

Challenge to Welby as traditionalist Anglicans stage 'fragmentation' summit

The Archbishop of Canterbury is facing what could be the biggest challenge to his leadership so far as a more than 1,000 traditionalist clerics stage a summit expected to formalise the “fragmentation” of the worldwide Anglican church.



More than 1,000 bishops, archbishops and senior clergy, claiming to represent around 40 million Anglicans, are due to gather in Kenya later this month to discuss what they see as a liberal drift within the Church of England and other western branches of the church.

It comes five years after more than 200 bishops boycotted the once-in-a-decade Lambeth Conference, openly defying the then Archbishop Dr Rowan Williams over what they saw as his liberal stance on homosexuality.

They staged a rival gathering in Jerusalem – the so-called Global Anglican Future Conference (Gafcon) – forming what has been widely characterised as a “church within a church”.

Now, the group is staging a second gathering, this time in Nairobi, where leaders from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Australasia hope to establish new, more permanent organisational structures,

rejecting the existing Anglican Communion arrangements as a “colonial” relic.

The event is timed to mark 10 years since the consecration of the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican Communion, the Rt Rev Gene Robinson of New Hampshire in the US – the catalyst for the crisis which has divided the 77 million-strong Anglican Communion ever since.

Items at the top of the agenda will be drawing up an “action plan” on marriage and sexuality, which will be an uncompromising reassertion of a traditionalist interpretation of the Bible.

That is likely to set them on a collision course with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, who has openly signalled that he is reassessing his own views on the subject.

Although Archbishop Welby comes from the born-again evangelical wing of the Church and voted against David Cameron’s Same-Sex Marriage Bill, he has recently spoken about wanting to get his “mind clear” on the issue.

He told a meeting in August that the Church needed to face up to the fact that most young people, including Christians, thought that its stance on gay marriage was “wicked”.

His remarks were watched closely traditionalists in the US and elsewhere.

It came just a few weeks after the leader of the Gafcon group, the Primate of Kenya, Archbishop Eliud Wabukala, issued a statement criticising the stance taken by Archbishop Welby and the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, over homosexuality.

Decrying the direction of the US Episcopal Church, he added: “The Church of England itself, the historic mother church of the Communion, seems to be advancing along the same path.”

He said that attempts to reunite the Anglican church would only achieve a vague unity “without repentance, sacrifice the transforming power of the gospel.

Although Archbishop Welby was invited, he has signalled that he will not be attending because of a prior commitment meeting European church leaders.

John Bingham - The Telegraph