

Anglicans shut door, but leave room for North Americans: Primates establish deadlines and breathing room

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Almost more than any other Christian group, Anglicans are notoriously—and proudly—hard to pin down. They are not fully Protestant yet not quite Catholic; hierarchical yet independent; scripturally literate but not literalistic; equal parts New York and Nairobi.

So, too, was the response last month from the 38 primates, or top national bishops, of the Anglican Communion to U.S. Episcopalians' and Canadian Anglicans' defiant embrace of homosexuality. It was firm but not heavy-handed, establishing deadlines and breathing room all at the same time.

In other words, it was a classically Anglican search for the cherished Via Media—the middle way. In it, there was a little something for everyone.

Specifically, the primates requested three things:

- A self-imposed moratorium on same-sex blessings and gay bishops within the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada.
- A three-year “voluntary” withdrawal by both churches from the Anglican Consultative Council, a key elected governing body within the 77- million-member communion.
- A promise from conservative Third World prelates neither to “encourage nor to initiate” meddling in North American affairs, while also creating a panel to ensure that “the legitimate needs” of dissident conservatives are met.

The report, issued February 24, gave the U.S. and Canadian churches enough time to seek remedies through “their relevant constitutional processes”—punting the next round of real decisions to the Episcopalians’ General Convention in 2006.

Ian Douglas, professor of mission and world Christianity at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, said the primates were trying to do more than simply keep their rocking boat afloat. “It would be unfair to the work the primates have done to simply say they’re trying to make everyone happy,” he said. “I think it represents the desire for the primates to stay in relationship, appreciating that it costs everyone something.”

Creating and sustaining that fragile coexistence has been a hallmark of Anglicanism, both around the world and in the United States. Anglicans call it holding all sides together “in tension,” like a tightly wound spring on a wristwatch.

Sometimes it has worked. For example, the Episcopal Church was one of the few American churches to survive the Civil War intact as slavery splintered the Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists into separate camps.

But another battle, the Revolutionary War, so strained the ties between American colonists and their mother church in England that the Americans split off to become the first satellite branch of the communion.

Some wonder if the current row over homosexuality—led again by an American rebellion—will have similar results.

The Episcopalians’ top leader, Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, said the primates’ four-day meeting was “an exercise in strained mutual affection” but insisted the Americans have not been disowned, as some conservatives hoped.

“This does not mean either suspension or expulsion from the Anglican Communion,” Griswold said in an interview from Northern Ireland. “Certainly [our actions have] made it complicated and difficult in the other parts of the world, but at no point did I sense that we were enemies.”

At the same time, the North American churches were put on notice that their actions had veered far afield of the Anglican middle way and were pushing the communion toward permanent strain—or perhaps schism. The primates, in their five-page communiqué, said the American defiance was a matter of “utmost seriousness” that

left the “effectiveness of our common mission severely hindered.”

They went on to say: “There remains a very real question about whether the North American churches are willing to accept the same teaching on matters of sexual morality as is generally accepted elsewhere in the communion.”

Conservatives were pleased with the unmistakable tone of the primates’ warning, but added that they would prefer a quicker resolution. Still, they said they were willing to follow the primates’ example.

“It [the document] is very clear, but at the same time is very graceful,” said David Anderson, president of the Atlanta-based American Anglican Council. “They’re given the time,” Anderson said, “but the choice before them is very clear.”

Yet the question remains whether grace—amazing or otherwise—will be enough to carry the church once again through the “dangers, toils and snares” bemoaned in that old hymn. *-Kevin Eckstrom, Religion News Service*