

Teaching Notes

COMMUNION IN CRISIS

Gene Robinson, the Episcopal Church, and the Anglican Communion

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In 2003, V. Gene Robinson was consecrated as the first openly gay and partnered bishop in the Episcopal Church USA (ECUSA) and the global Anglican Communion. A media frenzy ensued and observers both within and outside of the Episcopal Church predicted a significant schism within the ECUSA and between the ECUSA and the Anglican Communion. While there have been some defections from ECUSA, those leaving are a relatively small group and ECUSA remains part of the Anglican Communion (though some provinces within the communion have declared their relationship with the Episcopal Church to be broken or impaired).

This case study considers the nature of unity and division within this religious community. It considers the history of the Anglican Communion and its structure and historical debates over homosexuality. It also illustrates the significant diversity of perspectives within the communion based on doctrinal, social, and geographical grounds. The 1998 Lambeth Conference, the decennial gathering of Anglican bishops, serves as the initial event from which the “crisis” of Robinson’s 2003 consecration developed.

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Target Audience

Organizational studies
Organizational ethics
Organizational behavior
Ethics
Religious Studies
Sociology

Learning Objectives

1. Familiarize students with structural contributors to crisis in a large institutional setting
2. Investigate the idea of “globalization” in a concrete context
3. Gain insight into the internal operations of a globally networked religious organization
4. Challenge students to recognize that “crisis” as billed by the media may or may not reflect the organization’s understanding of the situation

Questions for class discussion

1. Read the following to students:

“The reason Anglicanism is worth bothering with is because it has tried to find a way of being a church that is neither tightly centralized nor just a loose federation of essentially independent bodies...Of course it is possible to produce a self-deceiving, self-important account of our worldwide identity, to pretend that we were a completely international and universal institution like the Roman Catholic Church. We’re not. But we have tried to be a family of churches willing to learn from each other across cultural divides, not assuming that European (or American or African) wisdom is what settles everything...But what our communion lacks is a set of adequately developed structures which is able to cope with the diversity of views that will inevitably arise in a world of rapid communication and huge cultural variety...We need ways of translating this underlying sacramental communion into a more effective institutional reality, so that we don’t compromise or embarrass each other in ways that get in the way of our local and our universal mission.”¹ – Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams

Ask the students:

Can you think of organizations or institutions similar to Anglicanism? Do you view the Anglican Communion as occupying a unique place among world religions?

Was there anything in the case that served to illuminate the “universal mission” of the Anglican Communion, as referred to by Williams, above? How would you describe it?

What, if at all, is the crisis in this case? How would you describe the crisis?

¹ <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/689> accessed 12/9/2008

2. “The Episcopal Church is committed to a Gospel so vague and spectral that false teaching is impossible,” one church critic complained. “The only heresy is to say that there is such a thing as heresy.”² How does “vagueness” function within the organizational structure of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion? How has the vague structure been helpful and how has it been harmful?

Possible Answer:

Vagueness has been helpful within the Anglican Communion because it allows for the local adaption of liturgy and the interpretation of doctrine. As the churches comprising the communion become more fully able to engage with one another through mass media, rapid communication, and inexpensive travel, ambiguity and vagueness in the structure have revealed the extent of disagreements, while making it less likely that these disagreements will be either quietly resolved or ignored. For example, the case cites several church authorities as characterizing the transfer of Rev. Thomas Johnston to service under the Bishop of Rwanda as highly irregular and possibly illegal. Similarly, the consecration of two North American “missionary bishops” by the provinces of Rwanda and Southeast Asia was also declared highly irregular and possibly illegal. And yet the actual significance of these irregularities remains uncertain. For example, the irregularly consecrated bishops haven’t been invited to the Lambeth Conference, and thus their impact on the Anglican Communion may be inconsequential.

