

**The Illusion of Inclusion: Why the homosexuality crisis in
the Episcopal Church is not just about sex.**

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From Inclusive church to marginal sect

God willing, or unwilling to intervene, Gene Robinson will be consecrated as the bishop co-adjutor of the Episcopal Church's Diocese of New Hampshire about 48 hours from now. The possibility that a gay man who lives with a male partner might become a bishop, or senior pastor, has provoked a crisis within the Episcopal Church itself and also within the Anglican Communion, an international body of which the Episcopal Church is a member. The moral legitimacy of homosexual activity is the dominant issue in most discussions, yet there is another dimension that may be equally important: Episcopalian leaders delude themselves that their denomination is becoming more “inclusive” even as it threatens to become a small and marginal sect.

The approval of Robinson was bound to be controversial because bishops of the Anglican Communion declared in 1998 that homosexual practice is “incompatible with Scripture” and added that they could not “advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions.”¹ Such declarations are not legally binding on the member churches, but they do have considerable moral authority.² The decision of the

¹ Lambeth Conference 1998, Resolution I.10, “Human Sexuality.” Cited from *The Official Report of the Lambeth Conference 1998* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 381.

² The statement was approved by the Lambeth Conference, a meeting of Anglican bishops from around the world held in London every ten years. On the authority of the Lambeth Conference, see Michael McFarlene Marrett, *The Lambeth Conferences and Women Priests: The Historical Background of the Conferences and their impact on the Episcopal Church in America* (Smithtown, NY: Exposition Press, 1981), 64. See also J. Robert Wright, “The Authority of Lambeth

Episcopal Church to ordain Robinson therefore came as a shock to many Episcopalians and to Anglicans in other lands. In mid-October of 2003, international leaders warned that this consecration could imperil the unity of 38 churches with over 70 million members on five continents.³ The controversy has been a major international news story, partly because the Anglican Communion is the third largest international association of churches,⁴ and partly because of the historic significance of the Episcopal Church, one of the “Colonial big three” that have played a prominent role in American history.⁵

Homosexuality is a controversial topic in several US denominations, with intense battles fought over the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian persons and proposals for the blessing of same-sex relationships.⁶ It is also a

Conferences, 1867-1988,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 58 (1989): 278-290 and Norman Doe, *Canon Law in the Anglican Communion: A Worldwide Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 339-342 and 372-373.

³ A Statement by the Primates of the Anglican Communion meeting in Lambeth Palace, October 16, 2003. Anglican Communion News Service 3633.

⁴ The largest association is the Roman Catholic Church, followed by the Orthodox, with 1,057,000,000 and 215,000,000 members, respectively (Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming Of Global Christianity* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002], 61).

⁵ Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future American Mainline Religion*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 85. The others are the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Church of Christ, a denomination that includes the Congregationalists.

⁶ For an overview of the conflict in several denominations, see David Alexander Tait, “From Confidence to Confusion in Moral Teaching: Episcopalians, Pluralism and Gender, 1892-1997 (Ph.D. Diss, Oklahoma State University, 1999), 142-176.

contested issue in US courts. In a June 2003 ruling that articulated a wide-ranging right to sexual privacy, the US Supreme Court struck down a Texas law barring the practice of sodomy between consenting adults.⁷ Some observers believed the decision opened the way for the authorization of same-sex marriages in future rulings.⁸ Barely a month later, the Episcopal Church met in Minneapolis for its triennial General Convention. One of the first issues it faced was a vote on whether to endorse Robinson, who was elected by a New Hampshire Convention in June. On August 5, the House of Bishops added its consent to an earlier affirmative vote by the House of Deputies.

And yet there is more to the story than an argument over sexual ethics. On October 19, as Robinson talked with members of an Episcopal congregation in Manchester, New Hampshire, he was asked why he thought there was so much opposition to his election within the Anglican Communion. He answered, "I think for a long time white men have ruled the world. With emergence of people of color, the emergence of the women's movement, with the emergence of gay and lesbian folk standing up . . . I think it's a threat to the way things have always been with white men being in charge."⁹

⁷ "Justices Overturn Texas Sodomy Ban," *Washington Post*, June 27, 2003.

⁸ "A Victory for Gay Rights," *Tulsa World*, June 27, 2003.

⁹ "Robinson advises, 'Fear Not,'" *Concord Online Monitor*, October 20, 2003.
http://www.cmonitor.com/stories/news/state2003/robinson_2003.shtml

In the context of recent US history, Robinson's remarks might appear plausible. On closer inspection, however, they are astonishing, especially the reference to "white men being in charge." Robinson himself is a white man. Moreover, the strongest opposition to his selection comes from Anglican leaders in Africa, especially the powerful Church of Nigeria. If the rule of white men is under challenge, it would seem that Robinson is closer to the dustbin than to the vanguard of history.

