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GENERAL CONVENTION 2006 (III)

Despite attempts to paint the actions of General Convention as effecting full compliance with the Windsor Report, it seems unlikely that they will be received as such by much of the Communion. Already, six American dioceses (Fort Worth, Pittsburgh, San Joaquin, South Carolina, Central Florida, and Springfield) have appealed to the Primates for immediate "alternative primatial oversight" with a view to becoming a Windsor-compliant province within the Episcopal Church. Due to the ambiguity of Convention's actions, the question of realignment is not whether, but how, it will happen.

One possibility is a series of bitter court battles over property, which has been the usual response of the liberal establishment to conservative dissent. Another possibility is some kind of settlement negotiated with a certain generosity of spirit. That seems to be what the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has in mind, according to his statement released after General Convention, "The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today: a reflection for the bishops, clergy, and faithful of the Anglican Communion." (It can be read in full at www.archbishopofcanterbury.org.)

In his view, the current debate is not primarily about "gay bishops". "It is possible – indeed, it is imperative – to give the strongest support to the defence of homosexual people against violence, bigotry and legal disadvantage, to appreciate the role played in the life of the church by people of homosexual orientation, and still to believe that this doesn't settle the question of whether the Christian Church has the freedom, on the basis of the Bible, and its historic teachings, to bless homosexual partnerships as a clear expression of God's will. That is disputed among Christians, and, as a bare matter of fact, only a small minority would answer yes to the question."

What is at stake "is a question, agonisingly difficult for many, as to what kinds of behaviour a Church that seeks to be loyal to the Bible can bless, and what kinds of behaviour it must warn against – and so it is a question about how we make decisions corporately with other Christians, looking together for the mind of Christ as we share the study of the Scriptures." It is in the unilateralism of the Episcopal Church's decision-making that he locates its gravest failure. In considering the decision of the Episcopal Church to elect Gene Robinson, "what most Anglicans worldwide have said is that it doesn't help to behave as if the matter had been resolved when in fact it hasn't." In the Anglican communion, which has no centralized

structures of government, "everything depends on what have generally been unspoken conventions of mutual respect. Where these are felt to have been ignored, it is not surprising that deep division results..." Moreover, "no member Church can make significant decisions unilaterally and still expect this to make no difference to how it is regarded in the fellowship; this would be uncomfortably like saying that every member could redefine the terms of belonging as and when it suited them. Some actions – and sacramental actions in particular – just do have the effect of putting a Church outside ...the central stream of the life they have shared with other Churches."

Williams rejects the 'go your own way' option as a recipe for fragmentation. The "basic challenge" of churches in a global communion is to ask "Are we joining together in one act of Holy Communion, one Eucharist, throughout the world, or are we just celebrating our local identities and our personal preferences?" To cope with the diversity of views, he proposes an Anglican Covenant (as recommended in the Windsor Report). "Those Churches that were prepared to take this on as an expression of their responsibility to each other would limit their local freedoms for the sake of a wider witness; and some might not be willing to do this. We could arrive at a situation where there were 'constituent' Churches in covenant in the Anglican Communion and other 'churches in association', which were still bound by historic and perhaps personal links, fed from many of the same sources, but not bound in a single and unrestricted sacramental communion, and not sharing the same constitutional structures. (...) The 'associated' Churches would have no direct part in the decision making of the 'constituent' Churches, though they might well be observers whose views were sought or whose expertise was shared from time to time, and with whom significant areas of co-operation might be possible."

Williams acknowledges that this scheme "leaves many unanswered questions ... given that lines of division run within local Churches as well as between them - and not only on one issue It could mean the need for local Churches to work at ordered and mutually respectful separation between 'constituent' and 'associated' elements; but it could also mean a positive challenge for Churches to work out what they believed to be involved in belonging in a global sacramental fellowship, a chance to rediscover a positive common obedience to the mystery of God's gift that was not a matter of coercion from above but of that 'waiting for each other' that St Paul commends to the Corinthians."

"We do have a distinctive historic tradition", he says: "a reformed commitment to the absolute priority of the Bible for deciding doctrine, a catholic loyalty to the sacraments and the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, and a habit of cultural sensitivity and intellectual flexibility that does not seek to close down unexpected questions too quickly. But for this to survive with all its aspects intact, we need closer and more visible formal commitments to each other. And it is not going to look exactly like anything we have known so far. ... But if we are to continue to be any sort of 'Catholic' church, if we believe that we are answerable to something more than our immediate environment and its priorities and are held in unity by something more than just the consensus of the moment, we have some very hard work to do to embody this more clearly."

Williams' proposal is lucid, thoughtful, genuinely humane, and fair-minded. Whether the Episcopal Church is capable of rising to the same level is an open question. The Nigerian bishops may be more realistic. In their response to Williams (which can be read at www.americananglican.org) they asked if the Convention's "blatant disregard" for the recommendations of the Windsor Report "should not be reprimanded." They suggested "that those who had embarked on this religious misadventure would be encouraged to judge their actions against our well-established historic tradition." Finally, they said, "A cancerous lump in the body should be excised if it has defied every known cure. To attempt to condition the whole body to accommodate it [according to Williams' proposal] will lead to the avoidable death of the patient. We encourage the Archbishop of Canterbury to persuade those who have chosen to "walk apart" to return to the path chosen by successive generations of our forbears."

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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