

Canadian Anglicans affirm 'sanctity' of same-sex couples: A conciliatory message

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One day after deferring a decision on whether to bless gay relationships, Canadian Anglicans approved a statement that “affirms the integrity and sanctity of committed adult same-sex relationships”—stirring accusations from traditionalists that attaching “sanctity” to such partnerships is contradictory.

But delegates meeting in St. Catharines, Ontario, at the triennial General Synod governing convention said their June 3 statement was intended to send gay and lesbian Anglicans a conciliatory message in the wake of the vote the day before. Delegates on June 2 had voted to put off the explosive issue of whether to allow individual dioceses to conduct blessing ceremonies for same-sex couples until the next meeting of the General Synod in 2007. A theological commission will study the issue in the meantime.

The “sanctity” measure, which passed with a show of hands, will help assuage gay Anglicans who were disappointed with the deferral vote, said Chris Ambidge, Toronto leader of Integrity, the Anglican gay and lesbian caucus. “This says the Anglican Church values you as partnered people,” he said.

While the latest move stops short of authorizing dioceses to hold same-sex blessing rites, observers noted that it is virtually certain to provoke rancor in the already heated debate over homosexuality in the 77-million-member global Anglican Communion. Peter Moore, a former Toronto rector who now serves as president of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Pennsylvania, said the measure “seems to intentionally confuse the voice with which the Canadian church speaks on sexual morality, which undercuts the church’s ability to speak on anything.”

Others defended the move as extending compassion to gays and lesbians. “This says to thousands of people that we love you, we include you among the faithful, we

seek to live with you, to work with you, to know you,” said Dennis Drainville of the Quebec diocese, who seconded the “integrity and sanctity” motion. Others questioned whether using the word “sanctity” in relation to same-sex relationships made the motion a matter of doctrine.

The Washington-based American Anglican Council blasted the “sanctity” statement. “It flies in the face of clear teaching of scripture, natural law . . . and the vast majority of Christians worldwide,” the conservative group said.

Because the church did not vote against allowing priests to bless same-sex unions, each of Canada’s 30 dioceses can still choose to do so. But Archbishop Andrew Hutchison of Montreal, the newly elected primate of the church, urged restraint. “I hope that many will hold back simply to avoid a major schism for the church,” said Hutchison.

Hutchison, 65, is seen as one of the Canadian church’s most liberal voices on homosexuality. In 1998 he was among 146 bishops to dissent publicly from the Anglican Communion’s decision that year to oppose priests in active gay relationships and to term the blessing of same-sex rituals “incompatible with scripture.”

Hutchison was chosen primate May 31, defeating a conservative on the fourth ballot. “We will get clear leadership from Andrew,” said Bishop Michael Ingham of the Diocese of New Westminster, British Columbia, where the blessing of same-sex unions in 2002 wrought division throughout Anglicanism. Opponents may take some solace in the fact that Hutchison will serve only one three-year term before mandatory retirement at age 70.

However, Anglican leaders from the “Global South” have demanded that the Anglican Church of Canada be ousted from the worldwide communion along with the U.S. Episcopal Church—which approved the consecration of an openly gay bishop last year—because of their permissive steps regarding homosexual relationships.

Archbishop Gregory Venables, who issued a statement on behalf of 22 archbishops who represent an estimated 50 million Anglicans, said the Canadian church was “rewriting the Christian faith.” By using “sanctity,” the Canadian church in effect “means that the whole issue has already been decided, and that is devastating,” Venables, who leads the Anglican Church in six South American nations, told London’s *Daily Telegraph*. “They should either repent or shut the door behind

themselves.” –*Ron Csillag, Religion News Service*