

Episcopal Church leaders vote to lift ban on ordaining gay bishops

ANAHEIM, Calif. – Episcopal bishops, priests and lay delegates at their church's triennial convention in Anaheim voted July 14 to lift a moratorium on the ordination of gay and lesbian bishops that had been in place for three years.

As reported by Ecumenical News International/Religion News Service, more than 70 percent of lay and clergy delegates in the church's House of Deputies approved the action. A day earlier the House of Bishops passed the statement by a 2-to-1 margin.

Delegates also were considering a proposal for sanctioning the blessing of same-sex unions and allowing bishops in those states where same-sex marriage is legal to adapt marriage rites in the Book of Common Prayer to be gender-neutral.

The moratorium on ordinations was approved in 2006 when convention delegates voted to urge dioceses to "exercise restraint" by not electing bishops "whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion."

The Episcopal Church is a member of the Anglican Communion.

Last August Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, England, the spiritual head of the worldwide Anglican Communion, called for a moratorium on those practices causing division: the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of openly gay people.

Respecting the moratorium, he said, 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 also said 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 he added that the Anglican Communion as a whole was not ready to condone gay unions.

Tensions have been mounting in the Anglican Communion – and Catholic-Anglican relations have been strained – since the 2003 ordination of Bishop V. Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, elected by New Hampshire Episcopalians as the bishop of their diocese.

His ordination has prompted some Episcopal priests and laity to leave their church and seek full communion with the Catholic Church.

Writing on his blog about the vote on gay ordinations at this year's convention, Bishop Robinson said it was "a day to rejoice in the Episcopal Church, which once again has stood for the full inclusion of all."

Bishop Henry Parsley of Alabama, who backed the moratorium and voted against lifting it, was quoted by the Episcopal Church's news agency as saying: "I long for us to be an inclusive church, but not a polarized church. We need to be part of the larger Anglican Communion in what we do in this matter."