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**World Anglican leaders  
protest gay bishop's election**

By Hannah Lodwick

MINNEAPOLIS, Minn. (ABP) -- Anglican leaders in Africa, Asia, South America, Australia and the United States publicly denounced the U.S. Episcopal Church's decision to install an openly gay bishop in its New Hampshire diocese.

"It's wrong and it's against the Bible," Bishop Joseph Kanuku of Kenya told The New York Times. "How can we go against God's words? Two men being joined is contrary to nature and contrary to the Bible."

The U.S. Episcopal Church belongs to the Anglican Communion, the worldwide association of 22 separate national Anglican churches that each act independently alongside the original Anglican body, the Church of England.

The U.S. church sparked international debate Aug. 5 by electing the first openly gay bishop in the church's history, a move critics warn could split the worldwide Anglican church. Already the head of the Anglican Church in Nigeria has called for severing ties with the American group.

Some observers say the outcry influenced the decision by U.S. Episcopal bishops not to establish a national liturgy for gay civil unions. Instead, the bishops voted Aug. 6 to let local dioceses decide on their own whether or not to bless same-sex unions. The decision to allow wedding-like ceremonies for gays, which still must be approved by a group of laity and clergy, nonetheless represents a major step forward, supporters said. "There has never been an explicit statement that acknowledges that bishops can do it," said Michael Hopkins, president of Leaders of Integrity, a group of gay Episcopalians.

The decision was seen as a compromise after a draining week of debate on homosexual issues.

"This is best because those of you who have reached a further point of clarity can continue to do what you think is right in your area," Bishop Gethin Hughes of San Diego told attendees at the church's General Convention in Minneapolis. "For many of us who are still struggling, there will be more time

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for ... coming to some answer together."

Some Baptist leaders think the recent Episcopal decisions will do nothing but cause more division among U.S. Christians.

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, said some denominations will now quicken their pace toward ordination of gay clergy, while others will stiffen their policies against homosexual practices.

"The Episcopal Church's decision will shove American denominations in two opposite directions," Parham said. "Lost will be the complicated common ground where churches see homosexuals as persons of sacred worth without condoning the practice of homosexuality."

Unfortunately, Parham said, churches will set aside more critical matters as they become consumed in debates about this issue.

Reaction from Episcopalians around the world was swift. South American leaders called the decision a "slap in the face." Opposition to the gay lifestyle remains the norm among Christians in Africa and Asia, said Episcopal bishops from those continents.

Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria called for severing relations with the U.S. Episcopal Church. In June, Nigerian Episcopalians separated from the diocese in British Columbia, which ratified a liturgy for same-sex marriages. The New York Times reported Akinola has now warned his members they may lose financial support from churches in the West, saying they must become self-reliant.

"We stand with the Bible," Kenya's Kanuku told the newspaper. "When we are wrong, those in the West should tell us. We are telling them this is wrong."

In South America, Archbishop Gregory Venables expressed frustration with the North American bishops who voted for Gene Robinson, the recently confirmed gay bishop. "What upsets people more than anything is this patronizing attitude," Venables told The New York Times. "Their attitude is, 'You'll get there one day.'"

Southern Baptist ethicist Richard Land thinks the debate over gays has already gone further than it should. Land, the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, told ABC News that Robinson should not have even been considered for the post.

By ignoring the Bible's prohibitions against homosexuality, Land said, the Episcopal Church leaders have embraced the deadly theology that says parts of Scripture are inspired and parts are not.

"Once you accept the presupposition that the Bible is just a human book and that you have to separate the divine inspiration from the human element which is flawed because that element is bonded to the culture and time in which it was written, it is a short jump for the Episcopal communion to have its first openly gay bishop," Land said in a statement.

The Episcopal decision comes at a time when public opinion about homosexuality is in flux. Pollsters suggest recent events like the Supreme Court ruling legalizing gay sex and the election of a gay Episcopal bishop may have sparked a "gay backlash."