An Establishmentarian Dream

Far from being a mere off-the-cuff response to a question, Robinson's remarks reveal an unresolved struggle to define the identity and mission of the Episcopal Church. Because of its roots in the established Church of England, the Episcopal Church has long sought to play an establishmentarian role in the United States. Although this project has proven wildly unrealistic, Episcopalians have been reluctant to abandon it. Today Episcopalian leaders keep the old dream alive by speaking of "inclusiveness." Their church has experienced a severe membership decline over four decades, but the pretense of inclusiveness allows leaders to pursue a divisive agenda without facing demographic or ecclesial realities.

Following the American Revolution, the Episcopal Church organized itself independently from the mother Church of England so that it could function in a republic whose constitution prevented the national establishment of any church.¹⁰

¹⁰ Tait, "From Confidence to Confusion", 223-25.

The preface to the Prayer Book of 1789 expressly acknowledged religious pluralism: “the different religious denominations of these States were left at full and equal liberty to model and organize their respective Churches, and forms of worship, in such manner as they might judge most convenient for their future prosperity.”¹¹ Yet establishmentarian thinking persisted among Episcopalians.¹² Between 1820 and the Civil War, prominent Episcopalians held that their church had pastoral responsibility for everyone, not just Episcopalians, in areas where the Episcopal Church was present. By the 1840s Episcopalians were considering proposals to unify the many denominations on the American religious landscape. After the Civil War the greatly respected William Reed Huntington proposed that the Episcopal Church articulate the basis on which a genuinely national (though not legally established) church might emerge from denominational pluralism. After 1900 the church’s leadership aspirations were reflected in its attempts to speak to major social issues, the building of a “national” cathedral in Washington, D.C., and the placement of a centralized national leadership in New York, the country’s financial and communications capital.

The bid for national leadership seemed entirely realistic as recently as 1960. For well over a century, between 1830 and 1960, the Episcopal Church grew significantly, not only in absolute numbers but also in relation to the total

¹¹ “Preface,” *Book of Common Prayer 1789*, cited from the *Book of Common Prayer 1979*, 10.

¹² The following account is based on David A. Tait, “The Wrong Church at the Wrong Time: Moral Teaching in the Episcopal Church,” paper presented at St. Louis, Missouri, Organization of American Historians, April 2, 2000.

population of the United States. In 1830, when there were 30,939 communicants, one American in every 416 was an Episcopalian. By 1960, there were more than two million Episcopalians; if one added in the younger baptized members who were not yet communicants, one American in every 55 was an Episcopalian.¹³ The church adopted a catchy slogan, “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You,” displaying it on strategically located signs throughout the United States. If one considers the numbers, the Episcopal Church was truly becoming inclusive of more Americans all the time.

Then came the 1960s. In that decade, two US historians have written, “many Americans came to regard groups of fellow countrymen as enemies with whom they were engaged in a struggle for the nation’s soul.”¹⁴ Critical national issues like civil rights, the Vietnam War, and the youth culture were also significant quandaries for the Episcopal Church. The denomination proved no more successful than the national polity in dealing with the associated conflicts. Civil rights was often a divisive issue for this church but many of its leaders wanted to be in the forefront of change.¹⁵ When urban riots erupted in 1967,

¹³ Robert W. Prichard, *A History of the Episcopal Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1991), 229. Prichard relies on data from *The Episcopal Church Annual* of 1966.

¹⁴ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4. See also E. J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 11.

¹⁵ On the civil rights movement and the Episcopal Church, John Booty, *The Episcopal Church in Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1988), 55-65, and John Snow, *The Impossible Vocation: Ministry in the Mean Time* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1988), 77-82.

Presiding Bishop John Hines called for a program of assistance to urban-based community organizations. That year the church committed nine million dollars to the new General Convention Special Program (GCSP).¹⁶ This initiative became extremely controversial, especially when it funded some organizations that appeared to endorse violence. Moreover, grants were made even when diocesan bishops were opposed to them. In 1973, the General Convention abandoned the program, but by then a number of parishes and dioceses had reduced their contributions to the national church's programs. One casualty was the church's educational program, which was virtually wiped out in a 1970 layoff forced by financial exigencies.

If we are to believe national leaders like former Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning, the Episcopal Church emerged from this turbulent era stronger than ever. In 1985 Browning reviewed the church's history since 1945:

During these forty years, the Episcopal Church adopted a new *Book of Common Prayer*, a new hymnal, voted to welcome women into the fullness of ministry as deacons, priests and bishops. We've accepted the challenges and opportunities of the civil rights era, worked for peace with justice, and sought to further open our doors to all seeking to find a new life in America.¹⁷

¹⁶ On the General Convention Special Program see Tait, "From Confidence to Confusion," 357-359.

¹⁷ Edmond Lee Browning, "Foreword," in Davie E. Sumner, *The Episcopal Church's History: 1945-1965* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse Publishing, 1987), ix.

