

Ex-Episcopalians launch rival Anglican church body: The Anglican Church in North America

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Conservative Anglicans disenchanted with the liberal direction in their U.S. and Canadian churches say they are confident that a new church body formally launched in June will one day gain a seat in the worldwide Anglican Communion.

The new Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) has been organized, its leaders say, as an alternative for Anglicans who disagree with the theology of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada.

“This is the beginning of a recovery of confidence in Anglicanism as a biblical, missionary church,” said former Fort Worth Episcopal bishop Jack Iker.

Iker and other ex-Episcopalians frequently criticized their former denomination’s approval of female clergy and the 2003 election of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire. Iker seceded, along with his diocese, late last year.

The ACNA, he added, will give “the mainstream of our clergy and laity a chance to recover confidence and enthusiasm about being an Anglican Christian.”

Delegates representing an estimated 69,000 active Anglicans from some 650 North American parishes met June 22-25 at St. Vincent’s Cathedral in Bedford, Texas, to ratify their church constitution and nine canons, or laws.

They also installed former Pittsburgh Episcopal bishop Robert Duncan as archbishop in a ceremony June 24 at Christ Church, a Plano megachurch that cut its ties with the Episcopal Church three years ago.

[A group of Episcopal loyalists in Pittsburgh noted that the ACNA has inherited ongoing litigation over property claimed by the parent denominations in California, Pennsylvania, Texas, Ontario, British Columbia and elsewhere. “Despite the ACNA’s

grand words, the new organization is being built largely with assets belonging to the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada. It is unclear what Christian moral principles can be invoked to justify this," attorney Kenneth Stiles, vice president of the Progressive Episcopalians of Pittsburgh told Episcopal News Service.

[V. Gene Robinson, whose 2003 consecration as bishop of New Hampshire created a backlash in the Episcopal Church, told Ecumenical News International that he doubts the new Anglican group has long-term viability. "A church that does not ordain women or openly gay people—I don't see a future for that," said Robinson after preaching June 28 at the First Presbyterian Church in New York City during the city's annual gay pride festivities.]

Anglican archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi of Kenya anointed Duncan, 60, as the ACNA's first archbishop; he will serve a five-year term. Duncan was removed from the Episcopal Church last year for leading his diocese to secede from the denomination.

In his sermon, Duncan urged the ACNA to focus on evangelism and mission by planting 1,000 new churches in the next five years, by engaging Islam ("because there is only one way to the Father," he said, "it's a matter of life and death"), by studying scripture and by practicing works of mercy. "We have been brought together for a noble work, and God has blessed this journey," Duncan said.

Nine of the 38 provinces in the Anglican Communion sent official representatives to the inaugural assembly, most of them from the growing churches of Africa and Asia.

ACNA leaders say they have the momentum to eventually be recognized as an official province within the Anglican Communion, but they will need the approval of two-thirds of the world's 38 Anglican primates and of a key international Anglican council before they can be granted full membership.

Episcopal Church headquarters in New York kept a low profile during the ACNA launch, reiterating its position that it is the only official U.S. branch of Anglicanism.

Duncan said that he is in regular contact with Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the head of the Anglican Communion, but had not received a formal acknowledgment of his election.

Church leaders will be working "relationally" to gain recognition from the larger Anglican Communion, said Bishop Martyn Minns, who leads the Convocation of

Anglicans in North America, one of the ACNA's member bodies. "The majority are already siding with us," he said.

Michael W. Howell, executive director of Forward in Faith North America, agreed. His own group split with the Episcopal Church long ago, partly over women's ordination. "Some of us have felt like we have been in exile for a while," he said.

The Texas gathering also drew solid support from conservative groups such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the National Association of Evangelicals. Speakers included California mega church pastor Rick Warren and Metropolitan Jonah, who leads the Orthodox Church in America.

The new organization's canons define marriage as "a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman" and prohibit the blessing of same-sex unions and ordination of female bishops and noncelibate gay clergy.

A governance task force devised a "minimalist structure" that leaves much of the church's oversight to local dioceses, said Cheryl Chang, chancellor of the Anglican Network in Canada and a lawyer who helped draft the new church constitution and canons. *-Robin Galiano Russell, Religion News Service*