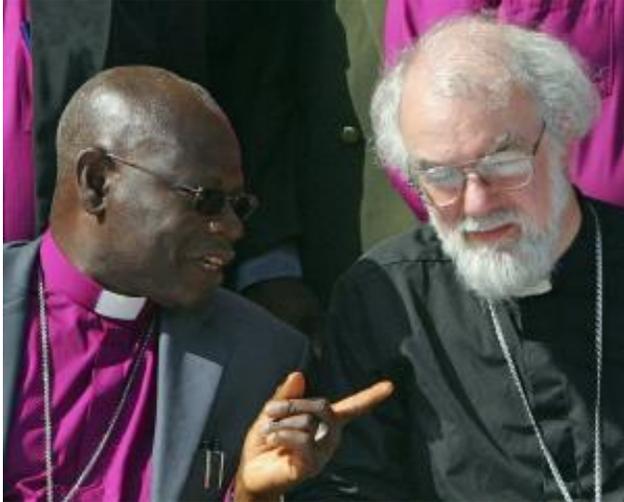


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-- Reuters Photo Archive/Antony Njuguna

Nigerian Anglican Archbishop Peter Akinola, left, chats with Archbishop Rowan Williams at a meeting in Ain El Sukhna, Egypt, Oct. 28, 2005.

the expanding Anglican churches of the Third World, above all in Africa -- who have accused the North Americans of following another religion. A crunch is approaching at the end of September, when the Episcopal church has been asked to declare that it will no longer bring forward candidates for the episcopate who are living in same-sex unions, and that no bishop will authorize same-sex blessings.

Virtually no one thinks the church will comply. Even Williams, who will address the House of Bishops of the Episcopal church later this month when it meets in New Orleans to decide its position, and who will then find it harder to avert open schism.

As he looks forward, the archbishop hopes against hope. He pauses for thought before he replies to questions, his eyes reflective under the bushy eyebrows. Then out comes his response, perfectly phrased, highly nuanced, each sentence proceeding coherently to a full stop. The requests that have been put to the Episcopal church are of slightly different kinds. The answers are not simple black and white. So even after the American Anglicans of the Episcopal church have declared themselves, there will still be some discerning and sifting to do by the standing committees of our international bodies.

This archbishop is a formidable intellectual, commanding respect even from those who accuse him of obscurity and remark that he is too clever by half. He speaks and understands a clutch of languages. He was one of the founders of Affirming Catholicism, a movement in the Catholic wing of the Church of England that endorsed women priests during the heat of controversy over their ordination. His wife, Jane, herself a theologian, is an evangelical. He has also been influenced by the Eastern tradition, with its emphasis on the Holy Spirit, community and waiting on God. His doctoral thesis was on the Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, exponent of Eastern mysticism, and during his recent three-month break he wrote a book on Dostoevsky. A Welshman, born in Swansea, he was much loved in his previous diocese of Monmouth, where he proved himself a sympathetic and capable pastor. He preaches striking and challenging sermons. He will write a lecture of 5,000 words in one sitting. He personally answers about a third of the 3,000 letters he receives annually. He reads widely and voraciously. He is also a poet and translator.

Despite his attainments, he has great humility. He is reserved, ultimately a loner, rather like his exemplar, Archbishop

Anglican schism?

Archbishop Rowan Williams strives to preserve the communion

By JOHN WILKINS

On Sept. 3 Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams came back from study leave to face the music. The primate of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion does not want to go down in history as the archbishop who presided over the disintegration of that communion. So far, against the odds, he has held together this worldwide grouping of 38 self-governing provinces counting more than 70 million Christians. He has sought to make space for all contending parties to be heard: notably the inclusive liberals led by the American Anglicans of the Episcopal church, who in 2003 ordained as bishop a divorced man, Gene Robinson, now living with a gay partner, and, at the other end of the spectrum, the conservative evangelicals, especially those of the Global South --

Michael Ramsey, whose photograph he keeps on his desk. He is not a politician. In a room, he is clubbable but a touch shy, very unlike another of his predecessors, Archbishop Robert Runcie, memorably described by one Anglican bishop as blending with a crowd like instant coffee meeting water. A bishop who knows Williams well discerns in him a deep river of prayer and meditation, from which he can draw whenever he needs to.

