

'Restraint' promised on gay bishops: Episcopalians seek compromise to avoid schism

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Hoping to stave off schism within the worldwide Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church has agreed to “exercise restraint” before electing any more openly gay bishops. The 11th-hour resolution at the triennial Episcopal General Convention last month in Columbus, Ohio, urged Episcopal leaders to refrain from electing bishops whose “manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church.”

The statement was a last-ditch attempt to appease anger at home and abroad since 2003 when the Episcopalians confirmed the election of an openly gay priest, V. Gene Robinson, as bishop of New Hampshire.

But the measure falls short of the “moratorium” that was requested by overseas Anglican leaders after Robinson’s election. Coming on June 22 at the tail end of a wrenching nine-day convention, the resolution pleased almost no one in this deeply divided church, and at least some bishops promised to ignore it.

Conservatives argued that it does not go far enough to meet the demands of Anglican leaders and threatened to further isolate the U.S. church from sister churches in the 77-million-member Anglican Communion. Liberals, meanwhile, lamented that the resolution would shut down and offend the ministry of gay and lesbian Episcopalians.

“This is not what we hoped for, but this is what we have,” said Robinson, whose longtime relationship with another man and 2003 consecration set off the current controversy.

But church leaders, including outgoing presiding bishop Frank Griswold and Presiding Bishop-Elect Katharine Jefferts Schori, pushed the resolution as the best way for the Episcopal Church to retain its seat at Anglican councils.

“We need something clear from the Episcopal Church,” said Griswold, who convened a special joint session of bishops and lay and clergy delegates to address the issue on June 21. The resolution was then passed separately by the House of Bishops and lay and clergy delegates.

Griswold warned that if the church didn’t “do something substantial,” the church would likely not be invited to a summit of Anglican leaders in 2008 at the Lambeth Conference in England.

His successor, Jefferts Schori, will be the new face of the American church during Anglican meetings, and the first female primate in the 400-year history of the Anglican Communion. Jefferts Schori, elected June 18, said of the resolution, “I believe this is the best this church is going to manage at this point in our history.”

During the emotional debate, many delegates spoke of being painfully conflicted. “This resolution tears my heart apart; it goes against everything in my being,” said delegate Sally Johnson from Minnesota as tears ran down her face. “But as a gift to the presiding bishop- elect, I think we should approve it.”

The resolution does not define what “manner of life” refers to, although all sides understand it to mean gay or lesbian bishops. And how the “restraint” resolution will affect the future election of bishops is not yet clear.

New bishops who are elected must gain the consent of bishops and elected leaders in a majority of U.S. dioceses. Almost immediately after the resolution was approved by lay and clergy delegates, Washington bishop John Chane pledged to ignore it. “I will defy this resolution by consenting after careful consideration of any person duly elected by a diocese in this church,” Chane said in a statement.

On the next-to-last day of the convention, a majority of lay and clergy delegates in the church’s House of Deputies turned down a measure that would have “urged very considerable caution” before electing gay bishops. But in a bit of last-minute wrangling, Griswold called the church’s two legislative bodies into special session and urged them to pass a resolution before the convention adjourned.

After Robinson was elected in 2003, Anglican leaders issued the Windsor Report, which asked the Episcopal Church to stop ordaining gay bishops until a wider consensus is reached within the communion on sexuality issues.

For nine days, Episcopalians at the convention debated how to maintain their seat at the Anglican table while also asserting their independent and pioneering spirit.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, who is the spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion, sent a message at the meeting's end that "there is much to appreciate in the hard and devoted work done by the General Convention." But he cautioned that "it is not yet clear how far the resolutions passed . . . represent the adoption by the Episcopal Church of all the proposals set out in the Windsor Report."

While Episcopalians may have placated Anglican leaders and headed off a potential schism, their actions come at a cost, said Susan Russell, president of Integrity, a network of gay and lesbian Episcopalians. "I think it's unconscionable that we have bishops in this church that are willing to sell out gays and lesbians in order to go to Lambeth," said Russell, a priest in Pasadena, California.

For her part, Jefferts Schori said she is "fully committed to the inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians in this church" and said she does not see the statement as "slamming the door" on gay church members.

After the "restraint" resolution passed, 20 bishops stood in the House of Bishops and said the church's response to overseas concerns is "clearly and simply inadequate." The group said they would withhold approval for clergy candidates living in same-gender relationships and added that they will still refuse to bless same-sex unions in their jurisdictions. "We intend to go forward in the communion confidently and unreservedly," they said. *-Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*