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## FACT

### ANNALS OF RELIGION

#### A CHURCH ASUNDER

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For Episcopalians, faith in the power of compromise was almost doctrinal—until a diocese elected a gay bishop.

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In the late summer of 1965, a high-school valedictorian named Gene Robinson anxiously set off from Lexington, Kentucky, for college. He was the first in his family to come so far, and the school he'd chosen, the University of the South, in Sewanee, Tennessee, was not an obvious fit. Sewanee, as the school is known, was conceived, by an Episcopal bishop turned Confederate general, as an élite institution of learning for the sons of the landed class. A century later, when Gene Robinson arrived on campus, Sewanee remained an insular place, a mountaintop sanctuary known for its academic rigor, its cultivated airs, and a full measure of that particular Southern regard for tradition. A Sewanee man, dressed always in jacket and tie, was a gentleman of breeding, who had likely attended a preparatory school. Gene Robinson had grown up on a dirt farm, the son of tobacco sharecroppers, and had gone to Sewanee on a scholarship after graduating from public school.

Sewanee was owned and operated by the Southern dioceses of the Episcopal Church, and the school, which included a seminary, had a distinctly Anglican character. Every student was required to attend services at the university's All Saints' Chapel, as well as morning worship on most Sundays. Robinson, who had grown up in a conservative congregation of the Disciples of Christ, found himself immersed in the Episcopal practice of faith. It was a form of worship that, to an outsider, could seem so wholly foreign as to be impenetrable, with its candles and censers, the processions of robed priests and acolytes, and the recitations of ancient rites that the initiated followed in a Book of Common Prayer. The country church where Robinson's family had worshipped for generations didn't believe in credal formulas of faith; the Holy Scriptures alone were enough. But Episcopalians ritually enunciated their beliefs at every service, through the utterance of one creed or another.

For Robinson, this saying of creeds intensified a spiritual crisis that had been gathering since high school. He had accepted Jesus Christ in his early teens, submitting, as was the custom in his church, to a full submerging in the baptismal pool following a public profession of faith. By high school, though, he had begun to harbor doubts about some of the particulars of the Christian faith—doubts, he felt, that would not be a welcome subject of inquiry either in his church or in his deeply religious home. At Sewanee, he found himself regularly obliged to proclaim some of the very assertions he questioned. The Nicene Creed, that fourth-century statement of Christian

orthodoxy, particularly vexed him:

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible: And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God; Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God; Begotten, not made; Being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man: And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried: And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures: And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father: And he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; Who spake by the Prophets: And I believe in one Catholic and Apostolic Church: I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins: And I look for the Resurrection of the dead: And the Life of the world to come. Amen.

To be expected to repeat these sentiments, Robinson decided, was an offense against conscience. He took his protest to one of the school's chaplains, who listened to him and told him that he saw no problem at all. If joining in the Creed distressed him, why not just speak only those portions of it that didn't offend? The chaplain's counsel disarmed Robinson, but it also revealed to him that although the Anglican faith had cherished creeds, it had no absolute doctrine, a paradox rooted in its beginnings as the Church of England.

Anglicanism's founding event was a sixteenth-century political fix, engineered by Elizabeth I as a means of avoiding the Reformation-era wars tearing at Europe. Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, for reasons of dynastic and connubial ambition, had broken with the Medici Pope Clement VII and declared himself the "Supreme Head in Earth of the Church of England." Elizabeth's half sister and predecessor, Bloody Mary, imposed a Roman Catholic restoration upon the kingdom, in the process dispatching some three hundred Protestants to the stake. When Elizabeth ascended to the throne as a Protestant, the realm faced a third religious about-face in a dozen years, and the prospect of civil war was real. Elizabeth's elegant solution allowed her subjects to believe whatever they wished but insisted upon a uniform worship service.

The vehicle for this "middle way," as Anglicanism came to be known, was the Book of Common Prayer, which gracefully blended Roman Catholic liturgy with Protestant principles. The prayer book allowed for the coexistence within one institution of distinctly different interpretations of Christianity, with the unofficial designations of High Church (those parishes inclined toward a more Roman Catholic orientation), Low Church (evangelicals), and Broad Church (those Anglicans tolerant of wide doctrinal interpretations). The Anglican way proved remarkably resilient, absorbing the shocks of the English civil war and the Enlightenment, and ultimately planting itself worldwide in the footsteps of the British Empire. In the United States, the Church of England became the Episcopal Church.

The big-tent tradition of Anglicanism—what its churchmen call "comprehensiveness"—made the faith especially hospitable to the theological innovations that moved through the Western Christian churches with particular force in the last half of the twentieth century. This new thinking tended to deemphasize sin and salvation, favoring a progressive theology of social justice and the affirmation of the individual self. That an Episcopal university chaplain in the mid-nineteen-sixties would advise a conflicted student to disregard those parts of the liturgy that

made him uncomfortable reflected not only the times but, in a way, the very nature of the Church.

For Robinson, as the weeks and months passed and the Anglican tradition washed over him, it all began to seem less alien, and even strangely captivating. The lyrical Tudor cadences of the liturgy, the majestic old Anglican hymns, sung by the school's prized choir, filling the high spaces of the splendid chapel, all began to find a purchase, and Robinson came to see Episcopal worship as an irresistibly attractive presentation of the Christian faith.