Dogged by controversy

Now 57, he was enthroned as archbishop of Canterbury in 2003. There were great hopes that he would find a new Christian language to use and that he would excel in leadership to the nation and the world. In fact he has been dogged from the start by the controversy over the ethics of homosexuality, which has grown to the point where it threatens to splinter the whole Anglican Communion. Williams accepts that the communion is changing irremediably, and has speculated about a future inner core of churches with a looser constellation forming a penumbra around them. Many observers fear that the communion is becoming the Anglican federation -- and the critics would add that this was always the truth.

Much hangs on the outcome. Anglicans have tried to share in Christian fellowship and practice as a family of churches without going down the Roman route. There is no Anglican pope, no Anglican curia, no Anglican college of cardinals. If the communion now comes apart, will it not show that John Henry Newman was right in thinking that the Anglican middle way has validity only on paper?

Ask the archbishop whether, given the present difficulties, he does not sometimes wish in his heart of hearts for a touch of papal power and he will always say no. Then what does he think that Christian leadership consists in?

One has to look at the Gospel, he replies, to tease out the context of a concept like that. In that light, he sees his task as taking appropriate responsibility for making things happen in the direction of God's kingdom. Instant results are not always to be expected. In the Anglican Communion, decisions depend very heavily on mutual consent. Otherwise they will not stick. He does what he can, he says, to make a difference that shifts things slightly.

Very Anglican. Very Rowan Williams. But he is well aware that if the communion wants to present itself as a global church, it has to have appropriate decision-making procedures. And at the present time, it has nothing adequate. There are instruments of unity within the communion: the archbishop of Canterbury himself, understood as first among equals; the Primates Meeting, which now convenes more often; the Anglican Consultative Council, whose importance is growing; and the Lambeth Conference, held every 10 years and moving to the forefront as an authoritative forum. The present crisis has tested all these instruments (now called instruments of communion), and found them wanting in their present shape.

To meet the challenge, a commission was set up in 2003. The following year it published what is known as the Windsor Report. Pervaded by a sense of crisis, the report has been described by the Anglican evangelical moral theologian Oliver O'Donovan as the only show in town. Back in 1988, in a prophetic speech to the Lambeth Conference of that year, then-Archbishop Runcie told the Anglicans of the communion that they were now being challenged to move from a position of independence to one of interdependence. The Windsor Report aims in this direction.

Its proposals have a double thrust. On the one hand, the archbishop of Canterbury's hand needs to be strengthened, it says. He should be able to speak directly to a provincial situation without this being construed as interference. And he should be supported by a council of advice.

The second key proposal of the report is that the churches of the communion should enter into a covenant that would oblige them to consider the loyalty and bonds of affection which govern the relationships between the churches of the communion. In other words, inter-Anglican relations would be governed by an explicit and forceful code of practice. This would be something new -- a fifth instrument of unity.



-- AP photo/Jane Mingay

Gwilyn Roberts, dressed as a priest, shows support for gay clergyman Jeffrey John in St. Albans, England, June 2, 2004.

The Windsor proposals were to be a central plank of Williams' strategy at the Lambeth Conference next year. They remain on the table, but he has had to row back. We are still floundering a bit, he said. The thrust of the opposition on both fronts can be gauged by how he phrases the difficulties. First, it would radically change the character of the church if there were a more bureaucratic primacy, and take away something from the sense of being a bishop among bishops.

As to the covenant, he would indeed like to see a much greater convergence of our canon law toward some kind of worldwide screening process that would make it possible to resolve any really bad procedural blunder that caused scandal and damage to a church in a province. But every Anglican province at present has what is in principle a self-sufficient system of canon law. To introduce any element into these provincial systems that gave jurisdiction elsewhere would be a huge innovation.

