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The crisis in Anglicanism revisited

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

At the end of May of this year I did a column on "**The crisis in Anglicanism**," prompted by an important address given in Houston, Texas, by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord George Carey.

Carey had argued the point that, because of the divisions created within the worldwide Anglican Communion by the ordination in 2003 of Canon V. Gene Robinson, an openly partnered gay, as the incoming bishop of New Hampshire, it is no longer clear that the unity of the Anglican Communion is entirely consistent with Anglicanism's traditional regard for local ecclesiastical autonomy.

It seemed to Carey that the autonomy of the Episcopal church in the United States, which has generally supported Robinson's controversial ordination, is now working at cross purposes with the demands for unity in the Anglican Communion as a whole.

At its General Convention this past July, the Episcopal church passed two resolutions: one that affirmed that the office of bishop is open to all qualified candidates, including gays and lesbians, partnered or not, and the other that opened the door to future blessings of same-sex unions.

Both resolutions have been interpreted as being against the spirit, if not the letter, of the Anglican Communion's official doctrinal stance and pastoral policy on these matters. As a result many Anglicans have wondered how the Episcopal church's actions are consistent with its stated desire to remain in full communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury and worldwide Anglicanism.

Toward the end of July, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, released a statement, "Communion, Covenant and the Anglican Future," which consisted of his reflections on the actions taken at the Episcopal church's General Convention (for the full text of Archbishop Williams's statement, see *Origins*, 9/3/09).

In his statement, the archbishop of Canterbury challenged the view that the issue of the public blessing of same-sex unions is a matter of civil liberties, human dignity, or freedom of conscience. He insisted that the biblical evidence and the longstanding tradition of the church stand in opposition to the practice.

At the same time, he described prejudice and violence against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons as "sinful and disgraceful."

Williams also challenged the view that the autonomy of a local church, namely, the Episcopal church, can, for all practical purposes, ignore the judgment of the Anglican Communion as a whole. He cited the "venerable principle" that "what affects the communion of all should be decided by all."

Otherwise, the archbishop argued, the Anglican Communion would have to be reconceived as "an essentially loose federation of local bodies with a cultural history in common, rather than a theologically coherent 'community of Christian communities.' "

Williams suggested that a "two-tier" or "two-track" model might be necessary to witness to the common Anglican heritage.

Most of the Anglican provinces would choose to be full partners in the Communion, but those local communities, such as the Episcopal church, that choose the second track would not fully participate in the official activities of the Anglican Communion, but would continue to cooperate in mission and service of the kind now shared in the Communion.

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On the first of September a small group of Episcopal bishops who are very much in the minority on these matters had a meeting in London with the archbishop of Canterbury to present their side of the argument. The bishops are heads of the dioceses of Albany, Dallas, North Dakota, Northern Indiana, South Carolina, West Texas and Western Louisiana.

Williams was careful not to issue a public statement following the meeting in support of one side or the other, although his sentiments are evidently with those opposed to the ordinations of openly gay and lesbian individuals to the priesthood and the episcopate and the public blessing of same-sex unions. The statement referred to above makes that clear.

The seven bishops who met with Williams also made it clear that they wished to remain "constituent members of both the Anglican Communion and the Episcopal church."

In their own statement they expressed support of the Anglican Communion Covenant and urged bishops, priests, deacons, and laypersons of the Episcopal church who support the adoption of the Covenant to do so publicly.

This current dispute within the Anglican Communion may not be of much interest to many Roman Catholics, but the issues involved in the controversy affect both churches.

The tensions between central authority and local autonomy exist in Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism alike, but in different ways. We need to learn from one another's problems and experiences in dealing with these tensions.

We cannot simply ignore them.

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