

Gay bishop confirmed: Action in U.S. triggers worldwide reaction

by [John Dart](#) in the [August 23, 2003](#) issue

As soon as majorities at the Episcopal Church's General Convention consented to the election of an openly gay bishop, outnumbered conservative delegates condemned the unprecedented action for "breaking the ties that bind" the U.S. church to the rest of Anglicanism. Nineteen dissenting U.S. bishops immediately told colleagues they were calling other primates "to intervene"; 38 bishops abroad joined the outcry. And before the ten-day convention in Minneapolis ended August 8, the archbishop of Canterbury called an extraordinary meeting of Anglican primates to be held in London in mid-October.

The specter of schism—whether through severed relations or large cutbacks in diocesan donations—hung over Episcopalians like the sword of Damocles this month.

But one delegate suggested that another sword analogy—the sword of Alexander the Great cutting the Gordian knot—was more apt for this moment in the life of the church.

Elizabeth Kaeton of New Jersey said that "human sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular," had been Episcopalians' Gordian knot for decades. She saw the support for New Hampshire Bishop-elect V. Gene Robinson—by a decisive 2-1 margin in the clergy-lay House of Deputies and by a 62-43 vote in the House of Bishops—as decisive strokes slicing through the church's tangled impasse on homosexual issues.

"The challenge will be to take up the cords that had previously bound us and weave them into a new foundation of faith," said Kaeton, co-vice president of the Episcopal Church Publishing Company and a leader in the Episcopal Women's Caucus.

Robinson, 56, a long-prominent priest in the New Hampshire diocese, who has lived openly with a male partner for the past 13 years, was elected in June as its next bishop. While urging that supporters be sensitive and caring with church members

who perceive a betrayal of scripture, moral consensus and Anglican unity, Robinson urged the church to seize “the wonderful opportunities” to live up to roadside signs in the U.S. that say “The Episcopal Church welcomes you.”

Wide respect for Robinson as a skilled priest, shared even by some traditionalist opponents, and the fact that Episcoplians rarely deny a diocese its choice of bishop, worked to override other considerations. The Diocese of Virginia, among others, would not ordain any noncelibate gay to the priesthood, but Virginia Bishop Peter J. Lee said his delegation consented by 3-to-1 margins to Robinson’s election. Lee said he concurred just as he has consented before to bishops-elect who were divorced and remarried “or held theological opinions contrary to my own.”

Out of consideration for Anglican primates who this year have asked the U.S. church not to develop official same-sex union blessings, Lee offered a compromise that limits the practice to dioceses that quietly allow such rituals. As finally passed, the resolution “accepts the fact that these blessings are taking place” in some dioceses for monogamous gay or lesbian couples and “affirms that this is an acceptable practice within the church,” said Frank Wade, a Washington, D.C., rector who chaired a committee that shepherded the resolution to its approval August 7.

The church “recognition” of such locally created rites, which are not legal marriages, was greeted as “a cause for celebration” by gay activists. But David C. Anderson, a retired rector and president of the conservative American Anglican Council, said the “green light” to bless relationships outside marriage illustrates that the Episcopal Church has “become an ‘anything goes’ denomination.” If conservatives’ dismay was somewhat muted, it was because approval of a gay bishop had already set wheels in motion.

Indeed, “difficult days lies ahead,” said Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams in his initial response August 6. The spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion, whose numbers are estimated between 70 and 77 million, said on August 8 that “the anxieties . . . reached the point where we will need to sit down and discuss their consequences. I hope that in our deliberations we will find that there are ways forward in this situation which can preserve our respect for one another and for the bonds that united us.”

Sharp reaction was expected by Anglicans in the southern hemisphere. The election of Robinson, who is scheduled to be consecrated as a bishop on November 2, could

be interpreted as “cultural imperialism,” declared Primate Greg Venables, presiding bishop of the Anglican Church of the Southern Cone of America, which covers Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. Venables added that he and other “orthodox primates” had declared the U.S. church to have “stepped out of communion” and would be meeting soon “to take the sad but necessary next steps,” according to Ecumenical News International.

In Nigeria, Archbishop Peter J. Akinola, whose nation has 17.5 million Anglicans, said: “A clear choice has been made for a church that exists primarily in allegiance to the unbiblical departures and waywardness of our generation. The present development compels us to begin to think of the nature of our future relationship [with the U.S. Episcopal Church].”