Issue won't go away

He has been warning some of his colleagues, he said, that the underlying issue is not going to go away. Acts and decisions by one province have an impact -- and sometimes a cost -- elsewhere, and it is an illusion to imagine otherwise. If we're going to be in any sense a global communion and not just the loosest possible federation of local churches, then not only do we have to ask about primacy, we have to ask about structures of responsibility. And he detects a very strong groundswell of opinion in many quarters toward that conclusion.

Maybe, but the Episcopal church in the United States took no such global view when it ordained Gene Robinson to the episcopate. Indeed, the presiding bishop at the time, Frank Griswold, announced that we thought it was a local matter. For the American Anglicans, what they have done in ordaining Robinson, according to the procedures laid down in their church's constitution, is a legitimate prophetic action in the cause of justice and human rights. They have always regarded themselves as the cutting edge of the communion, and since the foundation of their church in the wake of the American Revolution, have understood their General Convention to be juridically independent.



-- AP Photo/Kiichiro Sato

Delegates listen to the debate at the Episcopal General Convention June 20, 2006, in Columbus, Ohio. The convention produced a resolution asking dioceses to "exercise restraint" by not ordaining bishops "whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church."

tradition on homosexual practice. He distinguishes sharply between questions a theologian may ask and actions or decisions a church or a bishop may take.

His own Gene Robinson moment came also in 2003 after he had agreed to the appointment of a gay man, Jeffrey John, living celibately with a partner, as the new bishop of Reading. But conservative evangelicals in the Church of England and the Anglican Communion, seeing the appointment as a stalking horse, united in opposition, and raised such a firestorm in the media that Williams was forced to back down. He summoned John and told him to resign, which he did. The evangelicals rejoiced. Many of Williams' liberal friends were saddened and dismayed, and his reputation in the media, where

Williams, as always, sees both sides of the question. I do accept that there are moments when people say, truth before unity. I understand why the Reformation happened, why in the 1930s the German church divided so violently, where the only unity that could have survived the acceptance of Hitler's racial laws was a unity which absolutely undermined the integrity of the church. He commented: Clearly some people in the United States have seen this as that sort of moment. I don't.

But why not? As a theologian in the 1980s Williams himself was one of those questioning the Christian tradition on homosexuality.

I still think the points I raised were worth raising. But put them in the context of a wider discussion of the doctrine of the church and how the church makes up its mind, and it looks a little less simple. In that context it becomes clear that there are no arguments that are winning the majority of Christendom over to a new position that would amend or reverse the consistently negative Christian

he was charged with lack of courage and conviction, sank.

He had put unity first. He is asking his liberal colleagues in the worldwide Anglican episcopate to do the same. It is impossible for an archbishop of Canterbury, just as in a smaller degree it is impossible for any bishop, to be simply the mouthpiece of one position. You need to say, what would we lose if we lost those people on the other side?

He hopes that there can still be a reasoned discussion of homosexual ethics, and that the matter is not forever definitively closed. But he is convinced that this is not an issue over which the communion should break, and that as archbishop it is his task to persuade it not to do so. Unity leads us to the perception of truth. Unity matters for the maturing and resourcing of people's consciences in a way that you may not realize at this moment or that moment.

It is a Herculean task, and Rowan Williams is anything but Hercules. He follows his Master, whose power was made evident in weakness. His exercise of authority is reminiscent of that of St. Paul in the second letter to the Corinthians. In the first letter, Paul gives many instructions and rulings. In the second, challenged, and feeling the anxiety upon him for all the churches, he describes the signs of a true suffering apostle. Who is weak, and I am not weak? If I must boast, I will boast of things that show my weakness.

Some not invited

In that spirit, Williams presses doggedly on. One power that he does have is to invite or not to invite to the Lambeth Conference: He is the host. And the invitations sent out in May did not include the name of Bishop Gene Robinson or of Martyn Minns, the American priest consecrated a bishop last year by Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria to lead a breakaway group of Anglicans in the United States. Later, however, it transpired that Robinson would be allowed to come, but without a vote.

