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Anglicans at Lambeth, familiar divisions, different resolutions

by Ken Briggs

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No church leaders look more like a branch of the established order than do Anglican bishops. With their royal purple vests, stylish pectoral chains (crosses discreetly out of view) and dapper outfits, they call to mind their origins in British aristocracy.

As they wound up their Lambeth Conference in England Aug. 3, however, it was clear that their status was anything but sound, secure or privileged. Having spent two weeks conferring in small groups about how to resolve the clash among them over homosexuality and same-sex blessings, their deflated spokesman, the archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, conceded that no strategy had been devised to avoid a major split in the church.

The archbishop further pleaded with those he identified as the chief perpetrators of the rift ? American and Canadians who had ordained gay and lesbian priests and a gay bishop and blessed gay couples ? to discontinue those activities while talks continue between the two sides toward a nebulous goal.

Boycotting bishops

More than 200 bishops, most of them from Africa, South America and Asia, noisily boycotted the every-10-year conclave. They were convinced that the pro-gay ordination bishops would try to browbeat them into submission. They constituted nearly a fourth of all Anglican bishops and conducted their own rump conference in Jerusalem in June, naming it the Global Anglican Future Conference (with the unfortunate acronym GAFCON).

In effect, they seceded from the union until or unless they obtained a major concession from their opponents.

The bishops who did attend, about 600, understandably weren't eager to completely cut the cord by using Lambeth to further inflame passions before diplomacy had run its course. So, at the archbishop's suggestion, they abandoned open, plenary sessions in favor of a Zulu method (indaba) of debating the issues in small groups, with the Bible as their guide.

Other than the good cheer that usually emerges among most parties to long bull sessions, and a general commitment to "staying together," the results appeared bleak.

Nothing pointed to a way through the morass, save an improbable mass conversion on one side or the other. Conservatives vowed never to retreat; American liberals scoffed at the proposed moratorium on gay ordinations, consecrations of more gay bishops (the first, Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, was excluded from Lambeth, though he was a visible interloper), and same-sex marriages.

Indecision reigns

It was a muddle of indecision that has long both plagued and distinguished the Anglicans as their preferred method for handling differences. Let all sides retain a vested interest, keep mulling over the disputes and wait it out.

This relatively open-ended approach, slow to make definitive rulings and willingness to let contrasting views coexist, has born fruit in the past, though it has also caused defections in its Episcopal branch in the United States. The debate over the ordination of women raged for years before official approval of the practice in 1976. Some bitter opponents bolted to found their own schismatic churches or trekked to Rome, but they weren't forced out. They chose to leave after having been given ample opportunities to plead their case in a forum in which they were simply outvoted by a large margin.

The just-completed Lambeth Conference opened itself to instant ridicule by doing little more than talking and keeping a formal split at bay for the moment. Liberals refused to declare an ultimatum that would force the dissenters to stay or go. Some were angered by what they saw as Lambeth's toothlessness. Conservatives didn't quite defect, though many scoffed at Lambeth as a waste of time and \$12 million, and proclaimed their readiness to quit.

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Fragile Christianity

But to dismiss the conference as a failure of nerve would miss the point that is so vividly illustrated in this crisis: that Christianity itself, in all of its varieties, is a fragile thing indeed. There is every reason to believe that Anglicanism is beset by as many serious moral and theological problems as any church body. The distinctions arise in how denominations meet those challenges.

The Anglican way of openness to opposing views and a decentralized form of government that allows for broad deliberation has much to commend it. Like democracy with which it shares much, Anglican decision making is messy and inefficient, but it comports well with what many leading historians believe to be the method used by the churches of early Christianity. It allows for considerable diversity in belief and practices but sometimes an issue like homosexuality becomes divisive and demands attention.

The archbishop of Canterbury more resembles the Eastern Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople as the "first among equals" than he does the pope. He can do almost nothing by himself. At every level, from parishes to dioceses to regions to the world conferences, Anglicans argue and vote. The question is

whether this is a God-given means of deciding church teaching. In some form or other, it appears that the early church believed it to be.

Much of Christianity, most notably Catholicism, has acted on the assumption that God prefers a more autocratic means of ruling the church. Decisions are imposed from the top that may appear to settle disputes but, like the false security that existed while Marshall Tito was dictator over Yugoslavia, things can fall apart at the slightest easing of control, or even without it. Real solutions may elude churches that shortchange the process of working it through.

Question of Spirit

The most vexing challenges to Christians are those that fit the Second Vatican Council's category of the 'signs of the times.' The implication of that concept is that the Holy Spirit beckons the churches to take new directions that are critical to God's mission and that these signs will likely appear outside the confines of the church. The movements for civil rights, women's equality and world peace have been identified as such.

If the call to human rights is a sign from God, does that include the removal of bias and barriers for gays and lesbians?

The argument among Anglicans is whether this cause is secular or divine? Both sides search the scriptures for evidence. History, sociology, politics and sexual ethics all come under review. Many Episcopalians from North America became convinced this movement was of God and acted on it. Though dissidents have been loud and unrelenting, the movement's backers appear to have surprising strength.

A less emphasized drama with implications far beyond Anglicanism was whether churches in the developing world can parlay their increasing share of church membership into greater influence. Many of the fiercest opponents of homosexual ordinations are from poor countries with growing church rolls. Many First World leaders balk at treating these militants in any manner that might seem heavy-handed, lest they seem imperialistic.

Numbers and dollars

At the same time, some of these Third World bishops have become leading spokesmen for the faction threatening to break away over homosexuality.

Though the demographic center of Christianity shifts to the Southern Hemisphere, the monetary and institutional resources remain heavily concentrated in the First World. In the long run, despite the threats, any break by the conservative leaders in Africa, Asia and Latin America from the Anglican mainstream may cost more than they are willing to pay.

(Ken Briggs, a longtime journalist, is the author of Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns.)

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