

Anglican heads take dim view of would-be rival North American church: Anglican Church in North America

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Leaders of the Anglican Communion say that they, not dissident conservatives, will decide what role a newly formed traditionalist North American church will have in their worldwide fellowship.

Concluding their weeklong meeting February 5 in Alexandria, Egypt, the Anglican leaders also said a new North American church should not “seek to recruit or expand [its] membership” by attempting to convert others.

Conservatives angered by liberal trends in the New York-based Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada set up a rival church in December, calling it the Anglican Church in North America. Led by deposed Episcopal bishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh, ACNA aims to be recognized as the official Anglican franchise in North America.

But the 30-some Anglican primates, or archbishops, put a damper on those plans. While acknowledging that “there is no consensus among us how this new [church] is to be regarded,” the primates unanimously agreed that “it is not for individual groups to claim the terms on which they will relate to the communion.”

The primates also said that “any scheme developed would rely on an undertaking from the present partners to ACNA that they would not seek to recruit and expand their membership by means of proselytization.”

Peter Frank, a spokesperson for ACNA, said it would take a wait-and-see approach to the primates’ statement, which also calls for a “provisional holding arrangement” for the new church. “There are no real surprises here,” he said.

Added ACNA bishop Martyn Minns: “We didn’t go into this meeting expecting to get permission. We basically went in and said ‘We’re here’ and, in my mind, they acknowledged that.”

Under Anglican rules, new provinces must be approved by the Anglican Consultative Council, an international body with about 60 members, and two-thirds of the Anglican primates before they can be admitted into the communion.

A historically loose fellowship of churches that grew out of the Church of England and its foreign missions, the communion has been riven in recent years by a debate about the role of gays and lesbians in the church. That debate grew more acrimonious with the 2003 election of an openly gay man, V. Gene Robinson, as bishop of New Hampshire.

Acknowledging “continuing deep differences” on homosexuality, the primates asked each province to abide by moratoria on electing any more bishops in same-gender relationships, authorizing same-sex blessings and intervening in each other’s provinces.

Episcopal presiding bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, who attended the annual summit as head of the Episcopal Church, said her church is “going to have to have honest conversations about who we are . . . and the value we place on our relationships and mission opportunities with other parts of the communion,” according to Episcopal News Service.

“That is tension-producing and will be anxiety-producing for many,” she said, “but we are a people that live in hope, not in instant solutions but in faithfulness to God.”

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion, reported plans to develop a pastoral council whose envoys would visit various provinces to reduce tensions. The primates said they would support the plan.

“The spirit of this meeting has been very constructive,” Williams told reporters. “I don’t think many people have changed their minds, but there has been a willingness to listen and find accommodation for one another.” *-Religion News Service*