Williams' approach has the sympathy of Rome. His visit to Pope Benedict XVI last year was a success. Observers of the scene noted a remarkable transformation Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the unity council. Before the meeting with the pope, the cardinal looked glum. Afterward, his smile stretched from ear to ear. What happened?

In explanation, Williams recalls the huge ecumenical advances on the Eucharist, ministry and authority achieved by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) which began work in 1970. He believes that Anglicans must hold on to what was achieved, and he made this clear in Rome. The commission's approved method was to skirt hard lines of doctrinal definitions and explore the ground of Christian belief and practice lying beyond. So fruitful was this approach that at the end of its first phase, in 1981, the commission claimed substantial and explicit agreement, and some of its Anglican members even thought the two churches might unite in their lifetimes.

But the Vatican's doctrinal congregation, after keeping the Anglicans waiting for 10 years, issued a lukewarm verdict, and hopes were dashed by the ordination of women to the priesthood in the communion and, especially, in the Church of England, and by the controversy over the ethics of homosexuality.

Nevertheless, alluding to the overwhelming welcome of the first phase of the commission's work given subsequently by the Church of England and the Lambeth Conference, Williams insists that Anglicans must remember what they signed up to. We said yes to a lot of things. In recent years, he goes on, the Church of England in particular and the Anglican Communion in general have not always been brilliant (a very Williams formulation) at remembering that commitment. He was able to reassure the pope, he said, that we still as Anglicans thought we were in the same territory that ARCIC had inhabited. I suspect that our Roman friends needed to hear that, and to have a chance to test it and probe it. That was part of what changed the climate.

It was a shrewd choice also for him to choose St. Benedict as the subject of one of his two lectures in Rome. A mark of



-- CNS/Reuters/Alessandro Bianchi

Archbishop Rowan Williams presents a gift to Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican Nov. 23, 2006.

the pope's interest was that he had read the text in advance and annotated it. He'd picked up a couple of points and phrases, the archbishop recalls. It felt a bit like a seminar as it began. He laughs, recalling this encounter between two former university professors. That's fine. We both know how to do that.

One hopes that such ecumenical love-ins do not resemble the story of the emperor admired for new clothes that did not exist. For with the ordination Aug. 30 in Kenya of two more American priests to work in the United States as bishops outside the Episcopal church, the fragmentation of the communion looks worse than ever. Constantly Williams has warned that if a smash-up comes, there can be no such thing as a clean break. It will be more like a man putting his fist through a window pane. The fissures will be of every imaginable shape and complexity, and will run unpredictably in every direction, between churches and within churches.

A saving sense of gratitude

The toll his leadership has taken on him has been described by some as a crucifixion. But he discounts the comparison. Of course it's eroding and exhausting, he admits. But then suddenly the conversation takes wing. He gives thanks for the Christian milieu of Lambeth Palace, his London residence. It helps enormously to have not only the discipline of the daily Offices, the daily Eucharist here, but actually a praying community. Prayers are offered quite early. Every morning, therefore, I have an opportunity to remind myself that what matters is not the Church of England or the Anglican Communion but the act of God in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. When I am inclined to think that the whole thing is falling apart and that I am making a more than usually bad job of it, the transforming thing has got to be, and in my experience always is, renewing a sense of gratitude. Whether the Church of England survives or not, whether the archbishop of Canterbury survives or not, Christ still died on the cross and rose again, and that's enough to keep you going for quite a few lifetimes.

Powered by such spiritual integrity, can Rowan Williams continue to keep the show on the road? The talking cannot go on forever, and not everyone can be right. After the nursing, should there be surgery? Some Anglicans wonder, but their church does not do surgery, and this archbishop certainly does not. The risk is that effective schism will continue to be staved off by solutions that pile anomaly upon anomaly. I fear, one Anglican bishop said, that the communion may be held together in such a ragged way that one wonders what the point is.

But a leading evangelical, Bishop Tom Wright of Durham, voiced a robust hope. I really do believe, he declares, that if God had intended the Anglican Communion to shatter, he would not have raised up Rowan Williams to be the archbishop of Canterbury.

John Wilkins writes from London. He is former editor of *The Tablet*, the British Catholic weekly.

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