

Episcopal future: Is Anglican reconciliation possible?

by [Ronald A. Wells](#) in the [May 17, 2011](#) issue



Washington National Cathedral, seat of Episcopal presiding bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori

The Episcopal Church in the United States (EC), like other denominations, has been in crisis over human sexuality. What is different for the EC is that it faces, in its debates, the question of whether or not its vocation is to be an American Protestant denomination or to be part of the worldwide Anglican Communion in which national particularity is submerged for the sake of common witness.

In June 2010 EC Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori issued a pastoral letter that was a direct challenge to the archbishop of Canterbury and by extension to the Anglican Communion, of which Archbishop Rowan Williams is at least titular head. At stake is whether or not his headship can, or ought, to be more than titular; and if so, what would that mean?

The controversy had been brewing for some time, but a significant turning point came at the EC's General Convention of 2003 when V. Gene Robinson, an openly gay man in a partnered relationship, was approved as a bishop. Williams himself apparently had no personal objections to that move, judging from his writings prior to his elevation to Canterbury. However, as archbishop he saw his job to be that of holding together a widely—or wildly—diverse group of national or regional churches (provinces, in Anglican-speak). The reactions to the EC's 2003 actions were a

mixture of cautious approval in some provinces and mild-to-outspoken disapproval in many others.

The objections turned on both theological and procedural concerns. As to theology, the concerns were primarily that the EC had not done enough homework to persuade fellow Anglicans why, on scriptural grounds, they should change historic practices. Williams said as much himself. Many EC leaders were astonished by that criticism because, for them, the call for justice for gay and lesbians Christians in the church was at the heart of the gospel's call for our time.

In truth, some EC leaders (some bishops, cathedral deans and theology professors) have in recent years largely eschewed the heavy lifting of systematic and moral theology, preferring the more applied genres in which the key matters turn toward the psychological, therapeutic and pastoral, as well as toward calls for social justice. A few years ago a book was published with the title *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, which said that the evangelical movement in the U.S. had not so much forgotten how to think, but that it was intended to do without deep thinking. If there were a new book, "The Scandal of the Episcopal Mind," the conclusions might be disarmingly similar. The rise to prominence of liberal theology in the EC came along with disinclination toward theological depth, as well as a desire to ally the denomination with the more "progressive" American denominations. As one senior bishop told me, in choosing "justice" as the talisman for all actions and featuring inclusiveness as the badge of this new orthodoxy, the EC had taken a thin slice of theology—and of justice.

The Episcopal Church's House of Bishops was aware of the upset that the actions of the 2003 General Convention had caused, so they agreed to a moratorium on the appointment of openly partnered gay and lesbian bishops while the various parts of the communion listened to each other. Indeed, some good theological thinking and some good listening was done in the intervening years. But in the spring of 2010 the House of Bishops did what it said it would not do. It approved—without consultation throughout the Anglican Communion—the selection of Mary Glasspool as a bishop in California. Bishop Glasspool lives in an openly partnered lesbian relationship. Williams then removed some EC people from Anglican bodies, and that in turn prompted Presiding Bishop Schori's shot across the Atlantic in June.

The presiding bishop's letter was framed as an expression of anticolonialism, with Canterbury pictured as trying to enforce uniformity within the communion from a

putative imperial central office in England. However, Schori's advisers did not serve her well by this argument. In fact, most people in the Global South see the U.S. as the imperial threat, not Britain. In any case, many people in Africa said something like this: "Well, here we go again, white people in the powerful countries doing what they please." Others in the Anglican Communion place the EC's actions alongside George Bush's self-righteous unilateral actions in foreign policy. In Bush's case, God supposedly told him to invade Iraq; in the EC's case, it was following the lead of the Holy Spirit. When justice-oriented leaders in the EC hear this comparison they are horrified, of course. But unilateralism from mostly white people is not appreciated.

In trying to sort out this matter of human sexuality, some EC clergy I know make the appealing argument that being inclusive is the last phase of the civil rights struggle, following victories in the areas of race and gender. Indeed, they think that the resolution will be mostly the same: that after a period of opposition and fractiousness there will in time be broad acceptance of the new normal. That may be true. But the result might be more like that of the debate over abortion: some 40 years after *Roe v. Wade*, the divisions on the issue are deep and not easily reconciled. If that is true, then the EC is in for some rough sledding, in which the divisiveness will accentuate the already declining membership.

Further, by distancing itself from the Anglican Communion and virtually becoming just another (shrinking) American Protestant denomination, the EC will lose a lot of relevance, even in America. Presiding Bishop Schori says that the failure of Canterbury to discipline other provinces (mostly in Africa) for their double-mindedness on key issues amounts to a failure of nerve on Williams's part. She may be right about that. But an assertion of American autonomy from the communion is thought by some observers to be a failure of the EC's imagination. The Anglican Communion fails in its vocation if it is not universal. To advocate for a nearly autonomous province on the dubious argument of American exceptionalism is to undermine the essential calling of the communion.

Is there a way back? Can we get past allegations that Rowan Williams blocked the bridge at one end and that Katharine Jefferts Schori burned the bridge at the other? What can the possible common ground be? After the 2009 General Convention I spoke with a priest friend who assessed the situation. He said that the Episcopal Church, to survive and to honor its vocation, must strive for two things: to be fully inclusive at home and to be a fully accountable part of the Anglican Communion. Can that seeming paradox be resolved and such a goal accomplished? It will mean a

great deal of pride-swallowing and of trying to see another's view before insisting on one's own. It will require asking for forgiveness and granting it to others. I hope I do not have to argue with my fellow Episcopalians that repentance and forgiveness, not self-righteousness and defensiveness, mark the way forward. Even if one's self-understanding is that actions were taken on principle, one cannot claim "principle" only for one's own side.

