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Anglican divide becomes a chasm

Talk of schism pervades church's global circle

Blessings of same-sex unions at heart of dissent

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When there's a will, there's a way?

Not necessarily.

The desire of the international Anglican Church to stay together is strong, but a profound and bitter division over homosexuality is wrenching the world's oldest Protestant denomination apart.

The word schism is being uttered aloud in church circles here and abroad; the prospect of a split is unofficially, if sorrowingly, being prepared for.

"Our hope is that we don't have to leave," says Archdeacon Paul Fehleley, principal secretary to Canadian Archbishop Andrew Hutchison, "but we did talk about it hypothetically before going to the primates' meeting."

Fehleley is referring to last week's highly charged conference of senior church leaders in Northern Ireland, which hovered on the brink of expelling the North American churches.

Specifically, the crisis centred on the blessing of same-sex unions, as has occurred in one Canadian diocese since 2002, and the ordination of practising gay clergy, as happened last year in the United States. Both took place despite the vehement opposition of the wider church.

But the issue of homosexuality masks other, even deeper divisions among the church's 77 million adherents and their clergy. Among them:

★The huge theological divide between conservatives who believe in a literal interpretation of scripture and liberals who interpret the Bible in the context of its time. In this instance, the belief that homosexuality is a sin against God versus the belief that, in modern times, equal rights are simple justice.

★The gaping cultural and political differences between the West, particularly North America, and the developing world — in church parlance, the Global South. In some countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, where 70 per cent of Anglicans now live, homosexuality is taboo; in a few, it's illegal.

★Disagreement over the definition of autonomy, or local self-government. Unlike Roman Catholicism, the Anglican Church has no central authority, but rules by consensus of its 38 geographic "provinces" in what's known as the Anglican Communion. But what happens when consensus no longer exists?

Last week, Canada and the U.S. were asked to "voluntarily withdraw" from the Anglican Consultative Council, a key international liaison group, until the next meeting of the world's bishops at the 2008 Lambeth Conference.

Both were requested to appear at a special hearing in June to explain the actions of their churches; in effect to justify them theologically. They were also asked to halt further same-sex blessings and gay ordinations.

As one observer bluntly described it: "The primates have handed the North Americans a pearl-handled revolver."

Canada's primate, Archbishop Hutchison, keenly aware that his own church, let alone the Communion, is painfully split on the issue, reluctantly acquiesced to the terms. (His agreement, however, must be approved by the Council of the General Synod when it meets in May. That's highly likely, if not certain, say analysts.)

Somebody had to give, said Hutchison, because "we were trying to reconcile irreconcilables." Later, he would say that "it may simply be delaying what's going to be a negative outcome in the long term."

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, not the head of the church but "first among equals," sounded equally bleak. He had tried to broker peace all week with conservative African bishops who felt the North Americans' independent actions had hurt the Communion as a whole.

"We still face the possibility of division, of course we do," Williams told the BBC. "Any lasting solution will require people somewhere along the line to say, 'Yes, we were wrong.'"

There's the rub.

"I cannot imagine a conversation saying, 'We got it wrong,' " said Rt. Rev. Frank Griswold, head of the American Episcopal Church.

Griswold outraged many Anglicans in the U.S. and worldwide last year when he appointed Gene Robinson, an openly gay priest living in a same-sex relationship, as bishop of New Hampshire.

Conservative primates were equally angry that the New Westminster, B.C., diocese has been performing same-sex blessings since 2002. They were somewhat mollified when its General Synod decided last year not to approve them but to study the issue for another three years.

But that move was immediately undermined when the synod followed it up with a statement affirming "the integrity and sanctity of committed adult same-sex relationships."

The word "sanctity" was a scarlet-red flag, implying divine approval, and the furious reaction of West Indies Archbishop Drexel Gomez was echoed through the Global South.

"Such language is reserved for marriage alone," Gomez said. "The attempt to give same-sex relationships the same theological stature as marriage exacerbates the crisis in the Communion and will reap devastating consequences."

Chief among them: the separation of North America from the rest of the Anglican world.

Feheley says there are several forms that could take. Canada could remain linked to the Archbishop of Canterbury, but not the other provinces. It could leave altogether and then rejoin in, say, 10 years. Or the Communion could simply become a looser federation, for which there are different models.

Others argue a looser federation would mean a balkanized church united in name only.

Feheley says the first thing Hutchison did in Northern Ireland was to explain to the other primates the environment the Canadian church is living in; that same-sex marriage laws exist in seven provinces and may

soon be legal nationwide, that Canada's Charter of Rights prohibits sexual discrimination.

That undoubtedly will be emphasized at the June meeting, and no doubt countered as being theologically irrelevant.

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Chris Ambidge, Integrity Canada

Still, Fehely remains optimistic. "The cultural differences are very real, but accommodation has always been the way of the church."

Indeed, it has survived rancorous battles in recent decades over the remarriage of divorced persons and the ordination of women clergy, losing some priests and parishioners in the fray, but enduring as a whole.

But conservatives say the same-sex issue — and how Canada and the U.S. have handled it — can't be "accommodated." It is different.

