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Maybe the Center Holds After All

by Frank Kirkpatrick

Maybe it's time for the English press to entertain the possibility that the Anglican communion in general, and its U.S. branch in particular, aren't cracking up after all.

Reporting on last June's General Convention of the Episcopal Church USA (ECUSA) in Columbus, Ohio, Fleet Street reporters had no doubts about what was going on.

"The American Episcopal church was on a defiant collision course with the rest of the worldwide Anglican communion last night after representatives at its general convention refused to refrain from electing any more gay bishops or rule out blessings services for same-sex couples," began Stephen Bates' June 21 story in the London *Guardian*.

Likewise the lede on Jonathan Petre's June 22 story for the London *Daily Telegraph*: "Worldwide Anglican-ism was in its death throes last night after its liberal American branch failed to toe the conservative line on homosexuality demanded by the majority of the Communion."

As for the ECUSA itself, Christopher Caldwell's June 24 story in the *Financial Times* ran under the headline, "A Church Whose Day is Done."

By contrast, American journalists were much more restrained. On the scene, the *Columbus Dispatch* set the tone in successive headlines June 13 and 14: "Episcopal Church Proceeds Gingerly" and "Panel hopes for truce in church; U.S. Episcopalians look to heal recent rifts with communion over gay bishop, unions."

Certainly, that was the prevailing sentiment among most of the gathered delegates and bishops. From their standpoint, the goal was to do everything possible to stay at the table with worldwide Anglicanism, short of sacrificing their own autonomy and values.

The sentiment was particularly well captured by Ed Jones of the small (50,000 circulation) Fredericksburg (Va.) *Free Lance-Star*.

"The bottom line from Columbus is that, through earnest, heartfelt compromise, Episcopalians opted to stick together—to continue a prayerful pilgrimage despite deep divisions over issues of human sexuality," Jones wrote in a July 16 analysis. "[T]he doomsday scenarios snagging the headlines are premature, at best."

If, in its heyday, the Church of England was anything, it was The Establishment—a broad ecclesiastical enterprise whose business it was to uphold the state by embracing all parties and viewpoints so long as they were willing to be accommodated into the larger whole. And the ECUSA, as currently constituted, is very much in this time-honored "latitudinarian" tradition. Although there are many differences over issues of doctrine and tradition, the vast majority of ECUSA leaders wish to stick together.

The signature of ECUSA latitudinarianism is the principle of local autonomy. Out of respect for the decision-making power of the individual diocese, even some of those opposed to the ordination of gay

persons voted in favor of the election of Gene Robinson, an openly gay priest, as bishop of New Hampshire at the 2003 General Convention.

Such respect for local autonomy is far less characteristic of the other churches—called provinces—in the Anglican communion. That is precisely what upsets American conservatives, who would prefer a hierarchical authority structure that enforces their own conception of orthodoxy.

At the heart of what contentiousness there was at Columbus was what the conservatives considered ECUSA's inadequate response to the Windsor Report, a document commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury following negative reaction to Robinson's election on the part of conservative Anglicans around the world but particularly in Africa.

Most of the media focused on whether the convention would, in accord with the report's recommendations, express regret "that the proper constraints of the bonds of affection were breached" in the events surrounding Robinson's election. In fact, a motion expressing regret was passed, but the delegates did not say that the election was in itself morally or doctrinally wrong. The motion merely identified a desire to ask forgiveness in order to "live into deeper levels of communion."

The convention's most controversial action was to limit further strains on the communion by passing a resolution "urging" standing committees and bishops with jurisdiction "not to consent to the consecration of any candidate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church." This resolution, known as B033, was, at the last minute, substituted for one requiring a "commitment" not to give such consent.

The substitution, engineered by Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold and Presiding Bishop-elect Katharine Jefferts Schori, demonstrated the lengths to which the establishment was prepared to go in order to prevent the schism that at least some conservatives seemed anxious to provoke.

In the event, B033 fully satisfied neither the most liberal nor the most conservative wings of the convention. Many liberals saw it as an insult to gay and lesbian clergy, while conservatives regarded it as an insufficient response to the Windsor Report. In "An Open Letter to my Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Brothers and Sisters in Christ," dated June 24, Gene Robinson noted that gay support of B033 was given reluctantly by persons "willing to fall on their own sword for the presumed good of the Church" as a gesture of support for Schori, in order to "give her what she needs to continue the conversation."

Surprisingly, perhaps, there was less controversy surrounding Schori's election as ECUSA's first woman Presiding Bishop—and the first woman first woman primate (as the leader of a province is called) in the entire Anglican communion. Some conservatives were rumored to have voted for her in order to precipitate a breach, on the assumption that conservative provinces would be more inclined to break with ECUSA if it were headed by a woman.

But the consensus view was that she was chosen because of her commitment to harmony both within the ECUSA and with the communion as a whole. "I will," she said at her first news conference, "bend over backwards to build good relations with those who don't agree with me."

Following the convention, Arch-bishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams wrote a letter to all Anglican primates cautioning against any church acting "prophetically" on the grounds that such "radicalism" could prove costly. It was not clear whether he was referring to conservatives who want a break in the communion or to liberals who want to push ahead with the ordination of gay persons—or to both.

