

Anglican leader calls for moratorium on practices causing division

CANTERBURY, England - The spiritual head of the worldwide Anglican Communion called for moratoriums on the blessing of same-sex unions, the ordination of openly gay people and naming bishops for disgruntled Anglicans in other church jurisdictions.

“I hope that a little more mutual responsibility and accountability, a bit more willingness to walk in step will make us more like a church” rather than a loose collection of nation-based Christian communities, Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury said at an Aug. 3 press conference.

The archbishop spoke at the end of the Lambeth Conference, a 19-day meeting of Anglican bishops from around the world. Some 200 bishops declined their invitations to participate because of the presence of bishops from North America, where some dioceses bless same-sex unions and where an openly gay priest was ordained a bishop.

Archbishop Williams also was asked about his hopes for continued Roman Catholic-Anglican dialogue.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, had told the Anglican bishops that the ordination of women priests, and especially women bishops, makes the goal of Anglican-Roman Catholic full, visible union much more difficult to envisage.

Archbishop Williams also was asked if he thought there would be a third round of the formal theological dialogue conducted by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission.

“I think our Roman Catholic friends are looking at what emerges at this conference to see how that might feed into any planning for ARCIC III,” he said. “I am still very hopeful about that.”

The archbishop also said, “While full, visible unity may, from the perspective of the Vatican, look further off than they would like in light of some of the decisions made by Anglican provinces – particularly around the issue of the ordination of women – I don’t think that’s a reason for suspending the dialogue or giving up on it.”

Archbishop Williams told the press that details for structures ensuring greater unity within the Anglican Communion and a covenant that every province would be asked to sign “still need a good deal of clarification.”

However, he said, where many people predicted the meeting would mark a major fracturing of the Anglican Communion, the Lambeth Conference demonstrated “a surprising level of sheer willingness to stay together, a surprising level of agreement about what might be necessary to make that happen.”

He also said there was “wide agreement about the need for moratoria, on both sides, where divisive actions are concerned,” particularly blessing gay marriages, ordaining gay prelates and naming bishops to care for dissidents in other dioceses.

Archbishop Williams said that in dealing pastorally with homosexuals a Christian community could not act simply from what is seen as a human rights agenda; the church’s response must be theologically sound, he said.

In his closing address to the Lambeth Conference, he said a group of Christians can

believe they have “a profound fresh insight” and rightly try to persuade others of its validity.

“A healthy church gives space for such exchanges,” he said. “But the Christian with the new insight can’t claim straight away that this is now what the church of God believes or intends; and it quite rightly takes a long time before any novelty can begin to find a way into the public liturgy.”

At the press conference, he told reporters that the problem with blessing same-sex unions is that “as soon as there is a liturgical form, it gives the impression that this has the church’s stamp (of approval) on it,” but the Anglican Communion as a whole is not ready to condone gay unions.

Respecting the moratorium should create “space for study and free discussion without pressure” and for an affirmation that “the onus of proof is on those who seek a new understanding” of how to interpret Scripture and tradition, he said.

In his Lambeth Conference closing address, he also called it a “grave breach of charity” for a conservative province to name bishops for traditionalist Anglicans who disagree with their own province’s practices regarding homosexuality and the ordination of women. For instance, some conservative African bishops have named bishops for traditionalist Anglicans in the United States who no longer recognized the authority of bishops in the Episcopal Church.

Archbishop Williams later told reporters that by their actions the conservative bishops were in effect saying of the Episcopal bishops, “You can’t trust them to safeguard the essence of Christian orthodoxy.”

“That is not something a Christian should say lightly of another,” he said.

Closing the Lambeth Conference, he told bishops, “Our communion longs to stay

together - but not only as an association of polite friends. It is seeking a deeper entry into the place where Christ stands, to find its unity there.”