

African Anglicans Denounce Church of England's Gay Bishop Rule

Senior African Anglican leaders have lined up to denounce the Church of England's decision to allow celibate gay bishops, warning it would only widen the divisions within the worldwide Anglican Communion.

Archbishop Nicholas Okoh of Nigeria, effectively the largest province in the Communion, said such reforms "could very well shatter whatever hopes we had for healing and reconciliation within our beloved Communion."

His comments on Wednesday followed similar denunciations on Monday by Ugandan Archbishop Stanley Ntagali and Archbishop Eliud Wabukala of Kenya, who is also head of the Gafcon group of traditionalist Anglican primates opposed to **gay clergy**.

The global Communion of 80 million Anglicans split deeply after Canada's **Anglican Church** began blessing same-sex couples in 2002 and the Episcopal Church, its United States branch, ordained Gene Robinson as its first gay bishop in 2003.

The African churches, a major bloc of Anglicans around the world, were in the vanguard of the traditionalists opposing the change as contrary to Biblical teaching.

The **Church of England** had bowed "to the contemporary idols of secularism and moral expediency," Okoh said, and "is one step removed from the moral precipice we have already witnessed in The Episcopal Church (USA) and the Anglican Church in Canada."

"The supposed assurances of celibacy, while perhaps well intentioned, are both unworkable and unenforceable," he added.

Challenge Facing Welby

Anglican clergy, including bishops, are allowed to marry. The Church of England decision to demand celibacy of gay bishops was a compromise between liberals ready to give them full rights and conservatives opposed to opening the episcopate to them.

The Church of England, under pressure from public opinion after voting narrowly last November to maintain an unpopular ban on women becoming bishops, approved the change late in December but only confirmed it last Friday.

The reaction from African archbishops highlighted the challenge awaiting the new Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, who will officially take over as head of the Church of England and spiritual leader of the Communion in February.

His predecessor Rowan Williams spent his decade in office struggling to avoid a schism between the traditionalists, mainly African with strong support from U.S. conservatives, and liberal Church leaders in the United States, Canada and Britain.

The Communion survived in a broken state. Traditionalists have forged close links with like-minded parishes and dioceses in more liberal provinces and launched a parallel group, the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans, in 2008.

About a quarter of **Anglican bishops** boycotted the 2008 Lambeth Conference, the Communion summit held once every 10 years, in protest against the presence of liberal leaders from the U.S. and Canada.

Drifting Further Apart

Welby, a former oil executive before ordination, has long experience in Africa, which should help his relations with the critical Anglican leaders there.

But with the decision on gay bishops and the expected admission of women bishops sometime in the near future, his

church is adopting positions the Africans firmly reject.

Ntagali said he was discouraged to see “that the Church of England, which once brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Uganda, has taken such a significant step away from that very Gospel that brought life, light and hope to us.”

The Church of Nigeria has about 17 million members and Uganda another 8 million. As in other African provinces, most members in these two countries are regular churchgoers.

The Church of England counts about 26 million baptized members, but says only about a million of them attend services every Sunday.

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