Whither the Episcopal and Anglican Churches?
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The Anglican Church, the world’s third largest church and the one to which the USA’s Episcopal Church belongs, ended its seventeen-day meeting of all bishops last weekend (August 3rd). The Lambeth Conference, as it is called, takes place in Canterbury England once every ten years, and it provides the bishops from the 38 Anglican countries and regions (= “provinces”) the opportunity to worship and pray together, as well as to discuss matters of pressing concern. Was it a success? It depends on what criteria you use.

In terms of demonstrating concern for key world issues, it was a success. The bishops highlighted eight problems they promised to influence their countries to address by 2015. These include the reduction of child mortality, the implementation of universal primary education, the combating of HIV/AIDS, the promotion of gender equality, the empowering of women, and the working towards environmental stability in reaction to ongoing climate change. They expressed concern about the situation in Sudan and Darfur. They even staged a protest march against world poverty which Gordon Brown, Britain’s Prime Minister, joined in.

In terms of the key issue that has brought the global Anglican communion to the point of splitting up, that of homosexuality, the conference’s outcome was less clear. On the one hand, Archbishop Rowan Williams, Anglicanism’s leader, summed up the conference participants’ attitude well when he said, “Person after person has said to me, ‘There is no desire to separate.’” This was echoed by many bishops who indicated they felt the Lambeth meeting was spirit-filled and that the participants were willing to be open and loving with each other, despite their differences.

By the end of the conference, the bishops set out several steps to prevent further splitting of the Church, with some being more concrete than others. First, they would create a “Covenant,” a “binding voluntary agreement” among the branches of Anglicanism about the core character of the Church. This would attempt to define Anglican beliefs and practices in Scriptural and historical terms, as well as addressing present concerns with a view of strengthening the Church for the future.

Second, while this covenant is being developed, there would be a moratorium on actions that further exacerbate the situation. On the liberal side, this would include no more consecration of gay bishops and no more blessings of same-sex unions. On the conservative side, this would include the cessation of “cross-border incursions,” i.e., the operating of a bishop outside of his diocese. This especially applies to African bishops ordaining priests and bishops in America.

Third, there will be a “Pastoral Forum.” This will be the enforcement body for the moratoria, although its emphasis will be pastoral rather than legal. The conference report emphasized that this body should be able to move speedily to bring groups committing infractions towards reconciliation.

Will these actions be sufficient to prevent a split in the Anglican Church? Perhaps not.

Of the 800 bishops invited, more than 200 of the most conservative did not attend. Most of these were from Africa and Asia.

Even before the Lambeth Conference, these conservative bishops held their own meeting in Jerusalem. The June convention was called the Global Anglican Future Conference (Gafcon) and established an international association that is rapidly becoming the basis of an association of dioceses that could form the nucleus of a new, split-off, Anglican church. Its delegates represented approximately 35 million of the 80 million Anglicans world-wide.

Even as Archbishop Williams delivered his upbeat, closing address to the Lambeth Conference, the English bishops of Exeter and Winchester, called for the Church to recognize the inevitability of the split and to take steps to ensure that the coming separation was done in a peaceful and equitable manner.

Can anything be done to prevent the African and other conservative dioceses from forming a new church? There are only two actions that could prevent the split. If the US and Canadian branches back down from their acceptance of the rights of gays within the church, or if these two branches themselves withdraw from the Anglican Communion.