

The Episcopal middle: Listening to congregations

by [William L. Sachs](#) in the [August 10, 2004](#) issue

Soon after the Episcopal Church's General Convention of 2003, an unanticipated phenomenon became apparent. Though lay leaders and clergy frequently described themselves as dissatisfied with the convention, they were unwilling to align themselves with either supporters or opponents of its most controversial actions—electing Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, as bishop of New Hampshire, and allowing the blessing of same-sex unions. More often than not, it was difficult to elicit wholehearted dissent or support.

Leaders contacted by the Episcopal Church Foundation often depicted their dioceses and congregations as defined by a “20-20-60” breakdown: 20 percent endorsed the convention's actions, 20 percent were against them, and 60 percent came down “somewhere else.” As one prominent lay leader expressed it, “I’m not drawn to either extreme and I don’t know where to turn.”

In broad terms this outlook echoes recent surveys of the attitudes of all Americans toward gay marriage. Reviewing several books that challenge “culture wars” thinking, a recent *New York Times* article concluded that even on the charged issue of gay rights “there’s a whole lot of agreeing going on” (“A Nation Divided? Who Says?,” June 13). Over the past year Gallup polls have noted a gradual increase in acceptance for gay clergy and gay unions (Gallup Poll News Service, July 22, 2003, and May 17, 2004). A majority is emerging that challenges the sharply defined differences of a culture war. But no study to date has probed the nature of this new American majority. It has not been clear what views this large group holds other than shared antipathy to ideological extremes.

Using a survey of lay leaders in 15 percent of Episcopal congregations (40 percent of whom responded), along with comments made at gatherings of leaders across the country, one can begin to see what defines this emerging majority. They voice neither a clear endorsement of nor opposition to the church's actions on

homosexuality. A nuanced outlook sets the majority apart from the power blocs that have propelled the Episcopal conflict.

At first blush the majority of local Episcopal leaders appear conservative. They report that the actions of the General Convention have harmed their ability to engage in interfaith relations locally. They are critical of the ability of the church's national structures to communicate and to provide resources that benefit congregational life. A majority of respondents also report that they are actively talking about the issues surrounding the election of a gay bishop and the blessing of same-sex unions. These conversations have benefited their congregations without moving them in a conservative direction. With little exception, these discussions have been respectful of different points of view.

The most revealing statistic suggests the congregations' ability to hold diverse views on delicate subjects: nearly two-thirds of those surveyed report that members of their congregations hold widely differing views, while little more than half report they have reached any sort of consensus on gay bishops or same-sex unions. This means that local leaders view their congregations as places where differences of opinion on homosexuality are inevitable and believe these differences must be honored.

It is also clear that while congregations actively discuss this charged issue, they do not feel they must achieve uniformity for the sake of unity. Rather, they believe that unity will arise out of a local process of discernment that may entail ongoing management of differences.

In this respect, Episcopal leaders seem to have adopted what Ronald Heifetz, the author of numerous books on leadership, terms a "holding environment." They have defined their goal as a creative stasis that permits substantive, open-ended engagement in pursuit of clarity. At the heart of this strategy is an affirmation of holding differences in creative tension.

This emphasis suggests why the majority of Episcopalians are neither totally for nor against the actions of the church's national body. They view the General Convention's decisions as compelling a position on a complex issue before the church at the grassroots was ready to take a position.

Furthermore, they assess national structures not on the basis of ideological stances but on the basis of their practical relevance to the needs of congregations. They

emphasize that the church's priority ought to be finding new, effective ways to link congregations in forms of discernment—an ideal that the convention's top-down action on homosexuality has made more difficult. Lacking the sense that practical resources and processes of discernment are the priorities of national Episcopal structures, loyalty to them has ebbed.

The attrition of local trust has practical, not ideological, sources and expressions. Local leaders believe the church was not adequately prepared for the recent steps, and they struggle to turn the conflict over homosexuality into a practical focus on mission. Those with long memories contrast the convention's actions with the prayer book revision and the ordination of women a generation ago. These changes now appear to have resulted from more thorough processes of discussion than did recent steps on homosexuality. On this point, a large majority of local leaders express dismay at the actions of the church's national structures.

But such dismay is not the prelude to endorsing the conservative response as exemplified by the American Anglican Council (AAC), which looks to create an alternative church. The majority of Episcopalians value honest acknowledgment of differences and engagement with them. They intend to be collaborators in an open-ended process of discernment, one in which accommodation of diversity, not foreclosure of it, matters.

Fewer than a dozen of the church's more than 100 dioceses are poised to seek an alternative ecclesiastical structure. Is there a scenario under which this conservative initiative could attract substantially more Episcopalians? For the church's leaders, the worst possible tack would be to disregard the concerns of the majority of the people in the pew. If the national leadership assumes that the controversy over a gay bishop and the blessing of same-sex unions somehow has blown over, and if it does not engage grassroots concerns, the church's infrastructure will erode severely. Only a minority of people in Episcopal pews understand the church's national structures. Many wonder why such structures exist. Without a national effort to re-vision the church based on local priorities, there will be further erosion of loyalty. Bishops as well as clergy and lay leaders in increasing numbers will disregard national actions, and carve out their own meeting grounds.

Given the tenor of its new majority, the Episcopal Church is less likely to split than it is to fragment into a de facto confederation. The national organization will remain, giving an illusion of unity, while parishes and dioceses devote more attention to

regional priorities. The focus of these initiatives will be on clarifying a new sense of mission. The intensity of conversations about leadership at the grassroots signals this longing. One recent gathering of lay leaders named leadership and communication as the church's most urgent needs.

Can the national leadership address this longing effectively? The implications of the Episcopal Church Foundation's inquiries are clear: if national leaders heed local priorities in tangible terms, the church's fragmentation can be minimized. If national leaders encourage a genuine deliberative process on mission and leadership that values local wisdom and local needs, the church may be poised for an era of reconsolidation. To do this, national leaders must seek lessons from the current crisis—lessons based upon engagement with the sentiments of the majority of Episcopalians. With such honesty, it will be clear that Episcopalians must focus not on the triumph of one position on a delicate issue. They must honor divergent views in collective discernment. Out of such a process, local leaders believe, faithful direction for the church becomes possible.