

News Watch Article: DE442

EPISCOPALIANS CAPITULATE TO CULTURE, CONFIRMING PRACTICING HOMOSEXUAL BISHOP

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The 5 August confirmation and 2 November consecration of homosexual Episcopal priest V. Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire in the American branch of Anglicanism (ECUSA) marked the capitulation to contemporary cultural morés of one of the largest and oldest Protestant denominations. Factions representing tradition and change within this denomination have struggled with each other for more than half a century. The vote to confirm Robinson represented a decisive victory for the “progressive” faction of the Episcopal Church.

The decision surprised many but was one of a succession of liberalizations in this Reformation tradition. The ECUSA General Convention (including lay, clergy, and bishop representatives) also adopted language acknowledging that same-sex blessing ceremonies by Episcopal clergy are “an acceptable practice in the church.”

Anglicanism Worldwide. Anglicanism includes 77 million baptized members in 38 branches worldwide. The largest branch in England is comprised of 26 million baptized members; nearly 90 percent, however, are inactive. The ECUSA includes 2.4 million members, down by a third in three decades. Half of all Anglicans are now from Africa.

Anglicanism’s spiritual leader is the archbishop of Canterbury, who heads the Church of England and determines which churches are Anglican worldwide. Each of the branches are self-governing; although the 38 branches’ presiding bishops meet annually, policy guidance comes from the Lambeth Conference, a once-per-decade meeting of all Anglican bishops.

The 1888 Lambeth Conference established four points of unity: the Bible as “the ultimate standard of faith,” the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and the “historic episcopate” (leadership by bishops tracing a historical ordination line extending to the original apostles). Decisions made by one branch are not binding on others, but all recognize one another’s common faith, exemplified in their “full communion.”

The Roots of Liberalism. Many observers trace the source of contemporary decisions within Anglicanism to its early twentieth-century adoption of the popular European “higher critical” approach to biblical criticism. This approach considers the Bible to be authoritative as a guide or standard of faith, but it falls far short of affirming the Bible to be the infallible, inerrant Word of God, true in all it affirms and normative in all areas of Christian life.

Another important step in the development of contemporary Anglicanism was its embrace of the “Social Gospel,” a movement that married the Gospel to social progressivism and social Darwinism in order to make the Gospel more “relevant” to contemporary culture.

Discussion of the ordination of women occupied Anglican study groups and ad hoc committees beginning in 1930. It culminated in a validation of the ordination of women in 1976.

Conservative Lutheran pastor Todd Wilken, host of the nationally syndicated radio program *Issues, Etc.*, told the JOURNAL that liberalism thrives “when Christians forget that Christianity and culture co-exist in paradox, not in harmony, when we forget that culture is a product of sinful humanity, that the Church is

the prophetic voice in the midst of that culture, proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins in Christ alone." Wilken warned, "If we cozy up to the culture, that prophetic call is compromised. Christians are never at home in the world. We are strangers with a Christ-centered message."

The Multiple Faces of Anglicanism. Anglicanism today contains both liberal and conservative elements. Liberals attract the greatest media attention. Retired Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong, a fellow of the Jesus Seminar and author of *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, denies the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation, the deity of Christ, and the Resurrection. David Jenkins, former bishop of Durham, describes the resurrection of Jesus Christ as "a conjuring trick with bones." The current archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has refused to affirm his belief that sex outside of marriage is sin, has admitted ordaining an openly homosexual priest before it was permitted by the General Council, and, as archbishop of Wales, participated in a Welsh druid ceremony in which he was admitted into the Welsh Gorsedd of Bards, elite guardians of Welsh language and culture.

Not all Anglicans are liberal. A recent national study in Britain by Dr. Peter Brierley indicates that, if current trends continue, "evangelicals will make up more than half of all Sunday church worshippers in 10 years time, up from about a third now." He continued, "All but a tiny portion of the new breed of evangelicals will be theologically conservative, viewing sex outside of marriage, including homosexuality, as outlawed by Scripture." The 1998 Lambeth Conference voted 526 to 70 that homosexual practices are "incompatible with Scripture." The American Anglican Council, a conservative group within the Episcopal Church, campaigns for conservative change within the branch. The conservative group "Reform" is its British equivalent. Asian and African Anglicans, who constitute the largest numbers of Anglicans worldwide, are generally far more conservative than those of Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia.

Unity at What Cost? How do these two opposing viewpoints continue to co-exist? Archbishop Williams may provide some clues. Shortly before Williams assumed office, Reform asked him to affirm that church members should abstain from sex outside marriage (including homosexual relations). Williams refused, referring the group to the four fundamentals of the Anglican confession regarding belief in the Scriptures. In a letter he pledged to "exercise the discipline of the Church as I am bound to do. I can't go beyond this and say that I believe what I do not believe."

Earlier this summer, Canon Jeffrey John, a homosexual in a long-term (but celibate) relationship with another man, was appointed to become a subordinate bishop of Reading. Archbishop Williams forwarded John's name for confirmation. When, however, dissension broke out in Britain and in the international Anglican community, Williams was quick to distance himself and urge unity. In a 23 June 2003 letter to his bishops, he lamented:

It would be a tragedy if these issues, in the Church of England and in the Communion, occupied so much energy that we lost our focus on the priorities of our mission, the priorities given us by Our Lord....The concentration on this in recent weeks has had the effect of generating real incomprehension in much of our society, in a way that does nothing for our credibility....It does us no harm to think about our own priorities against such a background, and perhaps to learn in some matters to give each other a little more time and space for thought as we try to find how we can walk in step as the Body of Christ — not falling over ourselves because of anxiety and suspicion.

