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What Really Happened in New Orleans? An Anglican Schism Draws Closer

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“We want that statement to be clear and unambiguous and we are working in that direction,” said Episcopal Bishop Neil Alexander of Atlanta. The bishop made this statement at a press conference during the meeting of the Episcopal Church’s House of Bishops that ended in New Orleans yesterday.

The meeting of the bishops made international news because the stakes could not be higher for the future of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, the international fellowship of churches associated with the Church of England and the Anglican tradition.

The background to the controversy and drama is well known. In 2003 the Episcopal Church elected and consecrated an openly-homosexual man as the Bishop of New Hampshire, detonating an international crisis in the Anglican Communion. The American church had also moved in the direction of blessing same-sex unions. The unavoidable reality is that the American church has been moving toward the normalization of homosexual behavior and homosexual relationships — putting the liberal American church on a collision course with the churches of the so-called “Global South.” These churches, including several in Africa, now claim far more members than the Church of England and the Episcopal Church. They are also far more conservative.

The Global South churches, joined by evangelicals in other churches, are absolutely certain that the American church is defying biblical authority, ignoring clear biblical teachings, and rejecting the collegiality of their doctrinal consensus. The Anglican Communion responded to the crisis with a set of directives addressed to the American church. These directives, with a deadline of September 30, required the Episcopal Church to refrain from electing any further openly homosexual bishops and from blessing same-sex unions.

Underlining the importance of the New Orleans meeting, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, head of the Anglican Communion, came and made a personal plea to the American bishops.

Bishop Alexander said that he hoped for a “clear and unambiguous” statement from the bishops. Well, judging by the initial media response, the [statement](#) released Tuesday night falls short of “clear and unambiguous.”

The New York Times headline is “[Episcopal Bishops Reject Anglican Church’s Orders.](#)” Meanwhile, the BBC reports that “[Anglicans to Halt Gay Ordinations.](#)”

From the *Times*:

Bishops of the Episcopal Church on Tuesday rejected demands by leaders of the worldwide Anglican Communion to roll back the church’s liberal stance on homosexuality, increasing the possibility of fracture within the communion and the Episcopal Church itself.

After nearly a week of talks at their semiannual meeting in New Orleans, the House of Bishops adopted a resolution

that defied a directive by the Anglican Communion's regional leaders, or primates, to change several church policies regarding the place of gay men and lesbians in their church. But the bishops also expressed a desire to remain part of the communion, and they appeared to be trying to stake out a middle ground that would allow them to do so.

From the BBC:

Leaders of the Episcopal Church in the United States have agreed to halt the ordination of gay clergy to prevent a split in the Anglican Church.

The Church will also no longer approve prayers to bless same-sex couples.

Conservatives seem to see the statement as a non-starter and a sure sign that a schism is at hand. Their reading of the statement would seem to be shared, at least in this respect, with homosexual rights activists within the Episcopal Church.

The activist organization known as "Integrity" released a statement celebrating the bishops' action. Their statement began with these words:

The members of Integrity have prayed unceasingly for their bishops as they met this week to consider a response to the primates' communiqué. The bishops were pressured by the Archbishop of Canterbury and other international guests to comply with the primates' demands. The bishops struggled mightily amongst themselves to achieve a clear consensus on how to respond. Integrity is gratified that the final response from the House of Bishops declined to succumb to the pressure to go backwards, but rather took some significant steps forward.

Similarly, The New York Times reported:

The Bishop Martyn Minns of the Convocation of Anglicans in North America, a prominent conservative group supported by the Archbishop of Nigeria, responded to the bishops' resolution: "They're offering business as usual. The communion asked them to make a change, to embrace the teaching of the communion about homosexuality, and there's no change at all."

This indeed appears to be the bottom line — no change at all. This is indeed a tragedy, and one that will affect other denominations and churches as well. The most important issues at stake in New Orleans were not same-sex unions and gay bishops but biblical authority and the integrity of the church.

There seems to be little room for hope that this situation in the Episcopal Church can be reversed at this late point. Mark yesterday as another date of disaster in New Orleans.

Audio, video, and print coverage of the ECUSA meeting can be found here at Episcopal Life Online, an official ECUSA site.