"The changes with divorce and female clergy were done inside the process, not outside," says Lesley Bentley, an orthodox Anglican in Vancouver, whose church walked away from its New Westminster diocese over same-sex blessings.

Since 2002, eight conservative parishes have left in protest, several to join the Anglican Communion Network, a year-old evangelical movement, but three to link up with the Anglican Church of Rwanda. Its leader has appointed an American bishop to oversee them. (In the U.S., some churches have aligned with the Ugandan church.)

A few parishes remain "orphans," including hers, says Bentley, who is also a spokeswoman for the conservative organization Anglican Essentials. Her church has had no bishop and therefore can't hire needed clergy since it stopped recognizing the authority of New Westminster Bishop Michael Ingham.

The controversial Ingham says the call to voluntarily withdraw, agreed to by Archbishop Hutchison, should not be approved by the Canadian synod. Likewise, the request to justify at a special hearing why "homosexual Christians should receive equal treatment."

He further believes that the primates "don't have the authority to kick us out."

Bentley vehemently disagrees. If the Canadian church doesn't "repent" at the June hearing, she says it won't be invited to the 2008 Lambeth Conference, "and when the Archbishop of Canterbury stops inviting you, you're no longer Anglican."

Bentley calls the crisis "the biggest thing that's happened in the history" of the almost 500-year-old church, but she, too, says it is not only about homosexuality. "The issue is that there are two different branches of theology and they can't live under the same umbrella. Unity is a primary thing, but not unity at all costs. Unity is not God. I want to see the church stand up for God."

No, the issue is power politics, counters New Westminster Dean Peter Elliott, who has officiated at six blessings of civilly married gay couples. He is himself in a committed same-sex partnership. He is also the

vice-chair of the Council of the General Synod, the governing body of the Canadian church.

Elliott says *Church at War*, a recent book by British journalist Stephen Bates, reflects his own views.

It claims that conservatives in the U.S. as well as the Global South knew they would lose the debate on divorce and women clergy. "So homosexuality became the battleground over what they see as a hijacking of the church by liberals," Elliott says.

He shares Bishop Ingham's view that the Canadian church should not withdraw as requested. Not to defy the primates, but to stay and "talk across our differences" for as long as it takes.

"We respect that other provinces' pastoral practices are different," he says, "so let us do what we see as right for our own church. In my own congregation, I have five to 10 same-sex couples who are active, committed Christians. That is my local circumstance. But I can still talk with others."

He can try, but it will be difficult, says David Reed, theology professor at the University of Toronto and former member of Archbishop Hutchison's theology commission. The meeting in Northern Ireland made it clear the church is now weighted toward the conservative Global South.

"They are closer to historical Anglicanism than we are," he says. "Before, they were in colonial mode and things were fine as long as they never spoke up."

Today, there are 18 million members in Nigeria alone, more than North America, Australia and New Zealand combined, he says. The strength of the Central African and Asian churches is partly fuelled by their minority status, says Reed. Several exist within Muslim-majority countries.

"In the West, the Anglican Church is the establishment church and it never wants to be outside the prevailing culture. They don't have to worry about that, because they're already outside the culture."

Reed believes the June meeting will be a watershed. If the Canadian church doesn't pass muster there, then at the Lambeth Conference in 2008, it will have to face hundreds of angry Global South bishops.

At the last, emotional meeting in 1998, they passed, by 80 per cent, a resolution saying homosexuality was not compatible with scripture. One Nigerian bishop caused an uproar when he tried to drive out the "demon of homosexuality" from a gay Christian protester.

"It's hard for the liberal West," says Reed, "to understand how repugnant our sexual practices are to them."

No, they've made it abundantly clear, says Chris Ambidge, of Integrity Canada, a network of Christian gays and lesbians. He thinks their contempt is hypocritical. "A frequent remark you hear is that homosexuality is a sign of Western decadence, but it exists in their countries, too. They repeat their assertions over and over again — and never listen."

Ambidge studied for the priesthood but was denied ordination in 1980 after he came out to his bishop. He is now a U of T professor of chemical engineering, lives in a committed relationship, and believes the crisis is really about cultural differences and provincial autonomy.

"Toronto is not Tanzania. New Westminster is not Nigeria. Canada's same-sex law will be passed, but being gay is still illegal in Central Africa," he says.

Diverse opinions are held throughout the Communion on other contentious issues, he notes. Divorced people are remarried in some regions, not in others. Only Canada, the U.S. and New Zealand have female

bishops, though they are not recognized by many other provinces.

Schism is not what gay Anglicans seek, Ambidge says. But nor do they want the Canadian church forced to say: "You were right, we were wrong." He'd love to be able to speak at the June hearing, although Fehely in the primate's office says the team hasn't been selected — "We'll find a good one" — pending synod council approval.

"It would be nice to go as a special witness, but that is not how things are structured," says Ambidge, adding dryly that "the church always talks *about* us — 'the poor homosexuals' — they don't talk *with* us."

Still, he remains a devout and practising Anglican.

"I'm not trying to change other people, but I need them to understand that I am sincere in my Christian faith. We are on the same journey together."

Few would disagree. But will the journey now take two separate paths?

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