By his senior year he had decided that he would make his life within the Episcopal Church as a priest. On Easter Sunday of that year, 1969, he was confirmed as an Episcopalian. It was a momentous day for Robinson, and for the Episcopal Church. Thirty-four years after leaving Sewanee, Gene Robinson assumed his duties as the Church's first openly gay bishop. His elevation, cast alternately in terms of apostasy and divine revelation, posed the biggest crisis for Anglicanism since the Reformation, and brought the worldwide church to the edge of schism.

The General Convention of the Episcopal Church affirmed Robinson's election as the Bishop of New Hampshire on the evening of August 5, 2003. Earlier, Robinson had addressed a church committee, offering a theological context for his sixteen-year relationship with his gay partner. Sexuality is a gift from God, he said, a means of experiencing, in physical, human terms, God's own love. "What I can tell you is that in my relationship with my partner I am able to express the deep love that's in my heart, and in his unfailing and unquestioning love of me I experience just a little bit of the kind of never-ending, never-failing love that God has for me. So it's sacramental for me."

To several of the bishops at the gathering, the Church's endorsement of this logic, through Robinson's elevation to the episcopacy, pushed the Anglican notion of comprehensiveness beyond its historically implied limits. What the Church had affirmed, in the view of these traditionalists, was not just a different expression of Christianity but a different religion altogether.

When Robinson's affirmation was announced, twenty bishops, led by Robert Duncan, of Pittsburgh, rose in protest. "I will stand against the actions of this Convention with everything I have and everything I am," Duncan said. "I have not left, and will not leave, the Episcopal Church or my apostolic role as Episcopal Bishop of Pittsburgh. It is this Seventy-fourth General Convention that has left us, betrayed us, undone us. May our merciful Lord Jesus have pity on us, His broken bride." With that, Duncan and the others walked out.

They were incendiary words, and it was an insurrectionary gesture for a group of Episcopalians—not a denomination known for high-blooded passion (Bill Clinton recently kidded his Episcopal predecessor George H. W. Bush for being one of the "frozen chosen"). When the American Colonies became the United States, the Church of England in the new country became the Episcopal Church, and although it was no longer the established faith, it was, from the start, the church of the established order. Eight of the first fourteen Presidents were Episcopalians, as

have been half of the Chief Justices. The Church was termed “the Republican Party at prayer,” meaning that in style and in fact it was the denomination of the moneyed class. Episcopalians, heirs to a historic church that was born in compromise, typically form a committee when conflict arises, and the issue vanishes into the fogs of “further study.” There have been schisms, but none amounting to much, with the splinter groups invariably fading to the margins of Anglicanism.

The traditionalist Episcopal rebellion over the elevation of Gene Robinson would not on its face seem likely to have much effect on the national church; Duncan and the bishops who joined him in protest represent only a small percentage of the episcopacy. Their purpose, however, is not to persuade the Episcopal Church but to replace it.

The conservative strategy turns on an audacious twist on the old concept of religious schism: forcing a divide within the Episcopal Church that would render the main church, rather than the dissidents, the schismatic party. This depends on convincing the worldwide Anglican Communion that the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America, or ECUSA, as the national body of the church is called, has already departed from the faith, and that an alternative body of orthodox Episcopalians should be recognized as the true church in America. The old Episcopal Church, it is envisioned, would drift away into irrelevance, a shrinking sect of aging white liberals.

The issue may be decided by global demographics. As Professor Philip Jenkins, of Penn State, noted, in “The Next Christendom,” even as Christianity is diminishing in the developed West the faith is experiencing an explosive growth worldwide. The center of gravity of the faith is now squarely in the Global South. If the new Christendom had a world capital based on the location of its believers, it would be somewhere south of the Sahara.

This trend is acutely felt in Anglicanism, one of the world’s largest Christian denominations, with seventy-three million members. More than half of all Anglicans live in Africa, South America, and Asia, where the faith continues to grow even as it recedes in Britain and the United States. There are more Anglicans in Kenya (roughly three million) than there are Episcopalians in the U.S. (2.2 million), and Kenya isn’t the largest Anglican church in Africa. Church membership in Uganda is nine million, and in Nigeria is nearing twenty million worshippers. While the Church of England remains the mother church, and the Archbishop of Canterbury is the spiritual leader of the world’s Anglicans, the balance of power in church politics has shifted dramatically.

That is why the future of the four-hundred-and-fifty-year-old Anglican project may turn upon the reaction of a few key Global South churchmen to the ordination of a gay bishop in the distant Diocese of New Hampshire. The theology of these men is a direct legacy of the Church Mission Society, a nineteenth-century undertaking by the evangelical wing of the Church of England to “promote the knowledge of the Gospel among the heathen.” The fervent men who carried the faith to the far corners of the empire left a lasting imprint on their mission territories, and the churches in those countries are today led mostly by men who are themselves assertively evangelical and orthodox. They regard with dismay the progressive turn of the Western church,

its willingness to rethink the fundamentals of the faith, and its apparent doubt about the plain meaning of Scripture. “The Bible doesn’t make as much sense to them as it used to, to their ancestors,” Henry Luke Orombi, the Archbishop of Uganda, says. “The interpretation of the Bible is no longer what it was before. And that’s why the church life in America is so anemic and feeble.”

Orombi and other leaders of the church in the Global South believe that the current controversy over homosexuality directly reflects the divergence within the church over scriptural authority. The Bible, Old Testament and New, is unambiguous regarding homosexuality—it is a sin to be repented of, and to be condemned by the righteous. In the view of the orthodox, the acceptance of homosexuality in the American and English churches requires a reading of Scripture so innovative as to render its plain language meaningless. Peter Akinola, the Archbishop of Nigeria, has been outspoken on the issue, declaring that the Western church has so assiduously accommodated trends in the secular culture that it has betrayed the faith. “What is written of God is for all time, for all people,” he told me this winter. “But when you take what is convenient for you, and you hold on to that, and that which is not convenient for you, you throw it away—then there is a problem.”

