

'Spirituality' triumphs: Episcopalians' language of faith

by [William L. Sachs](#) in the [August 23, 2003](#) issue

It is tempting to view the fracas over a gay bishop as another instance of liberals sparring with conservatives. Like revision of the Book of Common Prayer and approval of the ordination of women, Gene Robinson's confirmation as a bishop in the Episcopal Church could be interpreted as a victory for liberals intent on affirming diversity and securing justice for excluded minorities. The cries of his opponents could be heard as the voices of conservatives who fear abandonment of historic standards of faith and morality.

But the support Robinson assembled, and the opposition he elicited, went beyond culture-wars assumptions. Instead, Robinson's broad-based support reveals that a new spiritual view of the church has become decisive among Episcopalians. Robinson was elected in New Hampshire, supporters declared, because his life and ministry uphold the necessarily spiritual basis for Episcopal life.

Though references to spirituality were not entirely clear, they were frequent. What triumphed in Minneapolis amid the labyrinths of Episcopal procedure was a conviction that the church's task is to encourage people on their spiritual journeys, to accept where that journey may lead, and to build faith community on that basis from the local level outward. Long prized by liberals, "diversity" in this case represented diverse personal spiritual journeys, and the assumption that each search for personal integrity leads ultimately toward God.

To bolster claims that Robinson's election offered a new basis for mission, supporters cited not "justice" or "rights" but "spirituality" and "diversity." They hoped, that is, that Robinson's confirmation would affirm the church's commitment to diversity by inviting gay persons to see the church as their spiritual destination, just as Robinson found it to be his. God was depicted as the power that calls people to journey in search of their authentic selves.

Supporters cited not only the sanctity of the individual spiritual search but also the integrity of New Hampshire Episcopalians who, by their electoral process, saw Robinson's ministry as the basis for an episcopate that would feature acceptance of diverse personal journeys, and on this basis rebuild the church as an authentic Christian community. In this view, "mission" entails fewer institutional programs and more initiatives that focus on incorporating diverse personal journeys into spiritual community. In their emphasis on local autonomy, supporters made little reference to the Episcopal Church's place in the Anglican Communion.

Robinson's opponents generally accepted the spiritual terms of the debate. But in their view, the spiritual journey features a movement away from sin and toward a sanctified life. Christian community arises not as personal discovery but as conformity to moral teaching. It was these opponents who argued that the Episcopal Church's place in the Anglican Communion calls for greater hesitation before acting autonomously on such a delicate issue.

Thus Robinson's confirmation was debated less on theological or biblical grounds than on his suitability to model the spiritual life. It was also argued in terms of whether personal and institutional relations must be open-ended, or necessarily bring certain forms of responsibility. His confirmation signals that a majority of the deputies and bishops endorse the spiritual life as an open-ended, personal journey and respect the autonomy of New Hampshire's election.

What are the implications of these ideals for Episcopal life and for the church's place in the Anglican world? Groups of opponents are mobilizing to challenge the view that prevailed at Minneapolis. Some of these groups will leave the Episcopal Church. Others will not make a formal break but may seek affiliation with sympathetic Anglicans overseas. Still others will decide that the church's institutional structures offer little to benefit their dioceses and congregations. They will stay in the church but circumscribe their involvement in church affairs outside the local congregation. Thus, varying erosions of Episcopal life appear inevitable.

This erosion will extend to the Anglican Communion. African churches now represent over half of the world's Anglicans, with Nigeria alone numbering 17 million, eight times as many as the Episcopal Church's membership. Africans' rejection of Robinson's confirmation, and their suspicion of the mind-set that produced it, reflects vast cultural differences and the challenge Africans face from militant Islam. With support from Anglican leaders facing similar issues in South and East Asia,

African Anglicans will generate pressure that Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams will find hard to resist. What form such pressure will take, and what response the archbishop is able to make, is unclear. But it is apparent that the pliability of the Anglican ideal of communion is being tested in an unprecedented way.

As a result Episcopalians must justify the spiritual claims that led to Robinson's confirmation and encourage new understandings of mission and ministry grounded in such spirituality with other Anglican branches. The test will be most acute for the ideal of communion and for the loosely knit structures of consultation it supports. The key question is this: Will there be significant fracture among Episcopalians, and will they lose their fragile ideal of being in communion? Or will new breadth in the forms of Anglican life and new patterns of collaboration emerge among Episcopalians and across the Anglican Communion?