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## National Religious Leadership Roundtable responds to new challenge put forth by Anglican conservatives

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Conservative Anglican bishops, who met at the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) in Jerusalem this past week, issued a statement yesterday announcing they would create a new movement that will defy historic lines of authority without breaking away from the Anglican Communion. They've had divisions with the U.S. Episcopal Church, including the consecration of the first openly gay bishop. **The National Religious Leadership Roundtable issued the following statement calling for wider dialogue on diversity among Anglicans and a renewed vision of Gospel hospitality.**

**The Rev. Jay Emerson Johnson, Ph.D. of the National Religious Leadership Roundtable had this statement:**

"The Anglican Communion may not split decisively after all. This is good news, but only if lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people aren't asked to pay for church unity with their silence or expulsion. I would also add, only if LGBT Christians are willing to continue to bear courageous witness to their own lives of biblical faith and gospel ministry.

"The latest news from the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) in Jerusalem renews my hope, not only for a rich Anglican diversity but also for all faith communities facing the prospect of schism over biblical authority and sexual morality. If Anglicans can learn how to stay together in the midst of our differences, surely other Christians can, too.

"I'm hopeful but also worried about the GAFCON proposal to create a 'church within a church' of 'confessing Anglicans.' The Jerusalem Statement issued by the GAFCON outlines a vision for a 'purified' Christianity with neatly drawn biblical and theological lines to determine who qualifies as genuine Christians and authentic Anglicans. This represents a significant departure from historical Anglican approaches to Christianity as it deepens the 'us versus them' mentality within the Anglican Communion and threatens to put church unity at the disposal of those who wish to exclude rather than embrace the diversity of God's people. From the very beginning Christianity has always been multifaceted and diverse, which inspired the Apostle Paul to describe the church as a body with many members: each member is needed; none is dispensable (1 Cor. 12:12-26). For centuries Anglicans have tried to take that expansive Pauline image to heart in a worldwide, multicultural communion where every voice and perspective is needed.

"I worry as well that the Jerusalem Statement will only perpetuate the image of LGBT people as generally anti-religious, opposed to Scripture and uninterested in the life of gospel ministry. That image completely overlooks the faithful witness of thousands of committed LGBT Christians, not only in the U.S. but throughout the world. The stakes are high in this attempt to create a 'church within a church,' which cuts to the heart of the Christian gospel. This has been true for centuries regarding race and ethnicity and for nearly as long among Anglicans concerning women. At risk is

our shared gospel witness to God's outrageous generosity toward all people and the extravagant welcome that witness creates in communities of hospitality.

"Sadly, church unity has too frequently been bought at the expense of this radical gospel vision. Episcopalians in the U.S. learned that lesson in the movement to abolish slavery in the 19th century and in the controversy over women's ordination in the twentieth. In both cases, the Episcopal Church for too long valued institutional harmony over the call to costly discipleship. The equally divisive questions regarding LGBT people of faith present an opportunity to take those hard lessons from the past and offer a compelling vision of Gospel generosity and communal hospitality.

"In John's Gospel Jesus prays that all his followers might 'be one' (17:11). In that same Gospel, he also insisted that not a single one should be lost (6:39). These Gospel words extend a challenge as much to me as they do to my GAFCON-affiliated brothers and sisters: Can we agree to disagree and still do the work of compassion and ministry in a world of pain and suffering? Can all of us imagine together a unity that does not require uniformity? Can we embrace each other with the same generosity God extends to us?

"If the life of faith is played like a game with winners and losers, then everyone loses, and the gospel vision is lost. The modern world knows only too well what it looks like for communities to fracture and institutions to dissolve over conflict. Anglicans might now have an opportunity to offer a different kind of vision to a deeply divided world. Avoiding outright schism is not enough. The harder work is rooted in God's unending love and generosity that does not erase our differences but instead shapes communities of extravagant welcome and hospitality for all.

"The GAFCON bishops have also expressed their own sense of betrayal and abandonment in the Anglican Communion, to which LGBT people, especially in North Atlantic regions, would do well to heed. In my view, the GAFCON urges a long overdue assessment of how Western colonialism has too often excluded non-Western voices and dismissed the rich cultural and spiritual perspectives of the global South. As LGBT people, we know only too well what that feels like, in every call to ordination denied, as our loving relationships are silenced and with every unfounded biblical condemnation of our lives uttered from pulpits. From those experiences we can surely offer compassion to others, even in the midst of our disagreements; indeed, our outrageously generous God is calling us to no less.

"The work before us as Anglicans, and for all faith communities on all sides of this question, will demand a renewed commitment to listen to each other and to share our lives of faith and ministry across deep lines of division. If we can do that, by God's grace, then there's nothing that can stop the radical vision of gospel generosity from transforming this world of violence into a hospitable world of human thriving. May it be so."

About the author: The Rev. Jay Emerson Johnson, Ph.D., a member of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force National Religious Leadership Roundtable, is an Episcopal priest and serves as senior director for Academic Research and Resources at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, Calif.