Within the Episcopal Church vagueness has functioned to allow significant flexibility and variation among the dioceses. This may have led to less open conflict. On the other hand, the heresy trial of Bishop Walter Righter shows that ambiguity can cause problems. Righter’s case was dismissed because the ordination of homosexuals wasn’t viewed as a “core doctrine” of the church. But it is unclear who determines what core doctrines are. The trial indicates that resolutions passed by the General Convention don’t necessarily have significant authority.

3. List the various sources of authority that are appealed to throughout the case. How does the strength of authority structures vary with their place in the hierarchy?

Possible Answer:

At the highest level, some authority rests among the four “Instruments of Unity”: Primates’ Meetings, Lambeth, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Anglican Consultative Council. Yet it is unclear how differing opinions among these four instruments are resolved. For example, there has been a desire to raise the stature of the Primates’ Meetings, as they meet yearly and could develop a single structure to oversee dissenting U.S. parishes and congregations. And the Instruments of Unity have variously responded to the consecration of Bishop Robinson, suggesting that the cost to an entire province for not complying with the Lambeth 1998 Resolution 1.10 is relatively minor (the Windsor Report asks the ECUSA for an expression of regret and to stop ordaining homosexuals), though some bishops in the communion think the sanctions should be far greater.

At the provincial level the Archbishops may wield more authority than any of the Instruments of Unity. But not all provinces are alike. In the United States, the House of Bishops shares authority with the House of Deputies, and they jointly make decisions at the triennial General Convention. At the diocesan level in the United States, the bishop holds a significant amount of authority. In the present case, we see this played out when Bishop Maze of Arkansas chooses not to acknowledge St. Andrew’s Church in Little Rock. Similarly, we see this authority structure manifested in U.S. dioceses that continue not to ordain women or allow ordained women to serve in their parishes.

Another source of authority throughout the entire structure is “biblical authority” and “Anglican tradition.” Though as sources of authority they can be and are variously interpreted by various bodies within the Anglican Communion.

² Boyer, Peter J. 2006. “A Church Asunder.” *The New Yorker*, April 17, 2006. Accessed online at http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/04/17/060417fa_fact5 on 12/4/2008.

4. In debates over homosexuality and, more recently, the meaning of communion, how have appeals to “history” functioned?

Possible Answer:

Both conservatives and liberals make appeals to history. For example, the first American bishop was consecrated “irregularly” and only later was his consecration viewed as legitimate. Liberals tend to appeal to the way change and innovation have happened in the past and emphasize the “comprehensiveness” of the Anglican tradition, and its desire to be the *via media* between the Roman Catholic and Protestant worlds. Liberals may also appeal to the common tradition of worship and argue that doctrine within the church has been intentionally ambiguous.

Conservatives are more likely to appeal to the authority of scripture and the traditional teachings of the church in relation to marriage and sexuality. They appeal to the idea of “orthodoxy,” believing that deviances from tradition and biblical authority will lead to a blurred boundary between church and society, between the sacred and the secular.

Another persuasive appeal to history is the legacy of colonialism. The African bishops have made this appeal when they haven’t felt fully heard at Lambeth Conferences. They view things like parliamentary procedure as being a system of organization that is inherently Western and which doesn’t allow for different styles of communication more indigenous to their cultures. Some of the bishops from the global North suggested that a fear of being labeled colonialist or racist is what led them to vote affirmatively for Lambeth 1998’s Resolution 1.10.

Thus, appeals to history don’t yield definitive answers in this crisis, as each side views and interprets “history” differently.

5. How would you describe the alliances between the global North and global South?

Possible Answer:

Conservatives in the North believe that Anglicans in much of the global South have a vision and zeal for the mission of the Church that is absent but needed in their increasingly secular and modern contexts. The global South also has increasing numbers of bishops that can directly affect the outcome of discussions and deliberations within three of the four Instruments of Unity: Primates’ Meetings, the Lambeth Conference, and to some extent the Anglican Consultative Council. Since the consecration of Gene Robinson, conservatives in the North and many in the global South have argued for tighter accountability structures within the communion as a whole, specifically through the Primates’ Meetings. There is a growing desire to be able to define what full communion is and how strained relationships among communion members might be restored.