The American Anglican Council, which rallied conservative voices at the convention, will meet October 6-7 at the Plano, Texas, church of David Roseberry, a delegate who surrendered his credentials in protest shortly after Robinson was confirmed. “I don’t want to debate anymore,” he said. “I want to get back to the mission of the church.” But walkouts by “deputies,” as the delegates are called, were sporadic and hard to confirm; many conservatives said they remained to console those who grieved over what they saw as a denomination that made a devastating error.

Bishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh, who read the statement of 19 bishops seeking intervention by other primates “in the pastoral emergency that has overtaken us,” said the Episcopal Church “has divided itself from millions of Anglican Christians.” Likewise, Kendall Harmon, canon theologian for the South Carolina diocese, addressing the House of Deputies, said he and other Episcopalians “are not leaving the church. It is rather this church which has left the historic faith.”

The most immediate effects will be felt in congregations, said William Dopp, director of communications for the generally conservative San Diego diocese. Two-thirds of its churches could see a “fallout” in attendance and contributions, Dopp indicated. While clergy disenchanted with the Episcopal Church could quit and receive their pension savings, the Episcopal Church and its diocesan bishops hold title to the local churches and the names of the congregations.

Despite those obstacles, small groups of churches and clergy split sporadically from the Episcopal Church during the 1900s. Aside from asserting a greater degree of autonomy from the church’s New York headquarters, some conservative dioceses

look to making alliances with like-minded bishops in Africa and South America. And Bishop Jack Iker of Fort Worth, Texas, said he will ask Archbishop Williams to create an alternative “province” in North America that would operate side-by-side with the Episcopal Church.

Frank Griswold, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, told reporters that he welcomed the major meeting of bishops called by Williams for October 15-16. Though Williams has been personally open to gay Anglicans as a bishop, in his relatively new role as head of the Church of England he prevailed upon an openly gay bishop-elect in Reading, England, to give up that position this summer for the sake of wider Anglican concerns. Griswold said he believed that “opposing views [on sexuality] can be held in tension” within the 2.3-million-member Episcopal Church and the Anglican world.

Saying that he too cast his ballot endorsing Robinson, Griswold asserted that “there is no such thing as a neutral interpretation of scripture,” alluding to years of debate over biblical verses pertinent to homosexuality. Church progressives have pointed to the absence of specific teaching by Jesus on gay issues. Liberals have also noted that the church has also gone against scripture by marrying divorced and remarried couples, defending those changes as meeting modern pastoral needs.

To warnings that liberalizing rules on gays would split the church, many speakers said a similar threat was raised 27 years ago in Minneapolis when the 1976 General Convention approved women’s ordination, now widely accepted in the U.S. And retired suffragan bishop of Massachusetts Barbara Harris said there were “dire predictions” when she was elected as the first woman Episcopal bishop in 1989. While some fallout occurred, she said more than a dozen Anglican women bishops have been elected since.

Robinson’s confirmation was in doubt for 24 hours at this year’s convention when a Vermont layman e-mailed to bishops his allegation of sexual harassment by Robinson. But the man withdrew his accusation that Robinson had inappropriately touched him a few years ago after investigating bishops talked to him by telephone. Added charges that the bishop-elect was involved with a gay counseling group having a pornographic link on its Web page were termed irrelevant because Robinson had had no contact with the group for several years.

At a news conference following the House of Bishops' assent, a relieved Gene Robinson said, "God has once again brought an Easter out of Good Friday." While agreeing that his elevation to the episcopacy made him a symbol of "a huge step" for gay and lesbian Christians, Robinson suggested that the decision by the Episcopal convention will make little difference for most churchgoers unless "clergy use it as a teaching moment."

The once-married father of two whose ex-wife spoke of their amicable divorce in a letter to delegates, Robinson introduced his daughter Ella, as well as his partner, Mark Andrews, at two news conferences. "People have been impressed with the way in which Bishop Robinson has handled himself throughout these difficult proceeding," said Susan Russell of Pasadena, California, president-elect of Integrity, the gay and lesbian advocacy group in the Episcopal Church. "He is truly a role model for us all."

Nevertheless, speaking of "some repercussions" back home facing clergy and lay leaders who favored Robinson, Bonnie Anderson of Pontiac, Michigan, elected vice president of the House of Deputies, admitted, "You may be called to exercise pastoral skills in ways you never imagined." She urged: "You may be afraid of schism. Do not be afraid."