

Reduced status suggested for Episcopal Church: Rowan Williams recommends secondary role

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Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has suggested that the Episcopal Church may have to accept a secondary role in the Anglican Communion after voting to allow the ordination of gay bishops and blessings for same-sex unions.

Williams, the spiritual leader of the world's 77 million Anglicans, said in a statement from England that "very serious anxieties have already been expressed" about the pro-gay resolutions approved by the Episcopal Church at its General Convention in Anaheim, California.

While "there is no threat of being cast into outer darkness," Williams said, certain churches, including the Episcopal Church, may have to take a back seat in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue because their views on homosexuality do not represent the larger Anglican Communion.

Many of the world's Anglican churches oppose homosexuality as sinful and unbiblical.

"It helps to be clear about these possible futures, however much we think them less than ideal," Williams said, "and to speak about them not in apocalyptic terms of schism and excommunication but plainly as what they are—two styles of being Anglican."

Williams said the mechanics of a two-track system "will certainly need working out," but could well include the kinds of "cooperation in mission and service" that is currently shared between sister churches in the communion.

Episcopal Church officials in New York did not make an immediate response to Williams's statement. But Mark Harris, a member of the church's Executive Council, said on his blog, *Preludium*, that the archbishop "nicely and in his usual nuanced

style essentially said that no one is fooled: . . . the Episcopal Church has strayed from the fold.”

As head of the Church of England, Williams serves as spiritual guide of the Anglican Communion, a worldwide fellowship of churches that includes the 2.1 million-member Episcopal Church.

Though he lacks the power of a pope to enforce his will on the communion, Williams remains extraordinarily influential among Anglicans; he has proposed the two-tiered system several times in recent years as a way to make the communion’s 38 provinces more mutually accountable.

At the start of the July 8-17 Episcopal convention, Williams urged the U.S. church not to take steps that would exacerbate Anglican tensions, which began to rise after the consecration of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire in 2003. Despite the warning, Episcopalians overwhelmingly voted to lift a de facto ban on the consecration of additional gay bishops and approved a broad local option for bishops who wish to allow gay and lesbian couples to receive nuptial blessings from the church.

At the end of the convention, Episcopal leaders sought to cut off criticism with a letter to Williams that described the measures as “more descriptive than prescriptive in nature”—more in keeping with a church that is ministering to a culture with rapidly changing understandings of homosexuality.

Williams responded July 27 with a pastoral, five-page reflection that gently chided Episcopalians for overturning centuries of Christian understanding of marriage and homosexuality without there being a wider consensus among Anglicans.

The archbishop also suggested that Anglicans could settle their differences with a proposed covenant that would outline acceptable beliefs and practices, particularly on divisive issues like homosexuality. Churches that could not agree to the covenant would be given a reduced role in the communion.

“Perhaps we are faced with the possibility rather of a ‘two-track’ model, two ways of witnessing to the Anglican heritage, one of which had decided that local autonomy had to be the prevailing value,” he wrote.

“The question is not a simple one of human rights or human dignity,” he said. “It is that a certain choice of lifestyle has certain consequences.” By pressing ahead without wide consensus, the Episcopal Church “risks becoming unrecognizable” and renders itself “strange to Christian sisters and brothers across the globe,” he said.

Susan Russell, president of the pro-gay Episcopal group Integrity USA, said that it is clear that the steps her church took in Anaheim “were contrary to what the archbishop said he hoped would happen.”

But Russell said she does not expect Episcopalians to back off on consecrating gay bishops or blessing same-sex unions. In fact, she said, the Diocese of Los Angeles, where Russell is a priest, is expected to consider electing a gay or lesbian candidate as suffragan (assistant) bishop later this year.

Bishop-theologian N. T. (Tom) Wright of England, in a July 30 post on the Thinking Anglicans Web site, said the Canterbury statement drew wide-ranging reactions—from calling the archbishop “a hopeless liberal” to saying he “sold out to the conservatives.” Said Wright: “There is much to welcome, and much whose implications need further unpacking.” *-Religion News Service*