

Jefferts Schori urges restraint: Calls for patience from restive Episcopal majority

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Pleading for patience from her church's restive majority, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori urged the Episcopal Church to refrain from ordaining gay bishops and blessing same-sex unions "for a season," so it can contribute further to the drafting of a covenant among the world's 77 million Anglicans.

"If we want to be part of the writing of a covenant, we have some expectations before us," Jefferts Schori said during a live Webcast from New York on February 28. She took questions from a studio audience, as well as by e-mail and telephone, during the hour-long event.

A number of gay and lesbian Episcopalians questioned Jefferts Schori about how far the Episcopal Church must bend to the will of overseas Anglican bishops, who have demanded that the U.S. House of Bishops promise by September 30 not to consent to electing gay bishops and not to authorize liturgical rites for same-sex unions.

In Africa, Anglican archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria told journalists February 22 that the Episcopal Church will be asked to leave the worldwide grouping of Anglican churches if it refuses to make those promises.

"If they agree to stop, there will be a huge celebration of the [Anglican] communion," Akinola said. "But if they chose to continue with it as a way of life, then they will be told to walk away from the communion."

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has proposed a covenant among the communion's 38 regional churches. The covenant would outline areas of common agreement and could provide a means for settling disputes.

It's unclear how long it would take to complete a working covenant. The once-a-decade Lambeth Conference in 2008 is expected to deal with it. But under the

Episcopal Church's democratic government, the American church would not respond until the next triennial General Convention in 2009.

Reiterating that her support of gay and lesbian Episcopalians "hasn't changed," the first-year presiding bishop has likened her request for an indefinite "season of fasting" to the restraint shown by spiritually mature members of first-century Christian churches toward weaker members who feared that eating meat from pagan sacrifices would compromise their faith.

But some Episcopalians—among them Bishop William Persell of Chicago—objected that the Anglican joint communiqué of February 19 had issued "what is essentially an ultimatum."

The Episcopal House of Bishops meets this month and in September, but many bishops, clergy and laypeople emphasize that the U.S. church vests authority in the combined legislative efforts of all levels of church membership. Bishop Marc Andrus of the San Francisco-based Diocese of California has urged that an extraordinary meeting of the lay-clergy House of Deputies be held in September with the bishops to restate that the inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the "full life of the church" is a matter of justice.

Bonnie Anderson, president of the 800-member House of Deputies, said in a statement February 23 that the Episcopal Church has declared repeatedly that its baptismal covenant requires equal treatment to people "regardless of their race, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, disabilities, age, color, ethnic origin or national origin."

Lesbian and gay Episcopalians have "flooded" the e-mail box of Susan Russell, president of Integrity, the Episcopal advocacy group for gay rights, asking why they should remain in a church "that seems willing to sacrifice . . . [their gifts] in order to retain membership in an 'international membership club.'" Russell said she did not have an answer to that.

Jefferts Schori in her Webcast said that the church could provide a "creative" response to the primates but that a decision "not to decide" will have consequences. "What it means for the church is that we lose our voice at the table," Jefferts Schori said.

Anglican bishops have also called for a "cease-fire" in the legal disputes over property between dissident breakaway parishes and the Episcopal Church. Jefferts

Schori said the lawsuits will continue.