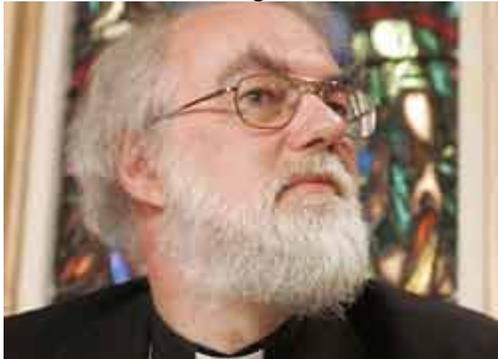


Secondary role suggested for rebel Episcopal church

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Jul. 28, 2009



Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury (CNS/Reuters)

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams suggested Monday, July 27, that the Episcopal church may have to accept a secondary role in the Anglican Communion after voting to allow gay bishops and blessings for same-sex unions.

Williams, the spiritual leader of the world's 77 million Anglicans, said "very serious anxieties have already been expressed," about the pro-gay resolutions approved this month by the Episcopal church at its General Convention in Anaheim, Calif.

While "there is no threat of being cast into outer darkness," Williams said, certain churches, including the Episcopal church, may have to take a back seat in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue because their views on homosexuality do not represent the larger Anglican Communion.

Many of the world's Anglican churches oppose homosexuality as sinful and unbiblical.

"It helps to be clear about these possible futures," Williams said, "however much we think them less than ideal, and to speak about them not in apocalyptic terms of schism and excommunication but plainly as what they are -- two styles of being Anglican ..."

Williams said the mechanics of a two-track system "will certainly need working out," but could well include the kinds of "co-operation in mission and service" that is currently shared between sister churches in the communion.

The Episcopal church declined on Monday to respond to Williams' statement.

As head of the Church of England, Williams serves as spiritual guide of the Anglican Communion, a worldwide fellowship of churches that includes the 2.1 million-member Episcopal church as its U.S. branch. While he lacks the power of a pope to enforce his will on the communion, Williams remains extraordinarily influential among Anglicans; he has proposed the two-tiered system several times in recent years as a way to make the communion's 38 provinces more mutually accountable.

Before the Episcopal convention, Williams had urged the U.S. church not to take steps that would exacerbate tensions in the Anglican Communion, which has been brought to the breaking point by the consecration of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire in 2003.

Despite the warning, Episcopalians overwhelmingly voted to lift a de facto ban on consecrating other gay bishops and approved a broad local option for bishops who wish to allow gay and lesbian couples to receive nuptial blessings from the church.

Episcopal leaders later sought to cut off criticism with a letter to Williams that described the measures as simply "descriptive" of a church ministering to a culture with rapidly changing understandings of homosexuality.

Williams responded Monday with a nuanced, five-page reflection that gently chided Episcopalians for overturning centuries of Christian understanding of marriage and homosexuality without wider consensus from other Anglicans.

"The doctrine that 'what affects the communion of all should be decided by all' is a venerable principle," Williams said.

The archbishop also suggested that Anglicans could settle their differences with a proposed covenant, which would outline acceptable beliefs and practices, particularly on divisive issues like homosexuality. Churches that could not agree to the covenant would be given a reduced role in the communion.

"Perhaps we are faced with the possibility rather of a 'two-track' model, two ways of witnessing to the Anglican heritage, one of which had decided that local autonomy had to be the prevailing value," he wrote.

The Rev. Susan Russell, president of the pro-gay Episcopal group Integrity USA, said it is clear the steps her church took in Anaheim "were contrary to what the archbishop said he hoped would happen."

But Russell said she does not expect Episcopalians to back off on consecrating gay bishops or blessing same-sex unions. In fact, she said, the Diocese of Los Angeles, where Russell is a priest, is expected to consider electing a gay or lesbian candidate as suffragan, or assistant, bishop later this year.

"I expect this church to move dramatically forward in the rest of the year," Russell said, "and our deepest hope is that the rest of the communion, or at least large portions of it, continue to be at the table with us."

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