A recent Gallup Poll suggests national support of gays has declined -- a first since the 1980s. The July poll reported 48 percent of respondents said homosexual relations should be legal, down from a record

high of 60 percent in May. In the same survey, the percentage of people who consider homosexuality an acceptable lifestyle dropped 8 percentage points since May.

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### **Divorce rates decline with help from marriage policies, counseling**

By Hannah Lodwick

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) --- In a country where half of all marriages end in divorce, a town in northern California is bucking the national trend. Since churches in Modesto adopted a citywide policy in 1986 requiring premarital counseling, the city has reduced its divorce rate by 57 percent.

Along with the decline, Modesto's marriage rate increased 12 percent in the same 16 years, while the national marriage rate fell 18 percent.

Other towns have followed suit. Coalitions of pastors in cities from Oregon to Virginia have signed community marriage policies -- covenants which commit the pastors to perform marriage ceremonies only for couples who have completed several sessions of premarital counseling.

First Baptist Church of Sioux Falls, S.D., signed such a covenant. "We did it because we saw within our own church the effects of divorce," said Susan Omanson, associate pastor. "All you have to do is look at what is happening in society. We said, 'Enough is enough.'"

The church's members -- who number more than 1,000 -- have experienced only four divorces since 1997.

In 1996 in Austin, Texas, the covenant was signed by 252 pastors, the second largest turnout in any city. The Austin American-Statesman ran a full-page story in advance of the event, and the signing attracted coverage from "ABC World News Tonight."

Community Marriage Policies are now in place in 170 cities nationwide. In most the policy is working.

An independent research firm compared the divorce rates in 131 cities for the three years before the policy was implemented to the rates for three or more years after its implementation. Divorce rates dropped in 70 percent of those communities. Nine cities reported a drop of more than 50 percent, and 27 cities showed declines of 20 percent or more.

Journalist Michael McManus created the first Community Marriage Policy after inspiring a group of pastors in Modesto to take action against divorce rates. A syndicated ethics and religion columnist, McManus published *Marriage Savers: Helping your Friends and Family Avoid Divorce* in 1993. The methods discussed in the book are used by McManus and others in counseling couples before marriage.

With his wife, Harriet, McManus now co-chairs Marriage Savers, a Maryland-based organization aimed at strengthening marriages. He said the idea for a citywide or countywide policy grew out of his frustration about national divorce rates.

"I'm struck by the paradox that we have a higher percentage of people who go to church in this country

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than other countries, but we also have the highest divorce rates," he said. Christians have remained largely silent on marital counseling issues, he added.

Baptists have the highest divorce rate of all denominations, McManus said. One reason, he said, is that Baptists don't take marriage seriously enough. "Baptists are always talking about evangelism, but if you don't have discipleship after evangelism..." McManus said without finishing his sentence. "In relation to marriage, it's clear it isn't working."

Couples themselves are also part of the problem, McManus said. "They think, 'We have love. We are Christians. What more do we need?'"

The couples counseled by Jeff Meyers, a pastor in the Kansas City area, can be pessimistic or unrealistic about marriage. "What happens is most couples I meet with think it's a 50/50 shot," said Meyers of Christ Lutheran Church in Overland Park, Kan. "The other extreme is, 'It's not going to happen to us. We don't need it.'"

Meyers wrote a community marriage policy signed by more than 50 churches so far in the Kansas City area. He plans to meet Aug. 15 with roughly 800 pastors and community members to discuss implementing marriage programs throughout the area.

Meyers said a community marriage policy helps unify members of different denominations. "It's a community effort," he said. "It's one of the few things [about which] I have no trouble getting heads nodding. There are no ifs, ands or buts about the issue of decline of marriage."

That denominational unity is McManus' goal. Getting churches of different denominations working together is important "because our kids marry their kids," McManus said. "They don't choose each other based on their faith. Marriage is one issue on which churches can agree. The key is preparation."

Preparedness could have immeasurable value when it comes to what McManus calls "the number one problem in troubled marriages" -- lack of communication.

"It's a lack of ability to resolve conflict without tearing the other person apart," he said. "It is a skill. It doesn't come naturally, but it can be learned."

