

Anglican unity in 'grave peril' if gay bans not enforced, Williams says: Report from Lambeth

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The three-week Lambeth Conference in England concluded with essentially the same prognosis that bishops of the global Anglican Communion were given before they met in Canterbury.

The spiritual leader of the communion said it will be in "grave peril" if North American churches ignore temporary bans on the ordination of gay bishops and the consecration of same-sex unions. "If the North American churches don't accept moratoria" on gay bishops and blessings, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams told reporters August 3, "as a communion we are going to continue to be in grave peril."

The archbishop also said conservative archbishops from the global South must stop transgressing traditional geographic boundaries and seeking to adopt like-minded parishes in the U.S. and Canada.

Williams's comments came at a press conference at the end of the once-a-decade gathering that brought together more than 650 bishops representing the world's third-largest Christian body.

Nearly 200 bishops, mostly from Africa, boycotted the conference because they refused to meet alongside bishops from the U.S. or Canada who allow same-sex blessings or approved of the election of an openly gay man, V. Gene Robinson, as bishop of New Hampshire in 2003.

Though there was no recorded vote, a majority of bishops at Lambeth agreed with Williams and said the moratoria, although "difficult to uphold," are necessary to keep the Anglican Communion from breaking apart. Yet in a sign of problems ahead, at least two California bishops had earlier said they will continue to bless same-sex

relationships in their dioceses.

The bishops' closing statement, which is not binding, came in a 40-page "Reflections from the Lambeth Conference."

The bishops said same-sex blessings and Robinson's consecration have led to "many negative results." Mission partners have been lost and interfaith partnerships damaged, while the church is ridiculed in some quarters as "the gay church," they said.

Strong approval was given for a proposed new covenant that would outline Anglican beliefs—and penalties for churches that flout them—as well as establish a pastoral forum to deal quickly with crises in the communion.

Episcopal presiding bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori said: "We have not resolved the differences among us, but have seen the need to maintain relationships, even in the face of significant disagreement and discomfort." Jefferts Schori generally favors gay rights in her church and voted to approve Robinson's consecration.

Throughout the conference, bishops studied the Bible and met in groups modeled on the African tradition of villagers convening to hash out serious disputes. The "reflections" document attempts to capture those conversations, but it was also debated by the full body of bishops beneath a big blue circus tent at the University of Kent. No binding resolutions were produced, however; conference designers had determined that they would be too polarizing.

The majority of bishops at Lambeth were skeptical about the U.S. church's declaration that it had effectively banned the ordination of gay bishops two years ago and has never authorized public liturgical rites for same-sex unions.

Some blessings of same-sex unions still occur in the U.S. "I'm not very happy about that," Williams said at his news conference. As head of the Church of England, the archbishop of Canterbury is spiritual leader of the world communion, but has no power to enforce the majority will of bishops.

Bishop Marc Andrus of San Francisco said August 2 that he will continue to bless gay unions. "It's a justice issue," Andrus said. "We cannot afford to wait while lesbian, gay, transgender and transsexual persons continue to be denied their civil and human rights."

Likewise, Bishop Jon Bruno of Los Angeles said proposals to halt same-sex blessings would be received with “fear and trembling” in his diocese. “For people who think that this is going to lead us to disenfranchise any gay or lesbian person, they are sadly mistaken,” he said on the Episcopal Café blog.

A number of bishops expressed frustration with the conference’s design, comparing it to “Bible school for bishops,” with endless talk but little action. “I don’t think we’ve done anything to resolve the crisis,” said conservative bishop Keith Ackerman of Quincy, Illinois, despite Williams’s suggestion that “the pieces are on the board” to resolve some problems.

In a presidential address, Williams said he would be bringing forward proposals within two months for a pastoral forum to deal with conflict situations in the Anglican Communion. The forum could also offer recommendations on what to do if any of the three moratoria were broken, said a paper presented to the conference.

Liberal Episcopalians such as Dean Wolfe, a bishop from Kansas, said the succession of meetings after Lambeth “is a dance that will go on for some time.” Wolfe added: “We don’t see this as a permanent marginalization.” -*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*