

Take Episcopal Church at its word, says Archbishop Williams: Trying to broker a fragile peace

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The spiritual leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion says it would be “unrealistic and ungrateful” to expect the Episcopal Church to make yet another attempt to explain itself.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, in a letter to the heads of the 38 member churches in the communion, released December 14, said Anglican churches should accept at face value Episcopal promises not to ordain any more gay bishops.

“It is practically impossible to imagine any further elucidation or elaboration coming from [the Episcopal Church] after the successive statements and resolutions” issued by the U.S. church in the last 18 months, Williams wrote.

The Episcopal Church has been under fire for electing an openly gay bishop in 2003 and allowing the blessing of same-sex couples in some local dioceses.

Third World conservatives and like-minded U.S. traditionalists have said it is not enough that American bishops, meeting in New Orleans in September, reaffirmed their promise not to elect any more gay bishops or approve national rites for same-sex unions.

Williams has been trying to broker a fragile peace. “I do not see how the commitment not to confirm any election . . . of a partnered gay or lesbian person can mean anything other than what it says,” Williams said.

In October, a joint standing committee appointed by Williams said that Episcopalians had “clarified all outstanding questions” on the matter and given the needed assurances.

But according to a report by Williams in late November, there was a lack of consensus when the opinions of the 38 Anglican provinces were solicited. Twelve provinces agreed with the joint standing committee, 10 disagreed, 12 provinces did not reply, three offered a mixed response and one said it would reply after further consultation.

Williams also solicited responses from the 75-member Anglican Consultative Council, a communionwide body; only 27 members replied, however. Of those, 13 said the Episcopal Church had clarified all questions, but eight disagreed.

While saying in December that the U.S. church should be taken at its word, Williams chided Episcopalians for acting “against the strong, reiterated and consistent” Anglican positions on sexuality. He said the 1998 Anglican resolution that calls homosexual activity “incompatible with scripture” remains the “only point of reference” adopted by the entire communion.

Nevertheless, he criticized Third World bishops for taking U.S. conservatives under their wing, saying the communion has always said such “interventions are not to be sanctioned.”

Ahead of this year’s once-a-decade Lambeth Conference, Williams said he will sponsor “professionally facilitated conversations” between Episcopal leaders and conservative dissidents to “see if we can generate any better level of mutual understanding.”

Without specifically citing the Episcopal Church, Williams said he will convene a task force to consider whether churches whose positions are “at odds with the expressed mind of the communion” can fully participate in all levels of decision-making. –

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