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Crisis, Controversy, and Confusion — Lessons from the Anglican Turmoil

Friday, February 23, 2007



The meeting of the Anglican primates in Dar es Salaam is now over, but the church's crisis is not — not by a long shot. The primates released documents described as a Covenant and a Communique, but arguments over what the documents mean emerged even before the ink could dry.

As Cathy Lynn Grossman of USA Today reported, Anglicans are now in “an interpretive free-for-all” over the meaning of the Dar es Salaam texts:

Tensions between the worldwide Anglican Communion and its liberal U.S. branch, the Episcopal Church, continued Tuesday as both sides fell to arguing over the requirements listed in documents released by the top bishops of the 77-million-member Communion.

On Monday, bishops released a draft “covenant” and a “communique” intended as a roadmap to mending divisions over views of the Bible, homosexuality and other questions.

On Tuesday, those trying to understand the documents squared off “in an interpretive free-for-all,” says Canon Jim Naughton, spokesman for the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, D.C. Progressives and traditionalists looked at the documents from the five-day meeting of 38 primates — leading bishops of national and regional churches — and drew opposite conclusions.

Laurie Goodstein of The New York Times reported the story this way:

There was a time when the Episcopal Church in the United States was known as “the Republican Party at prayer,” but in the last 30 years it has evolved into the Rainbow Coalition of Christianity.

There are hip-hop Masses, American Indian rituals to install a new presiding bishop and legions of gay and straight priests who don the rainbow stoles of gay liberation. Its pews are full of Roman Catholics and Christians from other traditions attracted by its aura of radical acceptance.

Now the conservatives who numerically dominate the global Anglican Communion have handed their Episcopal branch in the United States an ultimatum that requires the church to reel in the rainbow if it wants to remain a part of the Communion.

The documents adopted at Dar es Salaam are confusing to any reader, but there is no doubt that the Episcopal Church USA, the church that brought on the crisis by its election of an openly gay man as Bishop of New Hampshire and its allowance of same-sex union ceremonies, has been given until September 30 to adopt an explicit moratorium on the election of openly homosexual bishops and the allowance of same-sex ceremonies. The church's House of Bishops meets next month in Camp Allen, Texas.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, released an article this morning and described the “problem” the church faces:

So what is the problem at the moment? When Anglicans in America decided, in 2003, to appoint as a bishop someone in an openly gay partnership, the widespread reaction was that there hadn't yet been the kind of discussion in the worldwide setting that might convince others of the rightness, in principle, of blessing same-sex relationships - and that this discussion needed to happen before anyone decided whether an active gay person might be a candidate for being a bishop. Not too surprisingly, most in the Communion felt that the conclusion had come before the argument.

This created two sorts of difficulty. One was the question of limits. For most Anglicans, questions about sexual ethics belonged in that category of teaching that was not up for negotiation as a result of cultural variation or social development. As with the central doctrines of the Creed and the biblical world view, people could only say: "This isn't mine to give away."

And yet, the Archbishop's main goal seems to be to hold the Anglican Communion together as long as he possibly can through a series of time-buying measures. The primates warned the American church that there would be "consequences" if the church did not adopt the demanded moratorium, but the consequences were never spelled out.

At one point the Archbishop of Canterbury described the Dar es Salaam process as "an effort to define what could restore trust." That carefully indirect language actually says a great deal. When a church has to talk about "an effort to define what could restore trust," that church is in big trouble.

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori, released her own reflections on the meeting. In her words,

The Primates of the Anglican Communion have called for the formation of a "Pastoral Council" that would work in cooperation with the Episcopal Church to facilitate and encourage healing and reconciliation, particularly for those who feel unable to accept the ministry of their bishop or the presiding bishop.

The request came in a communiqué issued at the close of the Primates' February meeting near Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, during which extended discussions were devoted to the Episcopal Church's response the Windsor Report, a document that recommends ways in which the Anglican Communion can maintain unity amid differing viewpoints.

Meanwhile, the Archbishop of Canterbury seems to be fighting a losing battle for consensus. As The Telegraph [London] reports today:

The strongly-worded, unanimous communique gave the liberal American Episcopal Church just seven months to prove that it has fully reversed its pro-gay agenda or face expulsion.

A number of liberal American bishops, from New York to California, have already said that they would prefer schism to reversing their pro-gay policies and others are expected to follow.

The Bishop of Connecticut, the Rt Rev Andrew Smith, said: "If the primates are asking us to undo what we have already done, that is a step many of the bishops would be unwilling to take."

The mood in the Church of England, which is facing a highly-charged debate on homosexuality and civil partnerships at its General Synod in London on Wednesday, was also tense.

The Bishop of Durham, the Rt Rev Tom Wright, said the outcome of the primates' meeting had been a triumph for Dr Williams as many people had feared that it would end in schism, and he called for calm.

But the Rev Richard Kirker, the chief executive of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, said that the primates' policy was "as worthless as Chamberlain's piece of paper from Hitler."

He added: "Stalling for more time, equivocating, appeasing, and colluding with homophobia will not stand the test of time or close scrutiny."

The two parties in the Anglican Communion are growing farther apart, not closer together. The issue of homosexuality allows for no compromise solution because there is no middle ground. For the church to accept the normalization of

homosexual behaviors and relationships it would have to reverse, not merely alter, its historic teachings based on the Scriptures. For some Anglicans, that is a price they are unwilling to pay. For others, it is a price they intend to demand.

The Dar es Salaam meeting is a warning of sorts to other denominations as well. Efforts to delay an inevitable conflict may make the actual conflict far worse, not better.

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