

Anglican leader rebuffs challenge to his authority: Rowan Williams and GAFCON

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The archbishop of Canterbury has declared that conservatives' plans to usurp his leadership in the Anglican Communion are "problematic in all sorts of ways," saying Anglicans must renew— not dismiss—their now-frayed connections.

Archbishop Rowan Williams responded June 30 to a summit in Amman, Jordan, and Jerusalem of more than 1,000 conservatives who had announced plans to create a new council of top archbishops to oversee like-minded Anglicans.

In a direct challenge both to Williams, regarded as the spiritual leader of 77 million Anglicans, and to traditional geographic lines of authority, the conservatives also plan to build a new North American province for Anglicans upset with the liberal sway of their national churches.

"It is not enough to dismiss the existing structures of the communion," Williams said. "If they are not working effectively, the challenge is to renew them rather than improvise solutions."

The head of the U.S. branch, Episcopal presiding bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, also criticized the conservative declaration. "This statement does not represent the end of Anglicanism," she said, "merely another chapter in a centuries-old struggle for dominance by those who consider themselves the only true believers."

The conservatives' challenge came just weeks before the Lambeth Conference, a once-a-decade meeting in England of some 600 Anglican bishops from around the world. Dozens of bishops, however, are boycotting Lambeth to protest Williams's leadership in divisive debates over homosexuality and biblical authority.

Several conservatives said their proposed council is a direct challenge to Williams. As head of the Church of England, the archbishop of Canterbury is traditionally

considered “first among equals” by fellow bishops, and membership in the communion is granted by his recognition.

But more than 1,000 conservative Anglicans said June 29 that “we do not accept that Anglican identity is determined necessarily through recognition by the archbishop of Canterbury.” “Frankly, this is an admission that [Williams’s] leadership has failed,” said Bishop Martyn Minns, a Virginia-based ex-Episcopal priest who was appointed bishop by the Church of Nigeria.

Williams fired back, saying that a self-appointed council of archbishops “will not pass the test of legitimacy in the communion.” Moreover, he asked, “by what authority are primates deemed acceptable or unacceptable members of any new primatial council?”

Organizers of the conservative summit, called the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON), said their meeting drew about 1,000 delegates—including 280 bishops. The group claims to have a constituency of 35 million Anglicans in 29 countries.

The GAFCON meeting reflects not only conservatives’ decades-long frustration with the liberalism of Western Anglicans, but also their eagerness to assume control of a communion whose center is quickly moving from Europe to Africa.

Conservative Anglicans said that they are fed up with the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada “proclaiming [the] false gospel” of gay rights, as well as the reluctance of other Anglicans to stop them.

Their “Jerusalem Declaration,” issued June 29, outlines the orthodox tenets around which the new province and council would be built. While holding fast to traditional Anglican theology, GAFCON declared that the Anglican Communion, a federation of 38 national churches derived from the Church of England and spread by the British Empire, must change.

“Worldwide Anglicanism has now entered a postcolonial phase,” GAFCON leaders said, adding that it’s time to move past “the colonial structures that have served the Anglican Communion so poorly during the present crisis.”

“In many ways it’s like a traditional family where the children are growing up and taking responsibility,” said Minns, who heads the conservative Convocation of

Anglicans in North America.

Six Anglican primates who participated in GAFCON—from Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, West Africa and the Southern Cone (South America)—would initially form the new council. While Anglican churches in the West are losing members, churches in Africa are booming, according to most reports.

It's unclear how many congregations would constitute the North American province. Minns put the number at about 600, though liberals and church officials say that's much too high.

Jefferts Schori said that though “much of the Anglican world must be lamenting the latest emission from GAFCON,” the church’s work will go on. “Anglicans will continue to worship God in their churches, serve the hungry and needy in their communities, and build missional relationships across the globe,” she said, “despite the desire of a few leaders to narrow the influence of the gospel.” *-Religion News Service*