

Archbishop of Canterbury hears from cross section of Episcopalians

By Mary Frances Schjonberg

(*Episcopal News Service*) Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams spent the afternoon of July 8 hearing the stories of a cross section of participants in the 76th General Convention.

In addition to observing the work of the House of Bishops, Williams met with members of the convention's official youth presence, the House of Deputies president's council of advice and a small group of lesbian and gay deputies. He also met with provisional and assisting bishops in the four dioceses that are reorganizing after the majority of their members and leadership left the church.

Members of the first three groups said in interviews that they were pleased with the chance to be able to tell the archbishop something about their mission and ministry.

Diocese of Fort Worth provisional bishop Ted Gulick told ENS that he and his colleagues Jerry Lamb of San Joaquin, Robert Johnson of Pittsburgh and John Buchanan of Quincy had decided not to talk to the media about their lunchtime meeting with Williams.

The Rev. Canon Lisa Gray (Michigan) said of the time that eight lesbian and gay deputies spent with Williams, "in 16 minutes, we were able to create a tapestry of eight different lives, each spending a little over a minute and a half sharing our stories."

During their meeting the archbishop reflected with the deputies about what he had heard in their stories and shared his perspective, Gray said.

"I came away feeling heard, but more importantly I came away with a strong sense of compassion for the difficult position that the archbishop is in trying to lead at a time where a clear path forward is not self-evident," she said.

Deputy Mike Spencer (Eastern Michigan), who was what he called "the lead-off storyteller" during the meeting, said that the group's closing message to Williams was "that we're willing to help him, support him."

"We wanted him to understand that while we certainly have some expectations, we willing to work if he's ready to call on us, we're ready to go wherever he needs to send us," he said. "It's easy to want to vilify him -- to wring your hands and say 'why aren't you standing up for me?' I think that in the best way he can, for Rowan Williams, he probably is. Time will tell. History will be the final judge."

In his story, Spencer tried to convey the cost of the "current challenges" around the issue of full inclusion and he said Williams recalled his words during his conversation.

"I was just really glad to know that he recognizes that there are actually costs involved while we wait," he said.

The Rev. Altigracia Perez (Los Angeles) said that she felt "the burden" of all of the stories she had heard since the plan for the meeting became known. Perez added that she told Williams about "my love for the church, my concern about unity, but also my sense that I want to do ministry with integrity and that this church has given me the space to do that."

The meeting was important, Perez said, because the voices of lay people and clergy have not been heard in the conversations about tensions in the Anglican Communion over issues of human sexuality "that they've been having at certain levels."

Stressing the equal roles of laity, clergy and bishops was part of the goal when House of Deputies President Bonnie Anderson and her council of advice met with Williams.

Anderson said that the group told the archbishop that, while most of the requests from the wider Anglican Communion for the Episcopal Church to do certain things to resolve the current tensions in the worldwide body have been addressed only to the church's bishops, "we are a church of more than one order of voices."

"Our great, deep hope is that we would be included in [future] quests, communications and directions" from Anglican Communion leaders, she said.

Williams expressed "frustration" with the Episcopal Church's three-year legislative cycle, the Rev. James Simons (Pittsburgh) said. "It's difficult in some cases for decisions to be held for three years for the General Convention to meet, so we discussed some possible scenarios that would allow for a more timely response, at least in the interim, until a permanent response could be made."

"There was a lot of give and take in terms of trying to think through how we could work more collaboratively in a way that honors each other's polity," he added.

Sally Johnson (Minnesota), Anderson's chancellor, said that the group was "clear with him that the General Convention is the authority in the Episcopal Church and no one can respond and say 'we bind the Episcopal Church' other than General Convention."

"He seemed to hear that," added Deputy Byron Rushing (Massachusetts).

Deputy Frank Wade (Washington) said the session was a decision-making time, nor was it meant "to come up with a master plan by which all these things would be dealt with; it was an opportunity to talk and share"

The other major part of the half hour meeting involved giving Simons and Deputy Cindy Smith (San Joaquin) a chance to tell Williams about what Simons called "the enormous pain that's been generated in these dioceses on both sides because of this sort of schismatic action that's taken place" in the four dioceses which broke apart over issues of theology and human sexuality.

Anderson said that when the group characterized those experiences as "spiritual abuse," it was a new term for Williams.

The half-hour meeting did not touch on the specific issues of same-gender blessings or the election and consecration of non-celibate lesbian and gay priests as bishops or the role of other communion provinces in facilitating the divisions in the four dioceses, Anderson said.

In the meeting with the convention's official youth presence, Williams "wanted to hear about our stories; he wanted to hear about us," Elizabeth Anderson (Michigan) said.

"It was also a good chance to more about him," added Austin Roe (Long Island). Carolyn Chou (Pennsylvania) said that she hoped Williams remembers that the youth of the church are "passionate and engaged and active members of the church that are going to help continue to grow the church."

"He was extremely approachable," said Grace Aheron (Southwestern Virginia). "He was more approachable than a lot of the bishops that we've met that are just diocesan bishops."

The youth presence consists of one of the two young people from each of the church's nine provinces who have seat and voice in the House of Deputies.

Also on Wednesday, Williams made a keynote presentation addressing the world's economic crisis during a panel discussion.

Before returning to England July 9 in time for the Church of England's main legislative gathering, General Synod, Williams will visit the triennial gathering of Episcopal Church Women (ECW) and meet with Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori and her Council of Advice.

Williams is among 70 international visitors and one of 15 Anglican Communion primates attending the convention.