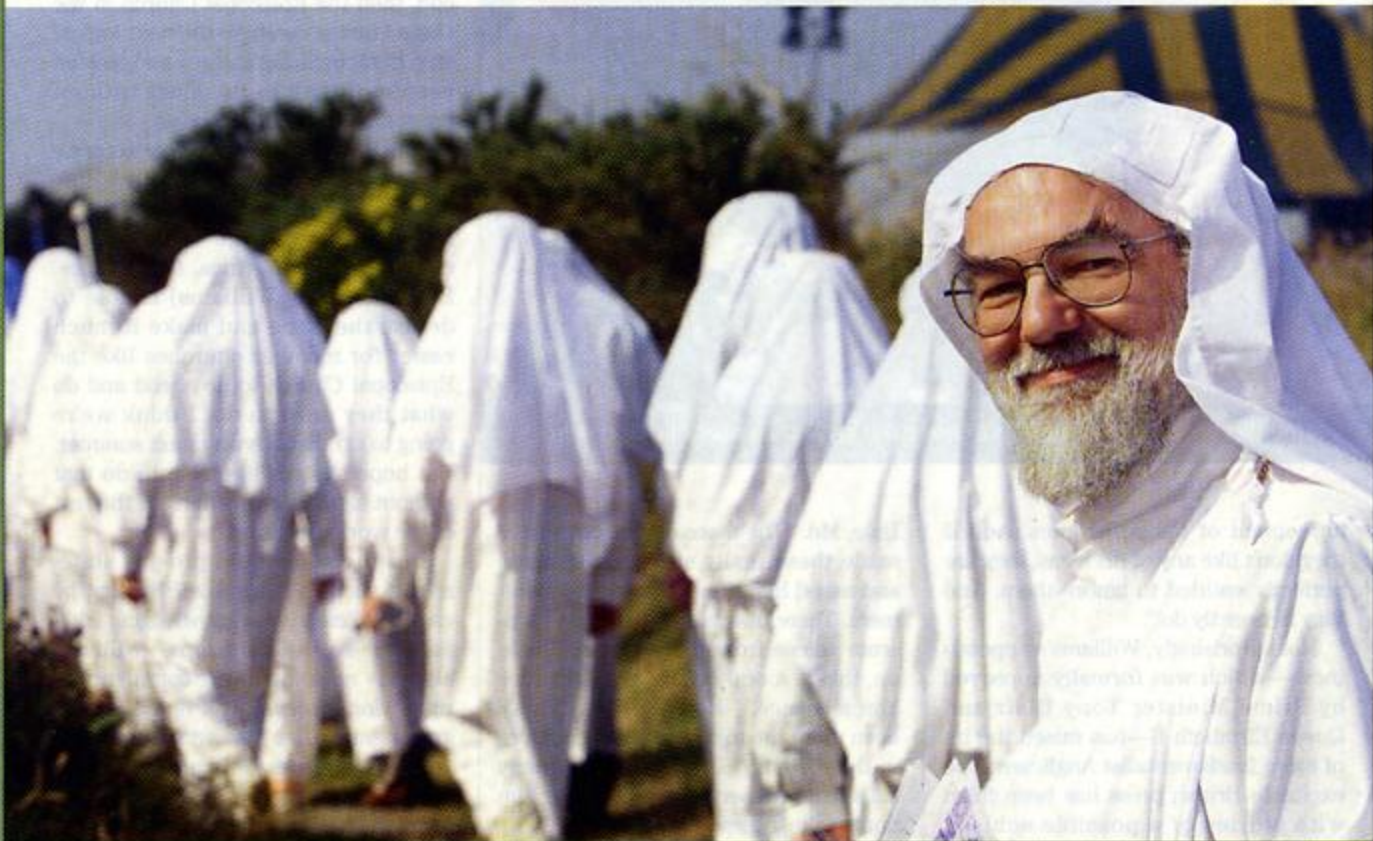


# Good heavens

The new archbishop of Canterbury speaks five languages and, in each one of them, says there's nothing sinful about being gay **By Michael Giltz**



Shortly before his election was confirmed December 2, Williams told the BBC that he can "see a case for acknowledging faithful same-sex relationships."

The Church of England has just appointed a new archbishop of Canterbury—the ceremonial leader of the Anglican Communion—and Rowan Williams already is making history. He's the first archbishop to come from outside England—in this case, Wales—for at least 1,000 years.

