

As Rowan Williams retires, guesses on successor rise

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When Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams announced suddenly in mid-March that he will step down at the end of 2012, a short list of prospective successors swiftly began to circulate.

Williams, 61, has led the Church of England and the world's 77 million Anglicans since 2002. In January, Williams will serve as master of Magdalene College in Cambridge, returning him to the academic life that defined his early years and where he seems most comfortable.

Williams is giving up a tenure that has been plagued and occasionally scarred by hot-button issues such as same-sex unions and the threatened breakup of the English and global church over female and homosexual bishops.

Yet even as members of his global flock refused to follow his lead, Williams was widely respected as a calm and gentle leader and academic who perhaps never had the stomach for the bare-knuckled fights in the church.

The odds-on favorite, according to numerous observers, appeared to be Uganda-born John Sentamu, the current archbishop of York and the no. 2 official in the Church of England. Sentamu, the sixth of 13 children, fled his homeland and its dictator, Idi Amin, in 1974.

Sentamu has gained a reputation in some circles as a "cleric of the people" for his

actions, including cutting up his clerical collar on live television in 2007 to protest the rule of Zimbabwe strongman Robert Mugabe.

Another

prospective candidate is Bishop of London Richard Chartres, who gave the address at the marriage of Prince William and Kate Middleton last year and has a record as a strong campaigner on environmental issues.

Other

prospects include Bishop of Bradford Nick Baines, who has gained a reputation as a "blogging" bishop for his use of modern technology, and Bishop of Leicester Tim Stevens, leader of the Anglican bishops who sit in the House of Lords.

Williams told reporters that his successor will need "the constitution of an ox and the skin of a rhinoceros." The cascading series of crises at home and abroad made Williams's job—and his life—a seemingly endless headache marked by embarrassments and disappointments ever since his appointment by former Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Williams worked desperately to prevent a global schism as the Episcopal Church in the U.S. ordained two openly gay bishops and allowed same-sex unions. Such steps, he warned, tear at the "bonds of affection" that keep the worldwide communion as one.

"We can all give thanks for his erudition and persistence in seeking reconciliation across a rapidly changing Anglican Communion," the Episcopal Church's presiding bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, said in a statement.

Because

the archbishop of Canterbury does not have the power of a pope to sanction dissident followers, Williams turned to the power of persuasion and symbolism.

When he issued invitations to the 2008 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops from around the world, he refused to extend one to openly gay Bishop V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire. At

the same time, Williams faced an insurrection on his right flank as influential Anglican bishops in the Third World dismissed him as irrelevant for not taking a harder line on Western liberals.

His attempt at compromise—an "Anglican Covenant" that would bind member churches that agree to its traditional tenets—has so far been met with tepid enthusiasm by both conservatives who don't think it will work and liberals who say they will not be bound by outside interference.

A majority of dioceses in the Church of England have voted down the covenant. Six diocesan synods voting on March 24 and 25 brought the current figures to 23 against and 15 in favor out of a total of 44 dioceses, according to the Episcopal News Service.

Williams has warned that the Anglican Communion risks "piece-by-piece dissolution" if its 40 member churches can't agree on a common set of rules and beliefs.

And in a Catholic-Anglican turf battle 400 years in the making, Pope Benedict XVI created a special structure for disaffected Anglicans in Britain and the U.S. to join the Catholic Church while still maintaining elements of Anglican liturgy.

Though Williams and Benedict have a close personal friendship, the pope's move made Williams appear powerless, and there was little he could do to stop the Vatican's overtures to conservatives.

Traditionally, the new Anglican leader is chosen by a church committee of clergy and laity, who then draft a short list of candidates to submit to the prime minister—a process recently dogged by controversy. While Queen Elizabeth II is the supreme governor of the Church of England and formally appoints the archbishop of Canterbury, the decision is based on the final determination of the prime minister, now David Cameron. —RNS