Effective premarital counseling not only leads couples to evaluate whether or not they should wed, it helps them develop relational skills they can use throughout the marriage, counselors say.

Most premarital counseling involves questionnaires, aptitude tests and discussions of potential areas of conflict within a marriage. Couples learn about personal strengths and weaknesses that can strengthen or sabotage a union.

Many community marriage policies mandate at least four sessions with a counselor, a long-term relationship with mentor couples and attendance at enrichment activities. Prices for the counseling hover around \$150.

Omanson said the mentoring system provides a support system and promotes church health. Churches have a responsibility to teach young couples how to overcome conflict, the Sioux Falls minister added.

"The church has to step up to the plate," she said. "For too many years it has been seen as a wedding mill. They didn't step back and help people evaluate if they should actually be getting married."

Critics of community marriage policies say the hassle of counseling, the time requirement and price will drive prospective couples away.

Indeed, some couples have decided to change wedding locations or dates to avoid the program, Marriage Savers reports. Others have started the sessions and broken their engagements.

But Amy Branch-Lambert, a pastoral care counselor in Dallas, said ministers should not turn away couples too quickly but help them work through their reservations and differences.

"Here's the reality for the minister: If the minister says no, they're going to go down to the justice of the peace," said Branch-Lambert, who works for a clinic operated by the Baptist General Convention of Texas. "Why would we force people to go to the justice of the peace when they can find a place where they are loved and honored?"

Ten percent of couples who go through premarital counseling break their engagements, reported Harriet McManus. But breakups can have positive results, she said.

"Going through a preparation course, even if the relationship ultimately dissolves, is maturing," she wrote in the website article. "Each partner leaves the program knowing themselves on a deeper level. Now those two individuals, who have chosen to go separate ways, are better equipped to pursue someone else in the future that is more suited for them."

Not all cities that implemented community marriage policies have had the success of Modesto and others. In fact, divorce rates increased in some cities that implemented the program. Most of the increases were below 10 percent, but 13 of the 131 cities studied increased more – one as much as 59 percent.

McManus said several variables affected those results, including the lack of training for mentor couples, the scarcity of full-time staff members to work with the program, and a lack of press coverage.

Meyers, the Kansas City pastor, said premarital counseling will help couples get past the first years of marriage -- the time when most divorces occur. "If you spend quality time preparing for the marriage, you basically inoculate it for the first five years," he said.

Churches also can have a role after the wedding to discourage divorce, Meyers said.

According to a study by the Institute for American Values, roughly two thirds of couples who stayed together through a time when they wanted to divorce reported happy marriages five years later. Meyers said that means pastors have to become "hope mongers" for couples who don't think they have a future.

"The thing that irritates me is people don't realize the couples getting divorced won't be any happier after the divorce," Meyers said. "Pastors have got to say, 'Hold on. So you're unhappy for a while. Let's fix it.'"

- John Hall contributed to this article.

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**CBF contributes to relief**

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## **in war-torn Liberia**

By Lance Wallace

ATLANTA (ABP) -- A moderate Baptist group is responding to a Baptist World Alliance request for humanitarian assistance for war-ravaged Liberia.

The Atlanta-based Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is sending \$10,000 in emergency relief funds to Monrovia, the capital of the West African nation, through Baptist World Aid, the assistance arm of the Baptist World Alliance. Baptist World Aid contributes to relief, development and Baptist causes worldwide.

Half of the \$10,000 is designated for ministry to internally displaced people who have sought shelter at the Baptist Seminary in Monrovia. The other half is designated for general food relief, such as the purchase and transport of rice.

"Liberia has been in turmoil for 13 years, and the civil war has reached a peak in fighting throughout the capital of Monrovia," said David Harding, CBF's international coordinator for emergency relief. "Thousands of people have been killed and even more are in misery. With the recent arrival of peacekeepers, we hope there will be a window of time where the hurting can be helped quickly and that Liberians can find a lasting peace. CBF would like to help in the relief effort and the longer process of reconciliation and development."

Baptist World Alliance renewed its special appeal for urgent humanitarian aid to be sent to Liberia because the deteriorating political situation in Liberia over the last three months has made life even more precarious for many Liberians.

