

Anglican disunion: The global response to a gay bishop

by [William L. Sachs](#) in the [November 16, 2004](#) issue

Finding ways to live together amid disagreement has long been an Anglican ideal. That ideal is receiving its severest test as the Anglican Communion discusses the Windsor Report, issued in October in response to the election of an openly gay bishop in the U.S. and the blessing of same-sex relationships by some American and Canadian dioceses.

An influential swath of Anglican leaders is hoping the Windsor Report's blend of reprimands and calls to unity can influence church deliberations and encourage a new sense of the larger common good, and also foster the civility and breadth of spirit that will make that sense possible.

The authors of the report, an international commission chaired by Ireland's Archbishop Robin Eames, emphasized that they were resolved to preserve the communion. "The commission's meetings became a remarkable process," observed member Jenny Te Paa of Auckland, New Zealand. "We saw that we could agree among ourselves and we wondered if we could encourage that spirit across the church." Commission member Bishop David Beetge of South Africa concurred with that account. "We realized that this is a kairos moment for the church. We resolved to create a way for a new ecclesiology to emerge."

The "way" they envisioned had one aspect that immediately made headlines: the commission seemed to demand that the Episcopal Church in the U.S. "apologize" for its actions, and it even seemed to "rebuke" the Episcopal Church. Indeed, the report invited the Episcopal Church "to express its regret" for its actions.

The response of Episcopal leaders has mostly been to express regret for the consequences of their action rather than for the action itself. Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold has expressed "regret" that hurt was caused. A number of Episcopal bishops in the progressive camp have spoken in similar terms.

Bishop John Chane of Washington, D.C., using the report's own language, said that he regrets that his actions in endorsing Gene Robinson's election as bishop and participating in his consecration, and in blessing same-sex unions, have caused pain and breached "the communion's bonds of affection."

Chane also declared that for an indefinite period he will no longer bless same-sex unions or participate in consecrating another openly gay person as bishop. "To do so at this time would be disrespectful of the process. It would be dismissive of the reality of the real crisis we face and of the sensitivities of those who feel deep pain," he stated.

It is not clear if his personal moratorium extends throughout his diocese, where a rite for blessing same-sex unions has been publicly used. Though Chane goes farther than most progressive bishops, he also stops short of disavowing the actions he has taken.

Ambiguous expressions of regret and indefinite suspensions of controversial actions will not suffice in the long run. Te Paa points out that the report calls for the Episcopal Church and the Canadian Diocese of New Westminster to explain their actions on theological and scriptural grounds. She observes that conservatives submitted extensive scriptural and theological documentation to justify their opposition. However, given the chance to make their case, Episcopal Church leaders argued on secular, human rights and social justice grounds. The task of going forward, she believes, must entail a theological articulation both of the Episcopal Church's unilateral actions and of the future nature of the communion.

Bishop Chane has no doubt about the validity of what happened in the U.S., but he agrees that an adequate argument was lacking. "There is validity in the charge to develop a scriptural basis," he admits. "We need a strong theological basis for the actions we have taken."

Not all progressive bishops will concur with Chane that an adequate basis was lacking. Even fewer will support the report's further recommendation that the American bishops who took part in Robinson's consecration as bishop should consider whether to "withdraw themselves from representative functions in the Anglican Communion" in order "to create the space necessary to enable the healing of the communion." These bishops "should consider the common good of the Anglican Communion," the report said.

The progressives believe that Robinson's election, confirmation and consecration followed standard church procedures and that the church in the U.S. was well within its right to act as it did. "The deliberations on Gene Robinson's confirmation were careful," Chane said. "There was a sense of making a painful decision. There was honest, intense prayer and there was thoughtful dialogue." Some Episcopal leaders stress that Robinson's selection was part of acknowledging social reality, speaking openly and acting democratically.

"This was not a political process," Chane said. "The bishops lived into the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit." The implication is that the American and Canadian churches have been faithful to a higher ideal and exercised prophetic moral leadership.

While the progressive camp feels it has been scolded, traditionalists did not receive the vindication many of them sought, namely, endorsement of the idea of a separate, North American jurisdiction directly linked to the archbishop of Canterbury outside the American and Canadian church structures. The basic planks in the traditionalist platform—faulting the American church for acting alone and for lacking theological justification—are in place, but the outcome many traditionalists sought was not forthcoming. As a result, most have adopted a wait-and-see approach. "This is only the first part of the story," commented Martyn Minns of Truro Church, Fairfax, Virginia.

Many traditionalists still intend, at the least, to encourage the creation of centralized, communion-wide structures to enforce doctrinal standards and pastoral practice. The report's reference to the creation of a covenant among Anglican provinces offers them hope on this score.

But there are two constraints on creating the sort of communion that would transcend progressive and traditionalist platforms. First is the fact that some Anglican leaders from the global South, even a few with progressive inclinations, regard the open discussion and acceptance of homosexuality as an expression of American cultural imperialism. That view is abhorrent to American and Canadian leaders, but its prevalence outside North America means it cannot be disregarded.

The second constraint is the uncertainty about what the communion means. As Tim Jenkins, dean of Jesus College, Cambridge, and a frequent adviser to major Anglican gatherings, notes, Anglicans have long believed their church should "hold together

people of strongly divergent views.” Now, “our immediate objective ought to be meetings of people of genuine good will,” he continues. “To do that will require overcoming a lot of posturing for local followings.”

The tension in the communion arises from its historic inclination to balance local allegiance and initiative with commitment to a larger body and to common mission. As Jenkins explains, the current crisis represents the tendency of Anglican bodies across the globe to privilege the local at the expense of the larger whole. “When a power struggle has been translated into such extreme terms,” he reflects, “what responsibilities must leaders exercise? Well, leaders must ensure that proper time is taken and must do so tangibly.”

Those who hold the extreme views will likely push for quick and dramatic action. There may be some further realignment as provinces in the Southern Hemisphere distance themselves from the North American churches, and as traditionalist parishes and dioceses in North America follow suit.

If Jenkins is right, the Anglican Communion’s future depends upon which sort of leadership, and which sort of church process, prevails. “We must lead by understanding each other’s local situations,” he said, “so that we can transcend those situations. For there to be a communion, we must come out of our confines.”