

Gay bishop, Episcopal leaders to stay course: Anglican Communion Network plans to start new churches

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An openly gay Episcopal bishop whose consecration was criticized by an Anglican church panel says he is “deeply sorry” for the disarray his election has caused and will adopt a personal moratorium on blessing same-sex unions.

“I do feel regret, a deep and abiding regret, that this has been so painful to so many people in the Anglican Communion,” said Bishop V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire. That was part of his initial response to the commission report from London last month that urged U.S. Episcopal leaders to express “regret” for their unprecedented steps last year.

Adding that he feels it is “God’s will” for him to remain in his post, Robinson noted that the panel headed by Irish Archbishop Robin Eames never asked for his resignation. Because he is “sensitive” to the fragile unity of the communion, Robinson said he would refer gay couples seeking a blessing to another priest.

While Robinson agreed to stand back, some other U.S. and Canadian bishops defiantly said they would continue to bless gay unions—a sign that substantial portions of the North American church bodies are unlikely to change the behavior that drew the wrath of sister Anglican churches around the world.

Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold of the Episcopal Church said he cannot impose a freeze on either gay bishops or same-sex unions—two demands made by the top-level commission. Griswold said the U.S. church is now more “intensely aware” of the ripple effects its decisions have. But he added that he does not have the power to stop a diocese from electing a gay bishop or blessing gay unions.

Griswold’s comments signaled, at least for now, that the Episcopal Church will likely continue on the same course. “We are more aware of the complexity of confirming

the ordination of gay people, but that doesn't mean for a moment that the church won't continue to exercise its own freedom and judiciousness in how it chooses persons for ordained ministry," he said in a telephone interview.

In Canada, where Anglicans came under similar rebuke from the Eames panel, there appears to be little sentiment for change. Michael Ingham, a Vancouver-area bishop who has allowed same-sex unions, said he will continue to permit them, and the country's top Anglican bishop, Andrew Hutchison, said the long-awaited report released October 18 contains "nothing authoritative" and "binds no one."

The North American intransigence prompted a stern rebuke from Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria: "They are hell-bent on destroying the fabric of our communion and we are told to sit and wait." Indeed, a joint statement from a large conference of African Anglican bishops in Lagos October 28 warned that U.S. and Canadian bishops would become schismatic if they do not heed the report's call for a change of heart and impose a moratorium on gay bishops and same-sex rites. "Failure to do so would indicate that they have chosen to 'walk alone' and follow another religion," said the bishops, according to an Episcopal News Service report from the meeting.

More than a week earlier, Robinson said the panel's call for a moratorium on gay bishops and same-sex unions would have a "chilling effect" on gay Episcopalians, but predicted it would not last long. "I do think that this moratorium is an attempt to contain the Holy Spirit in a neat and tidy little box, and we know that the Holy Spirit is that part of God who will not be contained," he said.

In his sole criticism of what Anglican officials called the Windsor Report, Robinson said the commission should have called on church leaders to also "express regret" for the "pain" caused to gay and lesbian people in the church. "It's been going on for centuries."

He agreed with the report's recommendation that the spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, should exercise "very considerable caution" when including Robinson at Anglican meetings. "I intend to be his ally in that and work with him so as to minimize any negative effects that my presence might have," Robinson said.

The report will take center stage in coming weeks as nearly half of the U.S. dioceses hold their annual conventions. Bishop Carolyn Tanner Irish of Utah, who will host a meeting of U.S. bishops in Salt Lake City in January, set the tone for bishops by

calling the idea of a moratorium insulting to gay and lesbian parishioners.

"It is entirely unlikely that we will be willing to set the clock back on the actions themselves, or to cease acting inclusively . . . as we promise in our baptismal vows," she said. "What would a reversal say to our gay sisters and brothers? Go back to the closet? To deceit and dishonesty?"

In one of the largest dioceses, Virginia Bishop Peter Lee said the disciplinary "alternatives" could have been worse. "Whether Americans, who are so accustomed to going our own way in our foreign policy as well as in our ecclesial life, can live with these recommendations remains to be seen," Lee said. "I think they offer hope."

The report did not stem a slow exodus of conservative parishes. On October 19, two churches in Washington state announced that they had left the Episcopal Church and were seeking membership in a Brazilian diocese.

Two days earlier, some 250 members of the conservative Anglican Communion Network gathered in Providence, Rhode Island, to plan a series of "church plants" throughout New England, according to the *Providence Journal*. "It is much easier to give birth than to resurrect the dead," George Beaven of Woodbridge, Virginia, told the crowd. -Kevin Eckstrom, *Religion News Service*