

Rowan Williams will meet with Episcopal bishops in September: Bishops requested urgent meeting

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Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said that he will visit the United States this September after U.S. Episcopal bishops declared an “urgent need” for a meeting with the spiritual leader of world Anglicanism.

Speaking at a news conference April 16 in Toronto, Williams said there has “never been any suggestion” that—despite earlier reports that he was too busy—he would decline an invitation to meet with the American bishops. The U.S. bishops have a crucial fall meeting in New Orleans September 20-25—at a time when their liberal majority is under pressure to respond to a controversial moratorium backed by traditionalist overseas primates by the end of September.

The U.S. Episcopal Church is at odds with more conservative sectors of the worldwide Anglican Communion over the issues of homosexuality and the authority of scripture. Meeting in Tanzania in February, Anglican leaders demanded that the U.S. church pledge not to appoint any more openly gay bishops or offer church blessings for same-sex couples.

Some observers, however, fear a reduced role for the U.S. church within the worldwide communion of autonomous provinces if it stays the course on homosexuality. Williams said sanctions could not be “imposed.” But he also said, “My sense was that the reaction from [U.S. bishops] was a very strongly worded protest against what was seen as interference.”

Meeting in Texas in March, U.S. bishops rejected the ultimatum and asked for a meeting with Williams. The archbishop said the “minimum” he hopes for in the September meeting “is simply a better understanding of [their] issues and a better understanding of what the evident problems are about the American church’s constitution, which are holding us up a bit.”

Asked by reporters in Toronto whether the global church is headed toward schism over questions of sexuality, Williams said: "I can't say. Naturally I hope we will find a way of working together on this because I believe very passionately that we need each other in the Anglican Communion. I believe that an Anglican Communion divided into a liberal and a conservative segment would be very, very much impoverished on both sides."

Speaking personally, Williams said he is "strongly and consistently opposed to anything which suggests that gay and lesbian Christians are less than human, less than fully baptized, good-faith members of the church."

Added Williams: "It's not just about nice people who want to include gay and lesbian Christians and nasty people who want not to include them. It's about what are the forms of behavior that the church has the freedom to bless if it wants to be faithful to scripture and tradition. That's the question that is tearing us apart at the moment because there are real differences of conviction."

Speaking to the Canadian-based *Anglican Journal*, Williams revealed April 17 that he had considered canceling the July 2008 Lambeth Conference of the world's Anglican bishops because of the divisive sexuality debates, but decided against it.

The conferences at England's Lambeth Palace are held once every 10 years. "We've been looking at whether the timing is right, but if we wait for the ideal time, we will wait more than just 18 months," he said. The journal said that there has been speculation recently that the U.S. and Canadian churches might not be invited to the Lambeth Conference because of their liberalizing views on homosexuality or that the North Americans would be boycotted if they did attend.

The previous Lambeth Conference in 1998 is known for adopting a resolution that has a passage declaring that homosexuality is incompatible with scripture.