Akinola is the acknowledged leader of the church in the Global South, and as such he is possibly the most powerful figure in Anglicanism. He is, of course, subject to the prejudices of his own culture, in which homosexuality is taboo. Akinola has been quoted as saying that he cannot fathom the sexual union of two men, and that “even in the world of animals, dogs, cows, lions, we don’t hear of such things.” There is also a practical aspect informing the views of churchmen like Orombi and Akinola, whose churches are in competition with Islam. In the Islamic areas of Nigeria, for example, homosexuality is punishable by death, and Anglicanism’s countenancing of gays complicates their evangelical mission. “Instead of proclaiming the grace of God, you have to justify that which God says should not be done,” Akinola says. “Instead of putting your energy into the work of mission, you’re spending your time defending the indefensible. It makes things much more difficult.”

To the Global South primates, such acts as the consecration of Gene Robinson without the broad assent of the whole church reflect an arrogant indifference to the consequences. “If you want to be very blunt about it,” Orombi says, “it’s a form of neocolonialism.” Bishops from the former British territories were routinely frustrated when they tried to be heard at the church’s once-a-decade Lambeth Conference. In 1978, Akinola’s predecessor Joseph Adetiloye stood at the microphone for twenty minutes, refusing to be seated until he was recognized by the chair. “In ten years, when African bishops come to the microphone at this conference, we will be so numerous and influential that you will have to recognize us,” he said. “In 1998, we will have grown so much that our voice will determine the outcome of the Lambeth Conference.” And, indeed, at the 1998 Conference conservatives, with the support of the Africans, pushed through a resolution declaring that homosexual practice is “incompatible with Scripture” and church teaching. The liberal American bishop John Shelby Spong, of Newark, disparaged the Africans’ form of Christianity—“They’ve yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we’ve had to face in the developing world”—and the American church continued along the

course that led to the consecration of Gene Robinson. But the Africans had laid their marker.

The traditionalist Americans see men like Akinola and Orombi as their natural allies, and, of course, as invaluable leverage. Global South church leaders have been inclined to help the efforts to supplant the Episcopal Church as the official Anglican body in the U.S. They have opened mission churches in the United States, and have offered episcopal oversight to those dissident orthodox churches wishing to leave ECUSA while remaining within the Anglican Communion. They are, for the Americans, the key factor in the effort to pressure the world church into recognizing an alternative American church body or persuading ECUSA to repent.

It is one way, Henry Orombi says, of keeping faith with those long-ago Englishmen in muttonchop whiskers who brought the church to Africa. “A hundred or so years ago, the fire was in the Western world,” Orombi says. “And many of their great people went over to the countries in the Southern Hemisphere, and reached out there, and planted seeds there. And then things changed in the Northern Hemisphere. . . . It now looks like the Western world is tired and old. But, praise God, the Southern Hemisphere, which is a product of the missionary outreach, is young and vital and exuberant. So, in a way, I think that what God has done is he took seeds and he planted them in the Southern Hemisphere, and now they’re going to come back, right to the Northern Hemisphere. It is happening. It is happening.”

Gene Robinson watches these developments with a mixture of sadness and alarm. “The reason that I have trouble with Bob Duncan and that bunch is that they are seeking to align our church with Peter Akinola, who says that homosexuals are lower than the dogs,” he recently told me. “That is very close to saying ‘inhuman,’ which is very reminiscent of what Germans said about Jews and so allowed them to devalue Jews, that it was O.K. to exterminate them. Bob Duncan wants to ally our church with the church of Kenya, where the primate there said that, when I was consecrated, Satan entered the church. What most people don’t realize is that homosexuality is something that I am, it’s not something that I do. It’s at the very core of who I am. We’re not talking about taking a liberal or conservative stance on a particular issue; we’re talking about who I am.”

One winter when Robinson was in high school, he developed a fever and a sore throat so severe that it required several visits to the family doctor. On one of the visits, the teen-ager complained that he’d never felt so poorly in his life. The doctor looked at him and said, “Oh yes you have, and a lot worse than this. Sit down.”

In the spring of 1947, the doctor said, he was called in to consult on the case of a severely damaged newborn at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Lexington. There had been serious complications in the delivery. The child’s young mother was a small woman with an extremely narrow birth canal. After an agonizing night, with the baby in severe distress, the delivery team resorted to forceps. The child, a boy, was at last forcibly extracted—alive, but very badly mangled.

The baby’s parents, who were poor farmers, had little notion of what was happening, and they

weren't the sort to ask many questions. The baby had been placed in an incubator in an intensive-care unit, and for hours that was the only information they had. A nurse suggested the name of a pediatric specialist, who was called in for consultation. He examined the child and then told the young parents that the baby might not live, and if he did he might be severely handicapped. He was partially paralyzed, and there was no way yet of knowing whether he had suffered lasting brain damage or how severe it might be. The doctor did not mention that he had taken the child's misshapen head in his hands, trying to massage it into something like a normal shape before the mother saw him.

Meanwhile, hospital officials said that a birth certificate must be filed: had a name been chosen for the baby? The young parents—his name was Charles Victor, and hers was Imogene—settled on the name Vicky Gene, suited for a girl. Under the circumstances—the child wasn't expected to live—they decided that the name didn't matter. So their boy grew up not knowing how or why he'd been given such a name until, in high school, a bad case of strep throat led him to the answer. It came just as the larger mystery of Vicky Gene's life was presenting itself.

