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Anglicans on the Brink

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The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, is set to meet with the bishops of the Episcopal Church USA [ECUSA] in a last-ditch effort to avoid a head-on collision between the American church and the worldwide Anglican Communion. Neither side in the Anglican controversy seems to think that the Archbishop will succeed in his effort to persuade the ECUSA bishops to make the assurances necessary to prevent a schism.

The presenting issue is the 2003 election of Gene Robinson as the Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire. Bishop Robinson is an openly homosexual man who divorced his wife and now lives with a male partner. His election as bishop came with the full knowledge of his homosexuality and his consecration as bishop set off an explosion in the Anglican Communion — the worldwide association of churches that emerged from the Church of England.

The ECUSA bishops are set to meet this week in New Orleans. As *The New York Times* reports:

Ever since the Episcopal Church consecrated an openly gay man as bishop of New Hampshire four years ago, forecasts of a rupture over homosexuality within the church or with the rest of the global Anglican Communion accompanied each big church meeting, only to fade.

But as the bishops of the Episcopal Church approach their semiannual meeting this week in New Orleans, the predictions are being taken very seriously.

Leaders of the Anglican Communion responded to Bishop Robinson's election with a document known as the Windsor Report. Included within that report were directives demanding that the American church cease and desist from further elections of openly homosexual bishops and from the blessing of homosexual unions.

From the *The New York Times*:

In interviews last week, bishops and church experts who hold a range of views on homosexuality said they expected the House of Bishops would stop short, perhaps far short, of meeting the directive's demands. That could widen rifts, as several dioceses have said they would break away from the Episcopal Church and primates of several provinces, or regions, have spoken of leaving the global communion.

What makes the New Orleans meeting all the more important is the fact that the Archbishop of Canterbury will be present. He is expected to ask the American church to accept the directives of Anglican Communion.

As *The Telegraph* [London] reports:

In one of the most crucial weeks of his tenure as Archbishop, he will fly to New Orleans on Wednesday to urge American bishops to heed the recommendations of the Windsor Report, which called on liberals to refrain from making further pro-gay moves.

They have been given the "deadline" of September 30 to introduce a moratorium on electing gay bishops.

Dr Williams's efforts to keep the warring factions within the fold of the Anglican Communion will effectively be rendered

meaningless if the American Church refuses to comply with the demands of the global church leaders.

“He’s in no uncertainty as to the importance of this meeting,” said one of his closest aides.

Meanwhile, the American bishops have already resisted the Anglican directives. Furthermore, a lesbian candidate is considered a front-runner in the election process for a new bishop in Chicago.

Some Episcopalians are already jumping ship. Several American Episcopal clergy have already accepted ordination and elevation as bishops of national churches in Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria. They, and in some cases their congregations, have then come under the oversight of the African churches. In effect, this is a case of the African churches planting congregations in the United States — a reminder that America is now seen as a nation in need of Christian missionaries from Africa and other parts of the “Global South.”

The division over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion is, in reality, a division over far deeper issues. At stake are basic conceptions of biblical authority, church doctrine, and the Gospel. In that sense, homosexuality is understood by both sides to be a Gospel issue. The liberals believe that homosexuality must be normalized in the name of a gospel of liberation. Conservatives insist that homosexuality must be understood as inherently sinful, and that the only rescue from sin is salvation through Christ.

These are not merely two rival conceptions of Christianity — these are two different religions.

All concerned Christians should watch the developments in New Orleans with great interest. Beyond this, we must pray that this church would, against all expectations to the contrary, affirm the full authority of the Bible and its teachings on human sexuality. Anything short of that is just a temporary delay of the inevitable disaster to come.

In an odd twist to this story, *The Times* [London] is reporting that the Archbishop of Canterbury is to lead a “secret gay communion” for homosexual clergy at an elite Church of England parish in London. As the paper reports:

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, is to hold a secret Communion service for gay clergy and their partners in London.

Dr Williams will celebrate the eucharist at St Peter’s, Eaton Square – the Church of England parish that is known as the spiritual home to some of the country’s most liberal and wealthy Anglican elite. There he will give an address titled “Present realities and future possibilities for lesbians and gay men in the Church”.

The event has been organised under Chatham House rules, which prevent any disclosure of the discussions. The event will take place at 10am on November 29. A list of the names of those who will be present will be seen only by Dr Williams. It will be shredded afterwards.

Needless to say, this has caused quite a stir in Anglican circles, leading to further confusion about the Archbishop’s own position in the controversy. Prior to his elevation as Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams was known to favor the normalization of homosexuality. Since his assumption of that office, he has attempted to hold the Church of England and the Anglican Communion together, even as both bodies are divided over the issue. This “secret gay communion” is seen by some evangelicals as an attempt by the Archbishop to give private assurances to homosexual clergy and their partners.

