

# Episcopal Bishops Reject Anglican Church's Orders

By NEELA BANERJEE September 26, 2007 The New York Times

NEW ORLEANS, Sept. 25 — Bishops of the Episcopal Church on Tuesday rejected demands by leaders of the worldwide Anglican Communion to roll back the church's liberal stance on homosexuality, increasing the possibility of fracture within the communion and the Episcopal Church itself.

After nearly a week of talks at their semiannual meeting in New Orleans, the House of Bishops adopted a resolution that defied a directive by the Anglican Communion's regional leaders, or primates, to change several church policies regarding the place of gay men and lesbians in their church. But the bishops also expressed a desire to remain part of the communion, and they appeared to be trying to stake out a middle ground that would allow them to do so.

Still, up to five American dioceses led by theologically conservative bishops may try to break with the Episcopal Church and place themselves under the oversight of a foreign primate in the coming months, said the Rev. Canon Kendall Harmon, a conservative Episcopal strategist.

"We'll have the chaos here increase as more individuals, parishes and dioceses begin moving," Mr. Harmon said. "What will happen is that we will see more of the disunity here spread to the rest of the communion."

In a voice vote, all but one bishop supported a resolution, called "A Response to Questions and Concerns Raised by Our Anglican Communion Partners." Several conservative bishops who are considering leaving the Episcopal Church were not in attendance.

The resolution affirmed the status quo of the Episcopal Church, both theological conservatives and liberals said.

It states, for example, that it "reconfirms" a call to bishops "to exercise restraint" by not consenting to the consecration of a partnered gay bishop. It also says the bishops promise not to authorize "any public rites of blessing of same-sex unions." Still, some bishops allow such blessings to occur in their dioceses. Both positions have been stated in past meetings of the governing body of the church, the General Convention.

The resolution also calls for an "immediate end" to the practice of foreign bishops' consecrating conservative Americans to minister to breakaway congregations in the United States, a trend that church leaders believe undermines their authority.

The Bishop Martyn Minns of the Convocation of Anglicans in North America, a prominent conservative group supported by the Archbishop of Nigeria, responded to the bishops' resolution: "They're offering business as usual. The communion asked them to make a change, to embrace the teaching of the communion about homosexuality, and there's no change at all."

The Anglican Communion in 1998 denounced homosexuality as incompatible with Scripture. Bishop Minns spoke from a meeting in Pittsburgh where he and leaders of as many as 50 breakaway groups were discussing how to cooperate and avoid further splintering.

Contrary to recent news reports that the conservatives were close to forming a unified new structure, Bishop Minns said there were no plans to announce the formation of a new Anglican body that would consolidate all the conservative groups that have broken with the Episcopal Church under one umbrella.

The dispute over homosexuality has simmered for at least 30 years, as part of a larger clash about biblical interpretations and primacy. Tensions worsened when the Episcopal Church consecrated an openly gay man, V. Gene Robinson, as bishop of New Hampshire in 2003.

At a February meeting in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 36 primates of the Anglican Communion issued the directive on gay bishops and same-sex unions. They also demanded that the Episcopal Church create a parallel leadership structure to serve the conservative minority of Episcopalians who oppose the stance on homosexuality.

The communiqué held out the possibility of a diminished status for the Episcopal Church in the communion if it did not satisfy the primates' demands.

In March, Episcopal bishops rejected the parallel structure, saying it would compromise church autonomy. At the time, the Episcopal bishops sent an urgent invitation to Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the communion's spiritual leader, to meet with them in New Orleans, which he did last week, along with other Anglican leaders.

At a news conference in New Orleans on Friday, Archbishop Williams said that other Anglican leaders at this week's meetings would be "reading and digesting what the bishops have to say" and would share their opinions with him. He said he would also talk to primates and others and then give his own opinion about what to do in the coming weeks.

Bishops in New Orleans said the Dar es Salaam communiqué galvanized them, despite their differing views on homosexuality, largely because of what they considered efforts by foreign primates to interfere in the life of the Episcopal Church.

The communiqué's idea of outside oversight for dissident Episcopal dioceses and the recent consecrations of bishops to serve breakaway congregations violated most bishops' notions of local authority and appropriate interactions among provinces of the communion, bishops said.

Some bishops said they have reconciled themselves to the fact that some kind of break in the Episcopal Church or the greater communion is inevitable. If several months ago, a sizable number of bishops would have argued for the unity of the communion at almost any cost, far fewer would do so now, several bishops said.

But others argued that the bishops had sought to prevent a split by agreeing not to ordain more gay bishops or to formalize rites for same-sex unions.

"I think they had a sense of what the communion needed to hear from them, and I think that they said it," Jim Naughton, canon for communications and advancement of the Diocese of Washington, said of the bishops.

"We wanted to give the people working to hold the Anglican Communion together a useful tool to help them do that," he added. "At the same time, we did not want to backtrack on our commitment to gay and lesbian Christians. It's our sense that this resolution has accomplished that."