Imogene Robinson always regarded Vicky Gene as her miracle, and she came to believe that God had saved her boy for everything that was to come. For all the grim warnings she'd been given at the hospital, her baby's paralysis soon resolved itself, and as time passed the child seemed in every discernible way to be quite normal.

Victor and Imogene had been high-school sweethearts in wartime Nicholasville, Kentucky, south of Lexington, and Victor had enlisted right after his eighteenth birthday. They were married soon after Victor's return, and they did what his people had always done, trying to coax a living from the soil of Jessamine County. Victor sharecropped tobacco, a reliable cash crop, and in that first harvest season after Vicky Gene was born Imogene set the baby on the floor of the stripping room and helped pull the tobacco leaves from the stalks. They lived in a house without running water until 1955, after Victor took a second job as a fireman, and they moved up the road into the outskirts of Lexington. Even then, they made the short trip home to Nicholasville a couple of times a week to attend services at the Disciples of Christ Church, which Victor's ancestors had helped to found.

It was not a home overly given to the airing of introspections, and certainly not those of the sort with which Gene struggled. "From the seventh grade on," Robinson recalls now, "I was horrified at the possibility that I was attracted to men and not women. Some of my friends got ahold of a *Playboy* magazine and were showing it to a group of us, and I could tell that these pictures did something different for them than they did for me." He desperately tried to banish his feelings. "When I was growing up in Kentucky, we didn't have the word 'gay,' " he says. "When we imagined what homosexual people were like, you know, the good ones were dead, because they had committed suicide. They'd realized how despicable they were, and did something about it. And the ones that weren't courageous enough to do that, we figured they wound up as dope addicts and alcoholics. So, before I could ever talk to anyone else about what I feared might be true, I had to come to grips with that myself."

Through his teen years, he had some same-sex experiences, but he told himself that it was just

adolescent experimentation. At Lafayette High School, he played first clarinet in the band, and acted in some plays. He was the top graduate of all of Lexington's high schools in the class of 1965. His academic prowess got him to Sewanee, but he wasn't there long before he realized that being in an all-male college only heightened his conflict. "In order to deal with my feelings, I so totally shut down that—it's sad to me now—I can hardly remember college," he says. "It was like a lost four years, because you can't just sort of selectively repress, you know? I just virtually shut down."

When he was away at college, a letter addressed to Vicky Gene arrived at his parents' home. They opened it, and discovered that their son had applied for conscientious-objector status. Victor Robinson travelled the three hundred miles to Sewanee, the only time he made that trip alone, and pleaded with his son to change his mind, to no avail. "It kind of hurt, because my husband had been in the service," Imogene recalls today. "But, you know, he's still our son, so we didn't let that bother us too awfully much." There was a gathering antiwar movement at Sewanee—the school's R.O.T.C. building was burned during Robinson's senior year—and the seminary offered the ancillary benefit of draft exemption. Robinson was accepted at the General Theological Seminary, in New York City.

He entered the seminary in the fall of 1969. The school is on Ninth Avenue in Chelsea, just a mile from the Stonewall Inn, in Sheridan Square, where earlier that summer the gay-rights movement came to life following days of confrontation with police. It was while Robinson was at the seminary in New York that he acknowledged that he was a homosexual. And it was there, too, that he met Bob Duncan.

"We were taught by the same people—isn't that astounding?" Robinson says now. "It's either bad scholarship on our part or bad teaching, I don't know which."

Like Gene Robinson's, Robert Duncan's bond with the church was made in crisis, but his was never a crisis of faith. He was a cradle Episcopalian, and grew up in Bordentown, New Jersey, in a household that was subject to the random terrors of an emotionally unbalanced mother. She sometimes beat her son, and he regarded his local church as a refuge. Christ Episcopal was in the High Church tradition, a full-bore "bells and smells" Anglo-Catholic experience, with Sanctus bells and incense, and the unchanging comfort of ritual solemnity. "It was wonderful," Duncan recalls now. "I came from a really troubled family, and it was a place of security and predictability. You came into this place, and these people obviously believed in something; there was something a lot bigger here. And you sort of saw into Heaven on Sunday, and it was pretty wild—I mean, this was not like home."

Duncan, too, was his high school's valedictorian, but his spiritual rebellion, while he was at Trinity College, in Connecticut, was against the unorthodoxy that he encountered there. He recalls a discussion in his freshman religion class about the miracles reported in the New Testament, focussing on those accounts in Mark about Jesus' casting out of demons. "Of course," the professor said, "a lot of people just can't take these stories at their face value." Duncan later counted that moment as his evangelical awakening, when he decided that the

claims of Christianity, as expressed in the Scriptures and in church teaching, are either absolutely true or the whole enterprise of the church is meaningless. “I remember sitting there in that class and saying, ‘Well, you know what? Jesus is the best friend I ever met. He was with me through all these teen-age years, and all this trouble at home, and I’ve come to rely on him. And the fact for me is, I’m actually going to believe his word until it’s proved false.’ ”

The consecration of Gene Robinson pains Duncan because of its implicit denial of the core elements of the Christian faith: sin and redemption. “If sin isn’t sin, you don’t need a Saviour,” he says. Like many conservative Episcopalians, Duncan says that his battle is not with Gene Robinson, or even over the issue of homosexuality, but with what he considers a radical reinterpretation of the faith by the liberal church. “I’m not in a fight over sexuality, gracious sakes,” he says. In his earlier career in campus ministries, he often ministered to young gay and lesbian people. “I loved them and cared for them,” he says. “We brought them in and helped them understand that God loved them. And actually not all of them came out of their same-sex affection, but they grew a lot toward God. We just made it clear we can’t bless the relationships. Everybody’s a sinner; you’ve got to break yourself.”

