

Would This Denominational Split Over Gay Rights and Women Be a Disaster?

A schism in the worldwide Anglican Communion over homosexual rights and women clerics would be a failure but not a disaster, the spiritual head of Anglicans said on Monday at the start of a high-stakes meeting between conservative and liberal primates.

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby will host the heads of the communion's 37 other provinces around the globe for a week of talks to try and work out if and how they can stick together after more than a decade of bitter disagreements.

"Certainly I want reconciliation, but reconciliation doesn't always mean agreement. In fact, it very seldom does. It means finding ways to disagree well and that's what we've got to do this week," Welby told BBC Radio 4.

The communion, which has around 85 million members in 165 countries, has been deeply divided over issues of gender and sexuality between liberal churches in North America and Britain and their conservative counterparts, especially in Africa.

Such is the strength of feeling that before the Canterbury talks had started some conservative primates were already dangling the threat of a walk-out.

Archbishop Stanley Ntagali, head of the Anglican province of Uganda, said on his website last week that unless "discipline is implemented and godly order restored", he would withdraw from the meeting.

Giving a measure of what Welby is up against, last week also

saw a group of senior Anglicans urge him in an open letter to approach the gathering of primates with “an unequivocal message” against any discrimination on grounds of sexuality.

The letter urged acknowledgement that Anglicans had “failed in our duty of care” toward homosexuals around the world.

Welby is expected to propose that the communion should reorganize itself into a group of churches all formally linked to Canterbury but no longer to each other, so that congregations could hold different views without a common Anglican doctrine.

“It would not be good if the Church is unable to set an example to the world of showing how we can love one another and disagree profoundly,” Welby said.

The main areas of disagreement have been the ordination of women and of openly gay men as priests and bishops by the more liberal churches, which conservatives in Africa regard as contrary to scripture and morally wrong.

These divisions broke out into open acrimony after the Episcopal Church in the United States consecrated openly gay Canon Gene Robinson as a bishop in 2003, and Anglicans have been facing the prospect of a permanent schism ever since.

“A schism would not be a disaster ... but it would be a failure,” Welby said in his BBC interview.

He sought to downplay the impact of a potential walk-out by African primates.

“There’s nothing I can do if people decide that they want to leave the room. It won’t split the communion,” he said.

“The Church is a family and you remain a family even if you go your separate ways.”

The talks began on Monday and are scheduled to go on

until Saturday. {eoa}

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