

Episcopal head reproaches Anglican uniformity

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Jun. 8, 2010



Episcopal Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori in a 2007 CNS file photo

Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori has forcefully defended her church's embrace of gays and lesbians, and firmly rejected efforts to centralize power or police uniformity in the Anglican Communion.

Anglicans should be led by local communities rather than powerful clerics, Jefferts Schori argued in a June 2 letter to her church's 2 million members. And, after 50 years of debate, the Episcopal Church is convinced that gays and lesbians are "God's good creation" and "good and healthy exemplars of gifted leadership within the church, as baptized leaders and ordained ones."

In May, the Episcopal Church consecrated its second openly gay bishop despite warnings the move would increase tensions in the worldwide Anglican Communion, many parts of which view homosexuality as a sin.

Last month, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said Episcopalians, who form the U.S. branch of the 77 million-member communion, are out of step with fellow Anglicans and should not fully participate in ecumenical dialogue and doctrinal discussions.

As head of the Church of England, Williams is spiritual leader of the communion, but has limited power. He and other Anglicans have been pushing for more centralized authority in recent years as the communion struggles to overcome disagreements on how to interpret what the Bible says about homosexuality.

David Hein, a professor of religious history at Hood College in Maryland who has written about Episcopalians, said the Anglican Communion has been moving toward greater unity on matters of faith and doctrine for at least 50 years, as the denomination grows in disparate parts of the world.

Independent-minded Episcopalians, however, haven't always been willing to go along, and have pushed the boundaries of acceptable faith and practice.

Jefferts Schori firmly rejected the push to centralize power and discipline, saying that Anglicanism, and the Episcopal Church, were founded by Christians who wished to escape the strong hand of an established hierarchy.

?Unitary control does not characterize Anglicanism; rather, diversity in fellowship and communion does,? she said.

Imposing uniformity on the 77 million Anglicans scattered across the globe runs the risk of repeating the ?spiritual violence? and ?cultural excesses? of colonial missionaries who built the communion on the back of the British Empire, the presiding bishop added.

?We live in great concern that colonial attitudes continue,? said Jefferts Schori, ?particularly in attempts to impose a single understanding across widely varying contexts and cultures.?

The presiding bishop also said that criticism of the Episcopal Church often comes from parts of the communion that bar women from becoming priests or bishops; and charged that other Anglican churches allow gay bishops under an unofficial don't ask/don't tell agreement.

?In our context, bowing to anxiety by ignoring that sort of double-mindedness is usually termed a `failure of nerve,?' Jefferts Schori said.

Liberal Episcopalians applauded Jefferts Schori's letter, which was remarkable for its full-throated defense of Episcopal Church policies.

?It is an understated declaration of independence,? said Jim Naughton, editor of the blog Episcopal Cafe. ?The presiding bishop is not going to allow the Archbishop of Canterbury to establish the terms of the debate anymore.?

Jefferts Schori's rehashing of Anglican history may seem innocuous to outside observers, said church historian Diana Butler Bass, but her strong defense of democratic Anglicanism is a ?call to arms.?

?Those are fighting words,? Butler Bass said. ?She's saying, `this is our tradition and you're violating it.' She is accusing Williams of being an imperialist.?

In essence, Williams and Jefferts Schori are having a very old argument over local autonomy and central authority, Butler Bass said -- two extreme and perhaps irreconcilable interpretations of Anglicanism.

?He's trying to find coherent Anglican identity and enforce it in a top-down way, and she's saying we've always been democratic, local, grassroots.?

That argument seems to have reached a breaking point, the historian said.

?Scholars will look back on these letters in 150 years and say, `This is it. This is when it all went away,?? Butler Bass said. ?The Anglican Communion is not going to make it.?

Hein agreed, saying, ?A path has been chosen. It seems (Jefferts Schori) has prepared to pack her bags and go off on her own.?

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