As it happened, Gene Robinson tried mightily to do just that. Robinson once believed as firmly as anyone that homosexuality was both a psychological disorder and a sin. “I think one of the things that people who are not gay sometimes fail to remember is that we learned all the same things that they did,” he says. “The hardest coming out is to oneself.” While in the seminary, he entered psychotherapy. “I got into therapy, to change this awful thing about myself,” he says. “It’s admitting to having this terrible sickness, and you want to get over it.”

A year later, Robinson was convinced that he was ready to undertake a heterosexual relationship. While interning as a chaplain at the University of Vermont, he met a young woman named Isabella Martin, whom everyone called Boo. Robinson warned her that he had been attracted to men, and that he’d undergone therapy to change that. “I thought I was capable of having a relationship with a woman,” he recalls. “We were totally open about that.”

They married in 1972, near Boo’s home in New Hampshire. After seminary, Gene got a job as parish curate in New Jersey, and Boo finished her undergraduate degree. Eventually, they moved to New Hampshire, acquired a piece of Boo’s family farm, and Gene ran various youth programs and spiritual retreats. They had two daughters, Jamee and Ella, but finally the fragile accord between them began to come apart. “Being in that relationship came at extraordinary personal cost, to me and to her,” he says. “In the last three or four years of our marriage, we together dealt with the fact that the price was too great for both of us.” In 1986, Robinson and Boo agreed to divorce.

It was an amicable parting. After the divorce was finalized, the couple went to a church and underwent a sort of reverse marriage ceremony—returning their wedding rings, vowing mutual support for each other and their children, and celebrating the Eucharist. It was more difficult to break the news to Robinson’s parents. “Let’s just say that, as a thirty-nine-year-old, to tell them that, A, I was getting divorced, and, B, it was because I was gay—that same father nearly didn’t let me stay in the house that night.”

“It hurt him pretty bad,” Imogene Robinson now says of her husband’s reaction to the news. “We were just so stunned, actually. We had never heard anything whatsoever toward that. It was a real shock to us. I think that was the worst part, the shock. And, of course, where we were from, that was just a bad word to say, about anybody.”

Robinson believed that his coming out was at God’s direction. “I have to tell you—I felt called by God to come out. It seems to me that if God stands for anything, God stands for integrity. And to be a priest, calling other people to integrity, when you’re not exercising it yourself—it’ll kill you.”

Boo soon began seeing another man, and in September, 1987, she remarried. Two months later, Gene was vacationing in St. Croix when he met a Peace Corps worker from Washington, D.C., named Mark Andrew, who had been raised a Roman Catholic. Mark eventually moved to New Hampshire, and the couple bought a house in Weare—substituting the Celebration for a Home, from the Church’s Book of Occasional Services, for a marriage ceremony. Imogene and Victor came to visit, and eventually accepted Mark and Gene’s new life—and even grew comfortable with the reflected celebrity that attended Gene’s election as bishop. “They’re out to all their friends now,” Robinson says. “Their friends will call them up and say, ‘Oh, I saw Vicky Gene on the “Today” show, and he was wonderful.’ ”

Mark attends the spouses’ functions and accompanies Gene on his rounds in the diocese. “My partner has made not only as much of a sacrifice in order to support me in this ministry as any wife of any male bishop ever has but even more so,” Robinson says. “He’s an incredibly private person, and for him to not only be willing but enthusiastic in his support of my doing this is just an astounding gift to me and to the Church. He is just simply beloved in this diocese.”

When Robinson was elected bishop, his seminary classmate Bob Duncan offered his prayers but not his congratulations. To Duncan, it was an occasion for grieving; his church had just taken a turn to heresy. “I was a seminary classmate of Gene Robinson’s,” he says. “I knew Gene. I knew his wife, his children. But that’s what’s so terrible, you know? What kind of a church is this?”

If there is someone who embodies the conservatives’ idea of the wayward church, it is Frank T. Griswold, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, U.S.A. On a snowy morning last December, I visited Bishop Griswold at the church’s national headquarters, on Second Avenue in midtown. He is in the last months of a nine-year term as the head of the Episcopal Church, and it seems unlikely that the Church will easily find another leader who so wholly fits the Episcopal type. Lean and gray, conspicuously erudite, Griswold has an air that suggests good schooling (St. Paul’s, Harvard, Oxford) and old stock (while preaching at Canterbury Cathedral once, he mentioned that a direct ancestor had been one of Thomas à Becket’s assassins in that cathedral more than eight centuries before). On this particular morning, Griswold seemed a bit on edge, perhaps because of our subject—the discord his church has caused in the Anglican Communion. It will be, to Griswold’s obvious regret, the signature of his tenure as Presiding Bishop.

I'd been thinking that morning of something that Bishop Duncan had said: that the theology of the liberal church—Frank Griswold's theology—was so distinct from classical Christianity that it amounted to a different religion. Duncan and his fellow-evangelicals see their Christianity as a religion of transformation, and liberal Christianity as a faith of affirmation. "One has sin and needs a Saviour, the other one simply tells you that you're O.K. as you are," Duncan said. The case of Gene Robinson brings that divergence into relief: is the gay bishop from New Hampshire in need of Christ's redeeming grace or is he a living expression of it?