Barely two weeks later Canon John withdrew from consideration, stating, "It has become clear to me that in view of the damage my consecration might cause to the unity of the Church, including the Anglican Communion, I must... withdraw acceptance of my appointment to the See of Reading." Insiders believe Williams was behind the withdrawal and cited his reluctance to take an unpopular stand. Williams commented that some critics "displayed a shocking level of ignorance and hatred towards homosexual people." John explained that his resignation was not an admission that his homosexuality was inappropriate, saying, "My own view is that there is a sound argument from Scripture and tradition in favor of Christians accepting same-sex relationships, provided they are based on a personal covenant of lifelong faithfulness."

American Decision Divisive or Inclusive? When it came to the American acceptance of Bishop Robinson, Williams could not avoid the conflict. Robinson believed he had an important mission: he had to take a stand for the rights of homosexuals in the church. At his confirmation Robinson told Convention delegates and reporters that the Bible's prohibitions against homosexual behavior were against homosexual cultic, pagan rituals, not against committed, monogamous relationships. He declared, "I believe that God is doing a new thing in the world." At his consecration he added that the consecration was "not about me — it's about so many people at the margins. Your presence here today is an invitation to them to move to the center."

The presiding bishop of the U.S. church, Frank T. Griswold, a strong Robinson supporter, harkened back to the Anglican adoption of biblical criticism as allowing for "various readings of Scripture." He stated, "How we have been shaped and formed as Christians and the context in which we live have a great deal to do with how we interpret various passages in the Bible and the weight we give them in making moral decisions."

Bishop Robert Ihloff of Maryland, a member of the Episcopal bishops' theology committee, echoed the appeal to biblical criticism to accommodate homosexuality in a Christian communion: "It is important to be able to grapple with the realities of the Scriptures and their time...and the effect of those Scriptures as they are read today.... [Scriptures prohibiting homosexual behavior] are not speaking to people who are identifying themselves as gay and lesbian persons by nature, because all of those Scriptures were in fact written in an ancient time and assumed everyone was heterosexual."

Reverend Sandye Wilson of the Minnesota Episcopal Diocese said, "This is a church which has finally understood that men and women created in the vision of God can be the guardians of the faith and be gay or lesbian."

Dissent Promised. Both the acceptance of same-sex union blessing and the confirmation of Robinson stirred up such controversy among Anglicans worldwide that Archbishop Williams called a special meeting of the 38 leaders of the Anglican communion to meet in London on 15–16 October: "I am clear that the anxieties caused by recent developments have reached the point where we will need to sit down and discuss their consequences." He hoped, nevertheless, that "in our deliberations we will find that there are ways forward in this situation which can preserve our respect for one another and for the bonds that unite us."

The meeting concluded with strong expressions by Archbishop Williams, American Bishop Griswold, and others. Williams affirmed, "We have...found the will to keep talking and working together. In short we have grown closer together rather than...further apart during this meeting"; but he warned that "issues around human sexuality will continue to be difficult and divisive for the Anglican Communion.... These issues will continue to cause pain and anger, misunderstanding and resentment all around." He noted that neither he nor the Bishops' meeting had any "legal jurisdiction" and "it would have been rather surprising had we been able...to make all the problems go away at once." Griswold was more optimistic, declaring, "I do think what binds us together is deeper than some of the things that divide us and certainly the whole question of human sexuality; more particularly homosexuality; is far from settled and as we continue to struggle together I think it's also important...that we keep our focus on the mission we share." The bishops themselves prepared a statement many viewed as more explicit in its judgments against the American branch and its predictions about the harm that would come:

These actions threaten the unity of our own Communion as well as our relationships with other parts of Christ's Church, our mission and witness, and our relations with other faiths....

We also re-affirm the resolutions made by the bishops of the Anglican Communion gathered at the Lambeth Conference in 1998 on issues of human sexuality as having moral force and commanding the respect of the Communion as its present position on these issues....

We must make clear that recent actions in New Westminster [Canada] and in the Episcopal Church (USA) do not express the mind of our Communion as a whole, and these decisions jeopardize our sacramental fellowship with each other.

Immediately after the convention vote was announced, more than 12 conservative bishops took the podium to express, as spokesman Robert Duncan, bishop of Pittsburgh, said, "grief too deep for words." Conservative theologian Kendall Harmon from the South Carolina Diocese said this was "the most serious crisis Anglicanism has faced since its founding." He added that the ECUSA "is now formally heretical in its teaching about the family." An ad hoc group of Episcopalians issued a resolution calling for a schism, announcing, "Be it resolved, that episcopalians, and former episcopalians, who respect biblical authority and truth, work together to 'prune the grapevine,' separating our direct connection to ECUSA, and rejoin the Anglican Communion and the Body of Christ as a new fellowship of orthodox, apostolic, episcopal, evangelical, Christian churches in the United States."

International response to the election and consecration indicates that there is a serious breach in the Anglican Communion. Following the consecration, individual congregations in the United States and Anglican churches in many parts of the world (including a majority of the presiding bishops) expressed their disagreement. The reactions generally took one of three positions: (1) a refusal to recognize Robinson in his office (as well as a refusal to recognize those who participated in his consecration and the vote to accept him); (2) a refusal to interact with the American church; or (3) a complete separation from the American church.

Following the consecration Archbishop Williams stated that "the effects of this upon the ministry and witness of the overwhelming majority of Anglicans, particularly in the non-Western world, have to be confronted with honesty....The divisions that are arising are a matter of deep regret; they will be all too visible in the fact that it will not be possible for Gene Robinson's ministry as a bishop to be accepted in every province in the communion."

-- Gretchen Passantino