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Anglicans Rebuke U.S. Branch on Blessing Same-Sex Unions

By SHARON LaFRANIERE and LAURIE GOODSTEIN
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Facing a possible churchwide schism, the Anglican Communion yesterday gave its Episcopal branch in the United States less than eight months to ban blessings of same-sex unions or risk a reduced role in the world's third-largest Christian denomination.



Emmanuel Kwittema/Reuters
The Most Rev. Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury, right, with Archbishop Donald Mtetemela of Tanzania.

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(episcopalchurch.org)

better to call the Episcopal Church back.”

The decision comes after years of debate and remonstrations within the Anglican Communion over whether and how to force the Episcopal leaders to conform to the wider church's view of homosexuality — a controversy that has also enveloped other mainline Christian denominations.

Episcopalians in favor of gay rights immediately urged American bishops to reject the demands. “The American church is not going to just roll over and turn back the clock on blessings,” said the Rev. Susan Russell, an Episcopal priest in Los Angeles and president of Integrity, an Episcopalian gay rights group.

Anglican church teaching, reiterated in a series of meetings since 1998, states that sex is reserved for married heterosexual couples. The Episcopal Church directly challenged that teaching in 2003 by consecrating [V. Gene Robinson](#), a gay man living with his partner, as bishop of New Hampshire. The church's bishops have also allowed priests to bless gay unions.

In response, more than a third of the other Anglican churches around the world — by

Anglican leaders also established a separate council and a vicar to help address the concerns of conservative American dioceses that have been alienated by the [Episcopal Church's](#) support of gay clergy and blessings of same-sex unions. Although the presiding American bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, agreed to the arrangement, some conservatives described it as an extraordinary check on her authority.

The directive, issued after a five-day meeting of three dozen top leaders of the Anglican church gathering in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, constituted a severe rebuke of the small but affluent American branch. Conservative Anglicans described the communiqué as a landmark document that affirms the primacy of Scripture and church doctrine for the world's 77 million Anglicans, only 2.3 million of whom are Episcopalians.

“This is very, very, very significant,” said Bill Atwood, who serves as a strategist for a group of the conservative bishops. “It was either call the Episcopal Church back or lose the Anglican Communion, and the group agreed it was

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some counts more than half — have curtailed their interaction with the Episcopal Church. The church has also faced an internal rebellion from nearly one-tenth of its dioceses, which have appealed to the Anglican Communion to free them from oversight by the presiding Episcopal bishop, Bishop Jefferts Schori. Several dozen more parishes have aligned themselves with bishops outside the United States whose churches are more conservative theologically.

At a late-night news conference in Dar es Salaam, the Most Rev. Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury, the denomination's spiritual leader, said the group hammered out "an interim solution that certainly falls very short of resolving all the disputes."

Tensions ran so high at the meeting that church officials abandoned the traditional group photo of the leaders on Sunday. Even church services were a tense affair as seven conservative archbishops declined communion rather than celebrate the Eucharist with Bishop Jefferts Schori.

The communiqué yesterday detailed at length what the Episcopal Church should do to heal the rift over homosexuality. It called on the House of Bishops to adopt an explicit ban against blessings of same-sex unions and to make clear that clergy in homosexual relationships cannot be confirmed as bishops.

In June, Episcopal leaders asked dioceses to refrain from consecrating openly gay bishops, but some dioceses continued to put forward candidates.

Ten of the 110 Episcopal dioceses officially permit same-sex blessings, according to Clinton Bradley, administrator of Integrity, the gay rights group. Others allow priests to perform blessings if couples request them, he said.

To assuage the concerns of traditional American dioceses, the primates, the general equivalent of an archbishop, essentially allowed conservatives to elect their own "primatial vicar." The vicar is to report to a council of five members, two of whom will be selected by Bishop Jefferts Schori, the communiqué states. She and the council together will decide the vicar's powers.

Analysts described the arrangement as highly unusual for the Anglican Communion, where primates have clear lines of authority and full responsibility for their own geographical regions.

"I've never seen anything like this before, but then the American Episcopal Church went pretty far off the reservation, very much counter to what the Anglican Communion said was its policy," said David Hein, a religion professor at Hood College in Maryland and co-author of the book "The Episcopalians."

"It is an unprecedented response to an unprecedented action."

The move at least partly satisfied the demands of conservative Episcopal leaders in the United States, who have been begging the Anglican Communion for what they call "alternative oversight." Bishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh, a leader of the conservative Episcopalians, said he told the Anglican primates on Thursday that Bishop Jefferts Schori was unacceptable as a leader because she supported the consecration of Bishop Robinson in 2003 and had sanctioned the blessing of same-sex unions.

How Bishop Jefferts Schori will sell the directive to Episcopal leaders is unclear. "I'll be very eager to hear from the presiding bishop," said Canon Jim Naughton, director of communications for the Diocese of Washington, and a liberal blogger who followed the Tanzania meeting closely. "You have to assume that she was involved in crafting this, so I think she's asking us to trust her that she can bring this off while protecting our integrity as a church."

The primates said their instructions were intended to reassure other Anglicans "who have lost faith in the Episcopal Church," to minister to conservative Episcopalians who have rebelled against their leadership's more liberal stance and ultimately to curtail efforts by

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bishops from other countries to take over parishes within the United States.

“If the reassurances requested of the House of Bishops cannot in good conscience be given, the relationship between the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion as a whole remains damaged at best, and this has consequences for the full participation of the Church in the life of the Communion,” the communiqué said.

The communiqué also attempted to settle the problem of legal battles within the Episcopal Church.

In the diocese of Virginia and several others, some congregations have voted to leave the Episcopal Church and take their properties with them. Earlier this month, the Episcopal Church joined a lawsuit to keep the properties. The Anglican leaders urged both sides to back off, saying that the lawsuits should be suspended and the congregations should take no steps to “alienate property from the Episcopal Church.”

“None of us agreed that litigation or counter litigation can be a proper way forward for a Christian body,” Archbishop Williams said at his news conference.

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