Griswold answered the question with a question. "Now, of course, what does transformation mean?" he asked. "If you're talking about human sexuality—and all manifestations of sexuality have to be seen under the aegis of the Gospel—there's no question of setting aside Gospel values." By "Gospel values," Griswold does not mean what Bishop Duncan might mean—that is, a plain understanding of Paul's assertion to the Corinthians, for one example, that "neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites . . . will inherit the kingdom of God." The values to which Griswold refers are those which order believers' lives in a manner pleasing to God, and those apply as much to gays as to anyone.

"Having been a parish priest before I was a bishop, into the congregations I served came men and women whose affections were ordered to members of the same sex," he says. "They shared some of their struggles with me, and, I must say, I came to respect, deeply, the integrity of their own faithfulness to a particular partner. And I think of one case in which one member of the relationship had multiple sclerosis, and his partner would bring him to church in a wheelchair, and the care, and the selflessness, was palpable. And members of the congregation, along with me, found ourselves saying, 'So what's wrong with this picture? Where is this in some way dishonoring of the Gospel?' Don't we see the fruit of the Spirit in patience and love and selfforgetfulness?"

It is true, Griswold says, that from "the classical point of view" sexuality "is to be exercised only within heterosexual, monogamous marriages." But he notes that the church has, through time, come to an understanding of marriage and sexuality that is less rigid than that prescribed by the Bible and church tradition. "The Episcopal Church over the years has come to, let us say, an understanding of the human person that is more sophisticated, possibly, than the understanding on the part of the Biblical authors."

Griswold suggests that it is problematic to try to understand the meaning of the Bible plainly, because the authors of Scripture were, as we are, captives of their time and place. "St. Paul very clearly assumed that everyone was, by nature, heterosexual," he says. Therefore, in Paul's time, homosexuality was a willing choice made by the wicked against God's natural order. Our current understanding, he says, has been altered by God's unfolding revelation of truth.

"Let's talk about truth," he says. "I'm struck by the fact that in the Gospel, in John, Jesus says, 'I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when the Spirit of truth comes, the Spirit will draw from what is mine, and reveal it to you.' Now, when we look at how we have come to understand the cosmos over the centuries, how we've come to understand the complexities of our physicality, and have seen advances in surgery and medicine

and all the rest of it, we can say to ourselves, ‘Why didn’t God simply plant the fullness of this knowledge in us at the beginning? Why has it taken us centuries to be able to cure fatal diseases that existed in the Middle Ages? How unkind and thoughtless of God not to give us all the information at the outset.’ And yet, we’ve been structured in a universe in such a way that truth is progressive.”

By this understanding, Gene Robinson presents to the church much the same question that the issue of gay marriage poses to the secular culture: is homosexuality what he chooses or what he is?

“I think, looking at what constitutes sin, in a relationship between two people,” Griswold says, “I think you have to ask, Is the relationship in some way abusive? Is it predatory? Is it non-mutual? Is someone being constricted or demeaned by virtue of this relationship? Are they being increased in some way? Are they undergoing a transformation? I mean, I’ve certainly had people in same-sex relationships say to me, ‘I know now what it means to love selflessly, in a way I didn’t before.’ So, clearly, grace can work in what many people perceive to be an anomalous or, even in some formal dogmatic sense, problematic relationship.”

In the current Anglican conflict, echoes can be heard of a larger struggle within Christianity that has been happening for more than a century. With the advance of science and the growing acceptance of Darwin’s theory of evolution, key theologians and churchmen concluded by the early twentieth century that the old faith had been essentially disproved. They began to imagine a more reasonable Christianity—one less insistent on miracles, resurrections, and a transcendent God who directed human history from a heavenly remove. Higher Criticism informed a new understanding of the historical Jesus; the Hegelian dialectic shaped a new image of an immanent and impersonal God, an unknowable force whose will was worked through human progress.

The new theology met stout resistance within the churches. The “modernist-fundamentalist controversy” of the nineteen-twenties split some of the mainline Protestant denominations, and eventually gave rise to the modern evangelical movement. The Episcopal Church, because of its liturgical unity and comprehensiveness—Elizabeth’s notion: Believe what you want, just use this book—was better able to absorb the new thinking, or, at least, to mask it. “Under the guise of Anglican comprehensiveness, and under the cover of Anglo-Catholic worship and liturgy, this alien religion took root in the Western Anglican world,” says Leslie Fairfield, a professor of church history at Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, a Pennsylvania seminary with an evangelical orientation. “The idea was ‘Keep all the same words, change all the meanings, but don’t tell the laypeople.’ ”

It was an Anglican scholar and bishop, John A. T. Robinson, who inspired the “God Is Dead” vogue of the nineteen-sixties, with the publication of his best-selling “Honest to God,” which posed the question: “Now that we have rejected the ancients’ view of God living in a material heaven above the actual sky, what does God’s existence mean?” His theological heir, Bishop Spong, of Newark, published a provocation that he called his “Twelve Theses”—a call to a new Christianity that rejected the divinity of Christ, the virgin birth and bodily resurrection, and most of the rest of traditional Christian doctrine. The central belief of Christian orthodoxy—the

substitutionary atonement of Christ on the Cross—Spong, now retired, pronounced “a barbarian idea based on primitive concepts of God.”