Yet during the 1960s the Episcopal Church began to lose members, and in large numbers. Although the absolute decline seems to have ended in the 1990s, the relative decline continues because the US population is growing while Episcopal Church membership is not. By 2002, the US population was 288,368,698.¹⁸ In 2003 the Episcopal Church boasts 2,319,844 baptized members.¹⁹ In 1960, one American in every 55 was a baptized member of the Episcopal Church; today the figure is one in every 124, a decline of 56 percent in four decades.

How, then, can leaders like Browning imagine that the Episcopal Church is becoming more inclusive when the numbers show that the church is now more *exclusive* than it has been in many decades? They are likely to point to significant changes in church life: the authorization of remarriage for divorced persons in 1973, the ordination of women since the 1970s, and the increasing readiness to welcome lesbian and gay Christians into church life. These may be real gains. However, they do not translate into growing membership, and they may not even indicate that the church is attracting different people than it did before. It may simply be the case that leadership is open to more people, but within a steadily declining church.²⁰ Thus Gene Robinson can see his election as

¹⁸ http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en Wilton, CT: Morehouse Publishing, 1987

¹⁹ <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/info/statistics.html>

²⁰ See Tait, "From Confidence to Confusion," 237, and David A. Tait, "A Tree House for Zacchaeus," *The Living Church*, September 5, 1999.

a sign of positive change while overlooking the possibility that he will occupy a rearranged bishop's chair on the deck of a transatlantic liner of famous memory.

Is there a direct correlation here -- between membership decline on the one hand and the acceptance of divorce, women's ordination, and gay and lesbian participation on the other? This seems unlikely. The membership decline of the Episcopal Church, and of other mainline churches, has not been due to a large exodus of alienated members to other, more conservative churches. Instead, a relatively low birth rate combined with serious weakness in retaining the loyalty of children born into these churches has resulted in a long-term numerical decline.²¹ That there is a serious problem, however, is undeniable -- yet talk of inclusiveness allows church leaders to ignore the evidence that their denomination is in danger of further decline.

"Inclusiveness" in an enlightened church

The establishmentarian legacy makes it difficult for Episcopalians to adopt a frankly combative stance. In a fragmented and competitive religious marketplace, it may be advantageous to offer a position that is a clear alternative to competing religious and secular messages.²² The vague slogan, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You" could be seen as a bid to "include" people

²¹ See Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, and Tait, "From Confidence to Confusion," 90-99.

²² See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churched of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992.

without explaining what they are to be included in. More recently that familiar message has been replaced by the insipid announcement, “We’re here for you.”²³ Surely this sentiment would work just as well for an airline or an office-supply store.

Despite the inclusive rhetoric, however, many Episcopalians are actually pursuing a different, and much more specific agenda, although they do not always fully articulate it even to themselves. Theologian Philip Turner has suggested that as the national-church dream became more obviously unrealistic, Episcopalians began to adopt a different self-image as “an enlightened alternative to the moral and theological rigidities of both Roman Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism. Emboldened by this new self-image, Episcopal clergy embraced new learning and new experience. They preached an enlightened religion attuned to the latest movements of liberal culture.”²⁴ In adopting this stance, church leaders became more willing to jettison much traditional theological and moral teaching, and less willing to heed the calls of other Anglicans to slow the pace of change in ideas and practices.

The new self-image is different from the earlier one in that it allows for a more partisan stance. However, the difference is not always acknowledged, or even recognized. Buzz words like “inclusiveness” can function easily in either

²³ Episcopal Church website, October 31, 2003. <http://ecusa.anglican.org/>.

²⁴ Philip Turner, “The End of a Church And The Triumph of Denominationalism: On How To Think About What Is Happening In The Episcopal Church,” 2003. I am quoting from an unofficial copy of the article sent to me by a colleague.

case. It is possible, then, to continue asserting that the church is “inclusive” in the sense of opening itself to participation by more and more people while actually endorsing an “enlightened” agenda with limited appeal in the US and less overseas.

Seeing himself as an heir of earlier struggles for racial minorities, women, and homosexual Christians, Robinson can present his ordination as one more step in the dismantling of oppressive and outmoded structures. He can view his unprecedented election as an advance in inclusiveness. And that is what it is, with the important qualification that what may really be happening is only that more of those who remain in a declining church are eligible for leadership than used to be the case.

However, Robinson’s view, which he shares with other “enlightened” Episcopalians, is no more consistent with broader social reality than the notion that the Episcopal Church is becoming a genuinely national institution. It is not embattled colonial masters who most strongly oppose the Robinson consecration, but the indigenous leaders of no-longer-colonial churches in lands such as Nigeria and Uganda. White leadership is under siege, but hardly in the way Robinson imagines.²⁵

The consecration of Gene Robinson may divide the Anglican Communion abroad and produce a split in the Episcopal Church at home. If these things

²⁵ See Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, on how rapid growth in the global South is changing the dynamics of Christianity.

happen, the Episcopal Church will be even smaller than it was before. Leaders like Browning and Robinson may continue to claim that their enlightened church is ever more “inclusive,” yet the denomination they lead will look much more like a sect than a national church that also participates in an international communion of churches.