The United States and Nigeria have sent troops to Monrovia to stem fighting between rebels opposed to the government of Liberian President Charles Taylor and militia forces supportive of Taylor.

Rebel forces began closing in on Monrovia -- which was mainly controlled by pro-Taylor forces -- July 18. Street-to-street fighting has claimed thousands of civilian lives.

The fighting in Monrovia and the surrounding countryside has caused thousands of Liberians to flee to neighboring countries as refugees, according to Baptist World Aid. The agency also reported that more than 150,000 internally displaced persons are scattered in camps all over Liberia. To date, more than 350 cases of cholera have been reported, and there are major outbreaks of meningitis, typhoid and malaria due to unsanitary conditions in these camps.

Baptist World Alliance also reports that basic commodities -- such as rice, water, meat, fish and gasoline -- are in short supply and very expensive. Health-care facilities have been looted of vital supplies yet remain overcrowded with the wounded and sick. All foreign staffers of international aid agencies have been evacuated from the country.

According to a recent United Nations report, food remained scarce in government-held areas of Monrovia, where the price of rice has soared five fold in recent weeks, and many people have not eaten a proper meal for days.

As peacekeepers begin to arrive, Liberian Baptists in exile want to work to ensure that much-needed food is provided to help alleviate the acute shortage in the country, according to Baptist World Aid. They plan to mobilize and collect food supplies, medication and toiletries.

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### **Privacy law puts wrinkle in hospital visitation**

By Hannah Lodwick and Jenny Hartgraves

(ABP) – A new federal law that protects the personal information of medical patients is also causing chaplains and churches to rethink their hospital visitation practices.

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, which went into effect nationwide in April, eliminates all public access to personal health-care information. The act applies to health-care providers, health plans, public-health authorities, employers, life insurers, schools and universities. "Many hospitals were frightened by the myriad of rules and overreacted at first," said David Cross, chaplain of Memorial Hermann Baptist Hospital in Beaumont, Texas. "HIPAA has made our work more complicated, but it's not impossible."

The regulations permit only pharmacists, doctors and insurance companies to know patients' medical information, and they can only discuss that data in relation to treatment, payment or training. Officials say the rules balance the use of information with protecting patient privacy.

"We've had to change our policies a little bit," said Al Hall, a Baptist and chaplain at St. Anthony's Hospital in St. Petersburg, Fla. "Churches used to call in and ask for the list of members in the hospital, and we'd give them their name and room number."

Not anymore, Hall said. Now inquiring church members must ask for a specific person if they want to know someone's room number.

Hall said the regulations can help build better relations between congregations and pastors. Now that patients have to give permission for their names to appear on a hospital directory, pastors can no longer simply look on a list to find names and room numbers. If someone doesn't appear on the hospital directory, Hall said, they won't get so much as a phone call, let alone a visit.

"It's important enough that a pastor needs to say something about it from the pulpit," Hall said of the new regulations. "Things have changed. We have a responsibility as an institution to protect our patients."

Bruce Lampert, chaplain of Hendrick Health Systems in Abilene, Texas, said patients now have total control over whether or not the church knows they are in the hospital. He said if a patient gives his or her religious affiliation by way of a church's name, then the chaplain has the authority to notify the church.

Hall said the privacy references illustrate the whole idea behind the new rule. He sent a letter to St. Petersburg churches explaining the changes. Most people appreciate what the rules provide for patients, he said.

"Occasionally we still get some complaints from people who didn't read the letter," Hall said. "It's all for the safety and privacy of the patient. I think it's a good thing for the patients."

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Phil Christopher, pastor of First Baptist Church in Abilene, Texas, agreed, but he said the changes haven't stopped his members from visiting.

Most people in West Texas want church members to know about their hospital stay, he said. The Abilene church still sends a 20-member team to local hospitals every day.

"These people have the gift of mercy, and it's their passion to minister in a setting where a lot of people feel uncomfortable," Christopher said. "I think privacy is important to protect personal information, but you never want it to turn into isolation. As the body of Christ, we need to be a community."

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