Within the Episcopal Church, the innate tensions long cherished by Anglicans eventually sharpened into theological conflict, with human sexuality the battleground. After the Church’s General Convention resolved in 1979 that ordination of gays was “not appropriate,” Spong’s assistant bishop ordained an openly gay man into the diaconate. The assistant bishop, Walter Righter, was subsequently brought to church trial on heresy charges, accused of violating the Church’s core doctrine; the charges were dismissed on the ground that the Church had no core doctrine that applied. (“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.”) Then the 1998 Lambeth Conference, the once-a-decade gathering of worldwide Anglicans, passed the resolution declaring homosexuality “incompatible with Scripture”; within five years, the American church had consecrated a gay bishop. Liberals claimed a prophetic witness to the world, saying that “God is doing a new thing” in the church; conservatives saw rank heresy.

Church leaders, meanwhile, declared themselves helpless to force any resolution. Frank Griswold said the election of Gene Robinson was a local diocesan matter, and expressed surprise that it caused such a stir. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, reminded agitated traditionalists that he was no Pope; he couldn’t intervene in the affairs of the American church even if he wished to, which he plainly did not. This institutional incapacity left some conservatives pining for the authoritative teaching and discipline forsaken by their forebears nearly five centuries ago. When many of these issues surfaced in the Catholic Church during the long pontificate of Pope John Paul II, they aroused passionate dissent, and ringing defense, of Church teaching, but all sides were clear on what the Church teaching was. John Paul’s defender of the faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, made certain of that. “The problem is that in Anglicanism, as presently constituted, we have no means of officially disciplining people,” says Archbishop Drexel Gomez, the Primate of the West Indies. Some, such as Paul Zahl, Dean of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, began to despair that Anglicanism’s very DNA bore the seeds of its undoing. “This whole crisis has revealed a very serious deficiency in the character of Anglicanism,” Zahl told me. “It’s a severe deficiency in Anglicanism because there isn’t really a church teaching in the same way that there is in the Church of Rome. . . . I would say there is a constitutional weakness, which this crisis has revealed, which may in fact prove to be the death of the Anglican project—the death, at least in formal terms, of Anglican Christianity. We’ve always said that we’ve had this great insight, and I used to think that we did. But I’m not quite sure whether we’re not on very sandy ground. . . . It’s at the edge of the abyss. It’s about to be extinguished, and that’s not histrionic.”

It was in this light that some of the American conservatives began to look to the Global South. “It is simple,” Akinola told me. “We believe we know the mind of the Lord. We believe we know what he’s asking us to do in his holy word, and we simply respond to his command. . . . It

is the power of the word, and the Lord has blessed our efforts.” In the marketplace of faith, it is hard not to notice the contrasting results. When Gene Robinson arrived at Sewanee in 1965, the Episcopal Church claimed three million six hundred thousand baptized members; church membership has fallen by more than a third in the forty years since. There are more worshippers in Akinola’s church of Nigeria on any given Sunday than there are filling the pews of all the Anglican churches of the West combined. Even Frank Griswold admires such fervor. “I do think there is always a need for what I call an evangelical vitality,” he says. “In terms of passion for the Gospel and, indeed, love for the risen Christ, these are gifts that the weary West can well learn from.”

Griswold observes, by way of a small caveat, that the churches of Akinola and Orombi are still relatively young in the faith, just a century or so removed from the missionary stage, their zeal uncomplicated by nuance. But the classical-Christianity-in-amber quality of the Global South is precisely what appeals to many American conservatives. “Because the world didn’t really care what Africans thought until about 2004, they were sort of in a hermetically sealed Christian terrarium for a hundred years,” Paul Zahl says. “Their Christianity didn’t get torpedoed by a lot of Western nihilism.”

But it is much more than a brotherly regard for Christian piety that draws the Americans to the churchmen of the Global South. Before taking his leave of the 2003 General Convention that affirmed Gene Robinson, Bob Duncan told the gathering that he and allied bishops would call on the Archbishop of Canterbury and the primates of the world church “to intervene in the pastoral emergency that has overtaken us.” The conservative dissidents already had the beginnings of a plan for what they called “realignment.” By December, 2003, the initial outlines of the plan were revealed in a letter to potential supporters. “Our ultimate goal is a realignment of Anglicanism on North American soil committed to biblical faith and values, and driven by Gospel mission,” the letter said. The aim was to create a “replacement jurisdiction” in the United States, supplanting ECUSA. The next month, in January, 2004, the Anglican Communion Network came into being, and Robert Duncan was elected moderator. This effort was receiving financial support from foundations associated with the family of Richard Mellon Scaife and other conservative donors.

Essential to the network’s plan was the support of, and official recognition by, the worldwide church. Anglican provinces representing most of the world’s Anglicans soon declared themselves in a state of “broken” or “impaired” communion with the Episcopal Church. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, responded. He called for a church inquiry into the crisis, and the resultant commission findings, called the Windsor Report, urged ECUSA to express regret over its action and to refrain from further consecration of gay bishops. ECUSA apologized for any unintended pain it had caused the Church, but not for the consecration of Robinson, and it declared a moratorium on the consecration of all bishops, gay or straight.

A meeting of the world’s primates was convened in Northern Ireland in early 2005, and some of them refused to share communion with Frank Griswold. At that meeting, the primates asked the churches of the U.S. and Canada (which had endorsed the blessing of gay civil unions) to abstain from the Anglican Consultative Council—the church’s most important deliberative body—until

after the next Lambeth Conference, in 2008. Akinola and others called on Rowan Williams to withhold a Lambeth invitation from the American church “unless they truly repent.”