What steps might be taken to accomplish this? First, I suggest that Episcopalians should support Presiding Bishop Schori in insisting that gay and lesbian people are not disordered, as some denominations and factions allege. There is a persuasive body of scientific evidence that certain people are genetically wired in a way that the majority are not. While one retains a "high view of scripture," the truth is that there are some scientific matters that biblical writers cannot have known about. Being gay is hardly ever a choice; for most gay people it is a fact. Indeed, in view of the opprobrium that often attaches to being gay or lesbian, it is ludicrous—even offensive—to say that some have simply "chosen a gay lifestyle." Many of us know people whose children attempted suicide because of their sense of isolation as homosexuals. In the homophobic atmosphere of religious North America, few would "choose" all the hostility he or she is subjected to if there were another realistic option open.

Second, gay and lesbian people are already vital parts of our parishes. One is not inventing their presence. It is a matter of pastoral concern that these brothers and sisters in Christ receive equal acceptance among the faithful and equal treatment as to pastoral care. A theology of pastoral care is what Presiding Bishop Schori could present winsomely to the Anglican Communion. It is not just our polity that's at stake here; it is our doctrine of God and what God has created. We must ask worldwide Anglicans, not with hostility but with gentle civility, "Please explain to me how part of God's creation is not good enough for you."

Some gay and lesbian members in our parishes have found partners for their journeys. Some of them—faithful Christians as they are—would like their church communities to bless their loving, committed relationships. As a matter of pastoral grace, our clergy (in consultation with their bishops and vestries) could offer the blessing of the believing community on those gay and lesbian couples; they are the people we know, who teach in Sunday school and sing in the choir. I appreciate that some well-meaning clergy will have difficulty doing this because of the ambiguity inherent in distinguishing between same-sex blessings and gay marriage. Many

parishes could possibly accept the blessings if they are not portrayed as a sacrament. Yet as the discussions go forward in the dioceses and vestries, I believe this resistance can be overcome. Surely the pastor's heart among Anglican clergy—even in parts of Africa—can see that it is the right, even holy, thing to do.

Third, EC leaders should acknowledge publicly that they probably have gone about all this—seeking justice for gays and lesbians—in the wrong way. In my view, they should have begun at the parish level, with the same-sex blessings outlined above. Beginning the conversation about justice with high-profile appointments was surely the more confrontational and unhelpful way to get started. Further, since the diocese is the keystone in the structure of the Anglican world, allowing controversial bishops was an ecclesial, not a moral, problem from the beginning. Let me quickly take the personal element out of this. While I do not know either Gene Robinson or Mary Glasspool, by all accounts they are good people, good priests and good bishops. My only point is that no one has a right to be a bishop in the church.

On the other hand, all communicants have a right to equal pastoral care in their parishes. In my scenario, the consecration of gay and lesbian bishops might have come at a later time, when the groundwork had been more carefully and sensitively laid. Indeed, we are now ready to do what we should have started with—same-sex blessings. Instead, the EC proceeded with provocative appointments—symbolically satisfying to the liberal leadership—that mostly accomplished the fracturing of the Anglican Communion. In retrospect, we might suggest that this controversy was unnecessary. If we were concerned about justice for gay and lesbians in the church, we would have concentrated on supporting the people who are losing their jobs, being expelled from the military and getting beaten up in our neighborhoods; they needed support in the parishes. Is it not the right time for the EC to apologize for the hurt it has caused in the Anglican Communion in barging ahead with two bishops and without consulting the people to whom they are accountable? I realize how difficult it is to admit that one was wrong. But the impact of graceful acts of repentance and forgiveness can be far-reaching.

Fourth, the House of Bishops must try to reestablish its credibility, which is now in tatters, after it did what it said it would not do. I know the bishops say they rescinded the moratorium because of the leading of the Holy Spirit; but for many people that assertion stretches credulity. Whether or not one agrees with the bishops' actions, one wonders who will believe them now when they say they promise to do anything. I know there are some bishops who also worry about their

collective credibility. Is it too much to hope that they can rally their colleagues? Can the House not tell the Anglican world that the church is working on pastoral care matters and that there will be no more openly partnered gay and lesbian priests appointed as bishops until and unless there is consensus in the communion, under the leadership of Canterbury?

These few suggestions from a layman need to be worked out by the best minds in the church. Whatever is worked out, I hope it will be good, because the stakes are high. These next few years might be the last chance for the Episcopal Church to survive and to fulfill its vocation. I hope and trust that whatever is said will include: 1) an unambiguous and unequivocal commitment by the EC to work within the Anglican Communion, under the leadership of the archbishop of Canterbury, and to maintain its global, cooperative and ecumenical vocation; 2) an unambiguous and unequivocal commitment by the EC to work in our own province, and with other provinces that care to join, on full pastoral care for all people in our churches. In doing so it will pledge never to lose sight of the implications of the doctrine of God and therefore of the good creation God has made in our fellow humans.

Is there a will in the Episcopal Church to change direction, to admit faults, to ask for and give forgiveness and to desire reconciliation within the Anglican Communion? What President Obama suggested in response to the Tucson tragedy has relevance here. The issue for the church is whether it can live up to what our grandchildren hope for us. As the president said in Tucson, "At a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized, at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who think differently than we do, it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we're talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds." If we can hope for that in politics, can we not also hope that people might come forward to do the hard work necessary for repentance, forgiveness, healing and reconciliation to occur in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion?