

Episcopal Church chided but not sanctioned: Controversial proposals

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The Episcopal Church should apologize for stirring disunity, but will not face serious sanctions for allowing an openly gay bishop, an Anglican church panel said in long-anticipated recommendations made October 18. The panel's 92-page report, issued by Irish Archbishop Robin Eames, stopped short of calling for the U.S. church to be excommunicated, but said the decision breached "the proper constraints of the bonds of affection" with sister churches in the 77-million-member Anglican Communion.

In presenting the report, Eames called for a moratorium on new gay bishops but said there is "no mechanism for the imposition of a discipline" after the U.S. church consecrated an openly gay priest, V. Gene Robinson, as bishop of New Hampshire.

The report's critique of the U.S. church was clear. "By electing and confirming such a candidate in the face of the concerns expressed by the wider Communion, the Episcopal Church has caused deep offense to many faithful Anglican Christians both in its own church and in other parts of the Communion," the report said.

The report called on the U.S. church to "express its regret" for fracturing Anglican unity, and said the seven principal bishops who consecrated Robinson—including Episcopal Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold—should reconsider their participation in the life of the Communion.

While calling for a moratorium on other gay bishops, the report did not call on Robinson to resign, a move that Robinson has rejected.

In addition, the report said U.S. and Canadian policies to bless same-sex unions are not a "legitimate application" of Christian faith and urged a halt to such rites, as well as a similar apology.

In Canada, where the Vancouver-based Diocese of New Westminster has approved gay unions, reaction was tepid. "There's nothing authoritative about this," said

Archbishop Andrew Hutchison, leader of Canadian Anglicans. "It binds no one."

Nonetheless, Eames said that Anglican provinces "are not free to depart unilaterally from a shared faith and discipline without this affecting our shared ties as a family."

The 17-member panel said the Communion's future depended on a commitment by all sides to "walk together." If the U.S. church rejected such overtures, it could face excommunication "as an absolute last resort."

The Eames commission included bishops, clergy and lay members from across the Communion. The sole American member was retired Bishop Mark Dyer of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

While the report was clear in its rebuke of the North American branches of Anglicanism, it also rejected conservatives' requests for a "parallel province" that would allow them to operate outside of the official structures of the Episcopal Church. For the past year, they have sought to be recognized as the "legitimate franchise" of American Anglicanism.

The report said an Episcopal Church plan to allow conservative bishops to minister to likeminded parishes beyond their dioceses seems sufficient, and urged overseas bishops to stop meddling in the internal affairs of the U.S. church.

Kendall Harmon, a South Carolina leader of the conservative American Anglican Council, said the report was a "nice try, but clearly insufficient."

Added Harmon: "The Anglican Communion is a wonderful family, but they've emphasized family to the seeming neglect of many other factors, one of which is truth. The family only has real unity if it has unity in truth."

The report will now be received by several Anglican bodies, including American bishops in January. It would take months, and probably years, for the recommendations in the report to be formally adopted.

In an effort to beef-up accountability, the panel proposed creating a "Council of Advice" to aid Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams in dealing with controversy. The report, however, said it did not endorse "the accumulation of formal power."

Currently, the only "instruments of unity" within the Communion are the archbishop of Canterbury, the once-every-decade Lambeth Conference of bishops, the Anglican

Consultative Council and an annual retreat of top Anglican bishops, or primates.

The panel's second, more controversial, proposal would create an "Anglican Covenant" that would have "no binding authority" other than a member church's commitment to uphold it. A proposed draft said bishops could not "be the cause or focus of division and strife in their church or elsewhere in the Communion," and would compel each province to only act in the "common good" of the Communion.

The proposal came under immediate scrutiny from Griswold, leader of the U.S. church. "This notion will need to be studied with particular care," he said.

"Throughout our history we have managed to live with the tension between a need for clear boundaries and for room in order that the Spirit might express itself in fresh ways in a variety of contexts," he said. *-Religion News Service*