

Anglican Church Suspends Episcopalians Over Gay Marriage

In a move that took some by surprise, the Anglican Communion voted to censure its American branch, the Episcopal Church USA.

At a private meeting in Canterbury, England, the home of the Anglican Communion, leaders voted Thursday (Jan. 14) to suspend the Episcopal Church from voting and decision-making for a period of three years.

Details of the suspension were reported by Anglican Ink, which said they came from a leaked communique.

The move is a reaction to a string of Episcopal Church decisions stretching back to 2004 when it elected Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, as a bishop. In July, the Episcopal Church voted to allow its clergy to perform same-sex marriages, something the majority of the other churches in the communion do not approve.

"Given the seriousness of these matters we formally acknowledge this distance by requiring that for a period of three years The Episcopal Church no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies ... ," a statement issued by the Anglican Communion reads. "They will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity."

"The traditional doctrine of the church in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds marriage as between a man and a woman in faithful, lifelong union," the statement continues. "The majority of those gathered reaffirm this teaching."

The Anglican Communion consist of 44 member churches from around the world, representing about 85 million Christians.

The Episcopal Church has about 1.8 million U.S. members, who now find themselves without a voice in denominational decisions. The three-year term of the suspension is the amount of time until the next denomination-wide meeting of the Episcopal Church, when they will vote on a response.

The suspension comes after four days of discussions among church leaders – known as “primates” in church parlance – over the Episcopal church’s position on homosexuality in relation to the position of the broader Anglican Communion. The meetings apparently got testy—British Christian media reported the Archbishop of Uganda, among the most conservative of Anglican branches, walked out amid disagreements.

Jeffrey Walker, the Anglican program director at the Institute for Religion and Democracy in Washington, D.C., said the suspension of the Episcopal Church is significant, but does not, at this point, represent a schism, or irreparable rupture, within the Anglican Communion.

“This is not kicking the Episcopal Church out of the Anglican Communion, but it is saying is that by making these decisions for the past 12 or so years the Episcopal Church has created this distance and there will be consequences to those decisions.”

Other Anglican experts were mystified at the Anglican Communion’s statement, which consisted of eight brief points.

“Are they asking the Episcopal Church’s its position on same-sex marriage?” Bishop Ian Douglas of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut said. “Or were they asking for an apology for how the (church’s governing body) went about opening all the roles and rites of the church, including marriage, to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Episcopalians?”

Jim Naughton, former canon for the Archdiocese of Washington and now a communications consultant specializing in the Episcopal Church, called the sanctions a “weird” attempt by

the primates to take power away from elected bodies and claim it for themselves.

But Naughton expects no impact in the life of the Episcopal Church.

“We can accept these actions with grace and humility but the Episcopal Church is not going back,” Naughton said. “We can’t repent what is not sin.”

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The Lambeth Palace press office did not respond to requests for comment about the vote, which was leaked to the media.

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