The Global South primates, in short, did all that the American conservatives could have asked, and more. When several of the primates appeared at a network convention in Pittsburgh last November, they were greeted like rock stars by the twenty-five hundred attendees. Akinola betrayed a hint of impatience with the American conservatives when he said, in his sharp, clipped tones, “Many of you have one leg in ECUSA and one leg in the network. With that, my friends, comes disaster. While that remains, you can’t have our support. Because, you see, as we speak here, we have all broken communion with ECUSA. If you want Global South to partner with you, you must let us know exactly where you stand. Are you ECUSA? Or are you network? Which one?”

Akinola later told me that he found it hypocritical for American dissidents to encourage action by the Global South so aggressively while remaining affiliated with the Episcopal Church. In defecting from the national church, however, a local parish risks losing its church building and property. In many places, the local Episcopal church resides in one of the oldest, finest buildings in a town’s best district. That first network letter outlining the plan for realignment plainly stated, “We seek to retain ownership of our property as we move into this realignment.”

Some churches, such as St. James in Newport Beach, California, took the risk in court when the Los Angeles Diocese filed suit to keep its church property. The lawsuit was dismissed, and the church declared victory. (The case is under appeal.) But laws in other states seem to favor the national church. In several instances, when a dissident parish has aligned itself with another province outside the U.S. and stopped sending annual contributions to the Episcopal Church, the church building has been seized by the local bishop bearing a court order. Akinola, whose own ministry started with the scarcest of resources, says the Americans have a clear choice. “I think it has to do with property, school buildings—those are very important things,” he says. “You have the right to decide what you want to do. You can keep on with your properties or say, ‘Well, it doesn’t matter—I can start all over again.’ So you have to interpret the faith in your own way. I can’t do that.”

The evangelical megachurch pastor Rick Warren also addressed the gathering in Pittsburgh, and put the property question to them bluntly. “What’s more important is your faith, not your facilities,” he said. “The church is people, not the steeple. They might get the building, but you get the blessing.” Bob Duncan says that the future looks like a series of unpleasant legal battles —“And the question that the state courts are going to have to figure out is, Who are the Episcopalians?”

That question must also be answered by the worldwide Anglican Communion. One possible outcome is that the Archbishop of Canterbury will effectively cast the Episcopal Church loose by withholding an invitation to the Lambeth Conference. That seems highly unlikely, but Canterbury also risks losing the Global South bloc in a massive realignment, which would effectively isolate a diminishing Western church.

All sides agree that much depends upon the coming General Convention of the Episcopal Church this June, the first national convention since Robinson's affirmation. Anglicans instinctively seek the middle ground, and there are signs that compromise may yet be possible. About a dozen key bishops (at one time including both Bob Duncan and Gene Robinson) have conferred privately over the past year, partly in an effort to devise an alternative system of episcopal oversight for parishes that are irreconcilably at odds with their local bishop. This is a fundamental issue to both the dissident parishes and the national church, because property and money are at stake. When St. James Church, in California, withdrew from ECUSA, taking its property with it into a new alliance with the church of Uganda, the Diocese of Los Angeles lost not only the church and its buildings but also an annual contribution that amounted to millions of dollars over the years.

Potentially more significant, perhaps, is the work of a special commission established by the Episcopal Church to directly address the crisis posed by the affirmation of Gene Robinson at the last General Convention, in 2003. In a report scheduled for release this week, the Special Commission on the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion was expected to recommend a course of action that amounts to a step-down on several contentious points. The report was expected to urge the national church to ask "repentance" for its actions in 2003, where hitherto ECUSA has expressed only "regret" for any pain it may have caused within the worldwide communion. Further, the report was expected to recommend a General Convention resolution mandating retreat on the question of same-sex blessings. In this compromise, the Church would not allow the performance of public rites joining homosexual couples, as in the blessing of a union; local priests would, however, be allowed to offer blessings to gay couples not based on the official church rites.

On the central point of contention, the consecration of gay bishops, the commission is expected to urge the Church to proceed down the path taken by Gene Robinson only with "extreme caution." That is the sort of phrasing that might placate conservatives, and could provide convention delegates with the typically Episcopal opportunity to kick the problem down the road, getting them safely past the Lambeth Conference in 2008. In this case, however, evasion may not be possible. The Diocese of California is scheduled to elect a new bishop next month, and three of its seven candidates are openly gay. If California elects a gay bishop, and the General Convention withholds its consent, the Episcopal Church will face a new revolt, this time from the left. At least one church official has already begun to ask whether the Episcopal Church's most prudent course might not be voluntary withdrawal from the worldwide Anglican Communion, thus taking a stand as a church pledged to human justice.

No one views such a possibility lightly, and for Gene Robinson the struggle has not been without personal cost. "Brothers and Sisters in Christ, I am writing to you from an alcohol-treatment center," he e-mailed his New Hampshire colleagues in February. But he was not abandoning the struggle. "I eagerly look forward to continuing my recovery in your midst." He returned home from rehab and resumed his ministry last month.

For Jim Naughton, the communications director for the liberal Diocese of Washington, D.C., any compromise with principle would have dire consequences for public relations. “What is the message we push to explain our desire to stay in the Anglican Communion?” he asks. “What is the slogan we put on our literature? Here is what I have come up with: ‘Join us in a diplomatically intricate, ethically ambiguous, and sometimes publicly humiliating tightrope walk toward Jesus.’ ”

Naughton said, “I think it needs work.” †