Episcopal alternative formed; Africans urge Lambeth be postponed: Anglican Covenant proposed

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A high-level Anglican committee based in Great Britain has reported that the Episcopal Church's bishops who met last month in New Orleans "clarified all outstanding questions" regarding its controversial stances on homosexual issues. But 11 bishops in the Council of African Anglican Provinces, in a special meeting October 2-5 in Mauritius, said the assurances by U.S. bishops that they will restrain themselves on ordaining gay bishops or blessing same-sex unions are "without credibility."

The African primates, or high-ranking bishops, called for postponement of the once-a-decade 2008 Lambeth Conference in July to "allow the current tensions to subside and leave room for the hard work of reconciliation that must be done." The primates urged that work continue on a proposed Anglican Covenant, which many conservatives hope will "uphold our common heritage of faith."

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, who had met with U.S. bishops in New Orleans, said he had sent the positive report by the Joint Anglican Committee to primates worldwide and asked them to respond to him by the end of October.

These developments within the 77-million-member Anglican Communion, which is nonhierarchal and traditionally gives autonomy to national churches, were reported by Episcopal News Service, an agency of the New York–based Episcopal Church.

In the meantime, ENS also reported on dissident conservative leaders who, unhappy with the liberal majority leadership in the U.S. church, met September 25-28 in Pittsburgh, in the diocese headed by Bishop Robert Duncan.

The new Common Cause Council of Bishops, convened by Duncan as its moderator, said the council will form "an Anglican union" in the next 15 months in hopes of gaining further recognition by traditionalist primates and provinces. At least four U.S. groupings whose representatives attended the meeting have ties to African provinces.

About 50 bishops were present, including 13 active or former diocesan bishops in the 2.2-million-member Episcopal Church, which embraces more than 7,000 congregations. The 10 participating groups said they represent 600 congregations.

Duncan said at a news conference after the meeting that the proposed realignment stems from the 2003 consecration of Bishop V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, who lives with a male partner. The Episcopal Church "has lost its way" and is "uncertain about Jesus," Duncan said, whereas churches in the global south are "utterly clear about what it is to follow Jesus."

Duncan said that the Diocese of Pittsburgh is scheduled to vote in early November on the first step in severing ties with the Episcopal Church.

The loose federation, with its own College of Bishops, hopes to garner favor domestically and abroad by using an “if we build it, they will come” strategy, according to Peter Frank, a spokesperson for Duncan. However, issues such as the ordination of women—some of the groups ordain women, some do not—remain to be decided, according to the Common Cause Council.

Bishop Martyn Minns, who heads the Nigerian-related Convocation of Anglicans in North America, told a telephone news conference September 26 that the participants “have different styles and approaches, but not differences” in doctrine.

The African “mission” links to dissident Episcopalians have been called “incursions” by the archbishop of Canterbury, but Minns, the former rector of Truro Church in Fairfax, Virginia, disagreed. “These are replies to the cries of help from this country.”