Ironically, liberals in the global North had begun working to increase participation by those in the global South as far back as the 1978 Lambeth Conference. By the 1990s, however, this work largely shifted toward those in more conservative circles who hosted additional meetings outside of the Anglican Communion’s structure, like the meetings in Flower Mound, Texas; Kuala Lumpur; and Kampala.

6. Identify particular aspects of the ECUSA’s organizational structure that have perpetuated the sense of crisis.

Possible Answer:

As the author of the case study indicates, some might say that the ECUSA has been in a state of crisis for half a century, perhaps paralleling the increasing segregation of the U.S. into “Red” and “Blue” camps. The crisis becomes

manifest when something new is introduced, for example the ordination of women, the publication and adoption of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, the ordination of gay deacons and priests, and finally the consecration of Gene Robinson. Others would view none of these events as significant crises but rather the ongoing negotiation of the ECUSA's mission and identity.

In terms of organizational structure, the national level contains two groups: bishops and deputies (composed of clergy and laity) who must work together to pass resolutions. But as the Bishop Righter case shows, even resolutions passed at General Convention may be interpreted differently and viewed with more or less importance by different groups. The bishop's power at the diocesan level is a significant feature of the organizational structure, as the diocese is in the middle of the hierarchical structure between parishes and the national church. The latitude that bishops are given has led to significant variation across dioceses, such that the Bishop of South Carolina is willing to transfer a priest to be under the Bishop of Rwanda while the Bishop of Arkansas will refuse to allow the same priest to serve in his diocese.

As churches and dioceses leave the ECUSA, the hierarchical form is transforming into a more networked approach. Dissenting parishes use international contacts that have resulted from international conferences to create more widespread networks. Dissenting congregations have chosen to network through a variety of organizations—AMiA, AAC, Ekklesia Society—and to draw on these contacts to leave the ECUSA and join with other structures.

7. Speculate about why homosexuality, as opposed to polygamy or women's ordination, has become a flashpoint for the unity of the Anglican Communion.

There are several reasons why homosexuality may attract greater attention than these other issues:

- Debates about homosexuality in the U.S. are lively and ongoing; there is less national consensus about gay rights than women's rights. Therefore, concerns over the ordination of gays in the U.S. are part of a larger national conversation about the possibility of gay marriage and other gay rights issues. The debate is a dividing point for political conservatives and liberals, and this division is carried over into religious organizations as well. Episcopal conservatives are therefore able to energize congregations around this point and develop resource pools to enable this topic to rise in importance.
- In other parts of the world, especially in Central and East Africa, Anglican churches are competing with the Muslim faith for followers and cultural control. Undoubtedly, there is more subtlety in the understanding of homosexual behavior in the Islamic world, but Anglicans in Africa cite a clear Muslim teaching calling for the death of homosexuals. African leaders argue that the behavior of the churches with which they affiliate (e.g., the liberal North American churches) affects their ability to proselytize and maintain spiritual authority.
- In the Anglican Communion and the ECUSA, there have been ways to dissent from the decision to ordain women that are honored within the existing structure. There are provinces in the communion and dioceses in the United States that don't ordain women. Decisions about who to ordain lie with the bishop. Bishops who oppose women's ordination simply don't ordain them, nor do churches in their dioceses call females priests. Dissent on the local level can be tolerated within the organizational structure. The liberals have made an attempt to argue that the same is true for ordaining homosexuals, but this argument fails to appeal to conservatives both because of the argument that scripture is more clear on this issue and because the consecration of Gene Robinson to the episcopate is not viewed by all as just a provincial matter. Some would argue that bishops are consecrated to serve the whole church, not just their province.