

Episcopal head rejects a 'colonial' Anglicanism: Fighting words

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Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori has forcefully defended her church's embrace of gays and lesbians and firmly rejected efforts to centralize power or police uniformity in the Anglican Communion.

Anglicans should be led by local communities rather than powerful clerics, Jefferts Schori argued in a June 2 letter to her church's 2 million members. And after 50 years of debate, the Episcopal Church is convinced that gays and lesbians are "God's good creation" and "good and healthy exemplars of gifted leadership within the church, as baptized leaders and or dained ones."

In May, the Episcopal Church consecrated its second openly gay bishop, leading Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams to say that the Episcopalians are out of step with most of the Anglican Communion and should not fully participate in ecumenical dialogue and doctrinal discussions.

Williams and other Anglicans have been pushing for more centralized authority in recent years as the communion struggles to overcome disagreements on how to interpret what the Bible says about homosexuality.

David Hein, who teaches religious history at Hood College in Maryland, said the communion has been increasing unity on matters of faith and doctrine for at least 50 years, but independent-minded Episcopalians have pushed the boundaries of acceptable faith and practice.

"Unitary control does not characterize Anglicanism; rather, diversity in fellowship and communion does," Jefferts Schori contended. Imposing uniformity on the 77 million Anglicans scattered across the globe runs the risk of repeating the "spiritual violence" and "cultural excesses" of colonial missionaries who built the communion on the back of the British Empire, the presiding bishop added.

“We live in great concern that colonial attitudes continue, particularly in attempts to impose a single understanding across widely varying contexts and cultures.”

Liberal Episcopalians applauded Jefferts Schori’s frank letter. “It is an understated declaration of independence,” said Jim Naughton, editor of the blog Episcopal Cafe. “The presiding bishop is not going to allow the arch bishop of Canterbury to establish the terms of the debate anymore.”

Church historian Diana Butler Bass said the “call to arms” by Jefferts Schori was remarkable. “Those are fighting words,” Butler Bass said.

“She’s saying, ‘This is our tradition and you’re violating it.’ She is accusing Williams of being an imperialist. Scholars will look back on these letters in 150 years and say, ‘This is it. This is when it all went away,’” Butler Bass said. “The Anglican Communion is not going to make it.”

Hein agreed, saying, “A path has been chosen. It seems [Jefferts Schori] has prepared to pack her bags and go off on her own.” -*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*