But more important, the 52-year-old Williams—whose election was confirmed December 2 and who will be officially enthroned in February—is an outspoken advocate for the inclusion of gay men and lesbians in the church. Married with two children, he's been active in supporting that cause for many years, has longtime friends who

are gay, and says he has ordained at least one noncelibate gay man. And all of this is making gay Episcopalians in the United States and Anglicans in the United Kingdom and around the world cautiously optimistic.

"I trust Rowan's instincts," says the Reverend Richard Kirker, who has known the archbishop for years and is general secretary of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, a group set up in 1976 to speak for all Christians but dominated by Anglicans. "But I've cautioned in numerous letters and statements since his appointment not to have unrealistic expectations about how quickly Rowan is

prepared to use his influence.

"He's quite different from a Catholic bishop," Kirker explains. "Any decisions in the Anglican Communion have to be reached at the end of the day by consensus." (The Anglican Communion refers to the sister churches of the Church of England around the world, including the Episcopal Church in the United States.) "The archbishop of Canterbury is a titular figurehead," Kirker continues. "Strictly speaking, he has no authority outside his own diocese. Whatever influence or authority he does in reality exercise outside the diocese of Canterbury really is on the basis of the ►



The transition from George Carey (left) to Williams makes gay Episcopalians cautiously optimistic.

agreement of his colleagues. And if they don't like any of his ideas, they are perfectly entitled to ignore them. And they frequently do."

Not surprisingly, Williams's appointment—which was formally approved by Prime Minister Tony Blair and Queen Elizabeth II—has raised the ire of more fundamentalist Anglicans. The excitable British press has been filled with stories of a possible schism, about bishops shipping in more conservative priests from Africa to do a runaround on Williams, and a poll of ordained ministers saying 54% objected to ordaining noncelibate gay clergy.

Things may not be that dire. The same poll shows that most ordained ministers consider Williams—who in 1989 gave a landmark speech on sexuality called "The Body's Grace"—to be a healing rather than a divisive force in the Anglican Communion. But even in the United States, it's clear Williams's appointment has shaken things up.

"My perception is that his appointment split the evangelical wing of the church," says the Reverend Michael Hopkins, president of the gay Episcopal group Integrity and rector of St. George's Episcopal Church in Glenn

Dale, Md. "The more radical ones have made these really strong statements and asked him to not take the appointment. There have also been some moderate voices from there saying, 'Come on, this is a real bright guy. Let's give him a chance,'" Hopkins says. "That's been more the tone from conservatives in this country. I haven't heard many calls from conservatives [here] for him not to take the appointment."

Kirker agrees. "They are up in arms, and I'm delighted by that because they're doing us no harm at all," he says. "They're exposing their hatred and intolerance and prurience.

"There are threats left, right, and center. But I don't feel the Church of England is in meltdown. We've had huge rows and bust-ups in the past. Unlike the Catholic Church, we don't wrap it up in as much secrecy as possible."

In early November, hundreds of members of Integrity, the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, Beyond Inclusion, and other gay rights groups met to strategize for the next general convention of the Episcopal Church, which takes place in July in Minneapolis. At the last convention, in 2000, a resolution to develop a rite to bless same-sex unions was narrowly defeat-

ed amid fears of creating turmoil throughout the Anglican Communion.

With Williams as the conciliatory, if symbolic, head of the church being likely to attend, advocates believe their time is now. Put simply, if someone as forthright as Williams can be named the archbishop of Canterbury without having the world come to an end, then the Episcopal Church in the United States can take the next logical step in recognizing the gay and lesbian people of faith in its midst without provoking a worldwide crisis.

"I don't hope for the whole communion to change its mind, frankly," Hopkins says, "because it's going to take a long time to change the minds of church leaders in Africa, for instance. But I do hope [Williams] is able to defuse the issue and make it much easier for member churches like the Episcopal Church to go ahead and do what they need to do. I think we're going to do that anyway next summer. But hopefully we'll be able to do that without significant portions of the rest of the world revolting."

Despite some bold pro-gay statements, such as telling the BBC that he can "see a case for acknowledging faithful same-sex relationships," Williams also has made soothing comments to right-wing forces. But if he hopes gay groups might let him settle in before facing these issues, he hopes in vain.

"There isn't any way that he's not going to have to tackle this right away," says Hopkins, who believes a resolution to develop a rite for blessing same-sex unions in the Episcopal Church will be passed in August, a mere six months after Williams takes office.

Kirker admits that "this isn't his issue," meaning gay rights is not the issue Williams would choose to push for first. "Genuinely, he doesn't want [gay issues] to be number 1. But I think it will be number 1. He will find the homosexual issue coming back time and time again, and so far as we can make a contribution to make sure that happens, I will make absolutely no apology for trying to make sure it does remain the number 1." ■

*Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post.*