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Episcopalians forge uncertain future

by Ken Briggs



(M Scott)

Analysis

The Episcopal General Convention last month bit the bullet. By a two-thirds majority, it officially admitted gays and lesbians to the office of bishop and approved the blessing of same-sex couples. Was it the wave of the future or beginning of the end?

Those who forecast disaster say the 2 million-member Episcopal church, now a tenuous part of the worldwide Anglican Communion because of its action, has doomed itself by condoning homosexuality. Many of these critics have already bolted the church for schismatic alternatives, such as the Anglican Church of North America. They claim the "orthodox" high ground, denouncing the practice of homosexuality as contrary to God's sexual ethics. To go that route, many of the resisters say, is to imperil salvation.

One of the opponents' staunchest defenders, David Virtue, declared in a recent VirtueOnline Web site posting, "The orthodox will never give ground on that if the church survives 1,000 years." The newly

named archbishop of the American breakaway group, Robert Duncan, said there had been "a new reformation in the Christian West." The underlying message was that July's General Convention would eventually mark the grave of a heresy.

Various on-the-scene reports made clear that the convention reached its landmark decision firmly but not triumphantly. The overwhelming final votes by bishops and deputies were greeted by flat acceptance of an outcome that was all but inevitable, rather than a victory celebration.

Decades of study, talk and dispute had preceded it, of course. Episcopalians were in the vanguard of reexamining the morality of homosexuality itself; biblical scholars, theologians and scientists raised serious doubts about Christianity's insistence that same-sex love was divinely condemned. Minds changed, acceptance grew and, of course, a small but steady flow of dismayed conservatives left the church.

The issue of gays in the Episcopal clergy has been on the front burner of the denomination since 1991. At that year's convention, discussion of gay ordination grew so heated that the presiding bishop, Edmund Browning, ordered six closed-door sessions to hash things out.

As open homosexuals were accepted into the priesthood, the question realistically was when, not whether, to accept gay bishops. The first was V. Gene Robinson, endorsed by the 2006 convention as the bishop of New Hampshire, with the proviso that such consecrations should be put on hold to satisfy the traditional elements here and abroad.

Last month's scrapping of that restriction came, therefore, after lots and lots of haggling, passion, sober study and deliberation. After the vote, some delegates were quoted as less than ecstatic, but realistic. They saw the decision as an accurate marker of the mind of the church and accepted it as such. Reason rather than radicalism emerged as the justification. Things had found their way over the years and it appeared to sufficient numbers to be God's will, whether or not it made delegates jump for joy. This moment had arrived, after all, at tremendous cost in defections from the church, lost income and the agony of conflict.

Clearly, this is new ground. The Episcopalians, aristocrats of American church life, have advanced the ball to a place no other mainstream church has gone. Not only does it further the cause of gays and lesbians, it sets a benchmark for all churches, even Catholicism, which officially appears at the farthest remove from reform on this front.

Though the Episcopal church's action looks precipitous, it is better seen as a product of an organic process that has grown through most churches that have engaged the issue of homosexuality in recent decades. All of them had a hand in prompting the Episcopal boldness, whether they acknowledge it or not, in part because the cause crossed over from society. The morality of same-sex relationships and the place of gays and lesbians in leadership have been broached by nearly every party to the wider ecumenical conversation, whatever the results of those investigations have been. Gay and lesbian advocacy and caucus groups have become significant players in those denominations. Though their accomplishments have been modest, they have established a broad, largely informal coalition that has represented a point of view previously unknown in those churches and through them a consensus has built that helped sustain Episcopalian advocates of change.

Meanwhile, biologists and behavioral scientists have added heft to the arguments for acceptance, advancing evidence that homosexuality is a naturally occurring form of conduct.

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Negative examples also appear to have played a part. United Methodist and Presbyterian strictures against gay clergy, Roman Catholic denunciation of homosexuality as "intrinsically disordered," and sordid exposures of repressed gay preachers have struck more Christians as illogical and shortsighted.

The Episcopal church, therefore, didn't act alone but took a bold step nonetheless. In the long history of church battles, this is the first caused by sex itself. A ton of other issues have triggered fights, from the nature of the Trinity to the authority of the Bible to women in the clergy (which for Episcopalians fomented a similar clash), but the division over homosexuality has broken new ground. If the dissenters are right, the convention broke with tradition and will wither on the vine. If the proponents of the new teaching are right, they will prosper spiritually by having responded to a divine mandate.

Everyone wants to be on God's side on such matter; everyone might be to some extent or other. The test case here is an imperative that stemmed from the Enlightenment: egalitarianism. The forces have lined up against each other over what the limits of that might be. The movement has sparked the acknowledgment of human rights for African Americans, women and sexual minorities, among others. It inspired the Declaration of Independence's claim that "all men are created equal," a promise not yet fulfilled. Some believe these concepts are embedded in scripture and Christian teaching. Assuming they are, institutional Christianity did little to translate them into movements to end slavery, anti-Semitism and other gross human rights abuses. Those movements largely came to the church from the outside.

A corollary to egalitarianism provided the key to the Episcopal outcome: the representative, electoral process that included laity, priests and bishops. The church was, in that sense, a democracy.

The wider cause of human rights has led a growing number of gays and lesbians to seek full inclusion in the churches as persons of equal standing. The Episcopal church has vowed to pursue that promise in a new way -- their willingness may encourage others to follow suit. If enthusiasts are right, it's the providential wave of the future. For many conservatives, it's a frightening illusion.

Ken Briggs, author of Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns and The Power of Forgiveness: Based on a Film by Martin Doblmeier, reported on religion for Newsday and The New York Times.

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