and lesbian members. We're not happy with the status quo. But tactically this seemed by far the wisest thing to do."

In an illustration of the distress within the U.S. church, Bishop Jeffrey Steenson of Albuquerque, New Mexico, announced at the bishops' meeting that he had decided to resign and become a Roman Catholic because of the direction taken by the American church.

At least three of the 110 U.S. dioceses—Pittsburgh; Fort Worth, Texas; and Quincy, Illinois—have threatened to leave the 2.2-million-member denomination if the New Orleans meeting did not produce satisfactory results.

The bishops endorsed a plan by Jefferts Schori to name eight bishops to take her place in six dioceses where her leadership has been rejected because of her progressive theology and pro-gay stance.

Anglican leaders in Nigeria and Kenya, among the most bitter critics of the U.S. church, in recent weeks have chosen six like-minded American and expatriate Nigerian clergy to serve as missionary bishops to dissident conservatives.

Archbishop Williams, speaking at a New Orleans news conference on September 22, deplored what he called these "foreign incursions" and added, "Canonically, this is a muddle, and I think it's getting worse." —*Religion News Service*