Williams' own position in the communion is at the moment ambiguous. Liberals think he caved too quickly on his previous support for equal rights for homosexuals, and conservatives believe that he hasn't moved decisively enough to root out the majority of ECUSA leaders, who have, in their opinion, betrayed the faith.

In his letter, Williams suggested (as he has earlier) that it might be necessary to develop some new ecclesial structures to accommodate the diversity of views. To this end, he broached the idea of a "covenant" among provinces, so as to limit provincial autonomy for the sake of a "wider witness." Those willing to sign onto such a covenant would then become "constituent" churches in covenant with the Anglican communion, while churches not subscribing to the covenant would be "churches in association, which were still bound in a single and unrestricted sacramental communion and not sharing the same constitutional structures."

The "associated" churches "would have no direct part in the decision making of the "constituent" churches, though they might well be observers whose views were sought or whose expertise was shared from time to time, and with whom significant areas of co-operation might be possible."

The proposal does not appear to have generated much support on either side. Archconservative Nigeria initially rejected the two-tier membership scheme and claimed it no longer recognizes the archbishop. In the U.S., the proposal seems only to have compromised Williams' authority further. As one retired Episcopal bishop recently said to me, "American Christians are not going to accept decisions made by an English crown appointment....We settled that in 1789."

In any case, it is not clear who would constitute the constituent churches. The Windsor Report, among its many recommendations, urged the maintenance of "historic diocesan boundaries, the authority of the diocesan bishop, and respect for the historical relationships of the separate and autonomous Provinces of the Anglican Communion." These boundaries, in the view of some moderate and liberal bishops, have been and are being violated by a number of African bishops who have attempted to appoint American priests as bishops to minister to disaffected conservatives in America—notably Peter Akinola of Nigeria, who compares ECUSA to a "cancerous lump" that should be "excised" from the worldwide communion.

Akinola recently consecrated Martyn Minns, a Virginia priest, to the episcopate, so that he could head the Convocation for Anglicans in North America (CANA). Minns' episcopate would violate the ECUSA's practice of designating its dioceses along geographical lines.

By his action, Akinola is, in the view of some, as much in violation of Anglican policy as he and a number of fellow African bishops believe the American church to be. Nevertheless, most observers believe that if the plan for "constituent" churches proceeds, it will be the conservatives who acquire that status.

Yet, while there have been many reports of individual churches breaking from the ECUSA, to date only 30 of the church's 7,600 congregations have voted to affiliate with an overseas diocese. The most significant of these is the Episcopal Church in Plano, Texas, which has (on unclear canonical authority) been granted by its diocesan bishop the right to dissociate itself from the ECUSA and to pay the Diocese of Dallas \$1.2 million for the title to its property.

Despite this action, the establishment's latitudinarian faith shows no signs of faltering. It is telling, for example, that the diocesan bishop of Virginia, Peter Lee, has not yet moved against Minns. Most Episcopalian leaders want to avoid a schism at almost any cost, and given Anglican history, their potential for success should not be underrated.

In September, at the behest of the Archbishop of Canterbury, bishops Griswold and Schori met in New York with several conservative bishops who wish to receive "alternative primatial oversight"—i.e., not to

be beholden to the presiding bishop of the ECUSA. (According to Mary Frances Schjonberg of the Episcopal News Service, seven diocesan bishops to date have asked for such oversight but none of their diocesan conventions has ratified their requests for it. It is not provided for in the canons of the Anglican communion, nor is it in the policy of the ECUSA.)

The meeting, which was facilitated by the secretary general of the Anglican Consultative Council, ended with some diplomatically positive words (“candor,” “honesty,” “charity”) but no resolution. This did nothing to enhance what little was left of Rowan Williams’ authority.

Inasmuch as the establishment wants to keep muddling through together, division, if it comes, will be instigated by conservatives unilaterally declaring themselves the true Anglican church in America. But separation will not come easily for them. Most individual churches don’t have the money that Plano has, and even the most schismatic conservatives seem determined not to sever their bonds with a Canterbury opposed to “radical” steps.

On September 23, the *Times of London* headlined a meeting in Rwanda of 20 African and Asian archbishops, “Anti-gay bishops vote to split the Anglican church in two.” The archbishops, wrote religion correspondent Ruth Gledhill, “took the first steps...in creating formally a new Church structure for anti-gay evangelicals in the United States.”

Two days later, the Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, Njongonkulu Ndungane told the Episcopal News Service that he had not been consulted about the document and that he and other attendees did not go along with major portions of it.

The document, Ndungane said, is “not consonant with the position of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa,” whose bishops had, in early September, unanimously issued a strong call to work for unity within the Anglican communion.

Then, on September 27, came a report from the Religion News Service of a new biography of Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu, in which the former Archbishop of Cape Town is quoted as saying that his church’s rejection of gay priests in 1998 made him “ashamed to be an Anglican.”

In other words, don’t count your schisms until they hatch.

<http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/csrpl/rinvol9no2/Maybe%20the%20Center%20Holds%20After%20All.htm>