



AN INTERVIEW WITH THE REV. GENE ROBINSON

by the Rev. George Conger, Church of England Newspaper.
Exclusive for **Anglican Voice**.

A crisis has been averted for American Church conservatives by the unexpected announcement by that Church's senior gay clergyman that he would not run in the forthcoming race for Bishop of Vermont. V. Gene Robinson, 53, Canon to the Ordinary of the Diocese of New Hampshire in an interview with the Church of England Newspaper stated that he could "provide one piece of information that may help people sleep a little better," he would not run for bishop.

"I have prayed very hard and very long to God about whether or not I was called by God to the Episcopate in Vermont and I kept getting the answer, No" said Robinson. Nor would he allow others to put his name forward for election. "I would not accept that", stated Robinson. "I believe that if someone openly Gay or Lesbian is to be elected bishop it needs to be fully a part of the normal, regular process. I would not participate in such a thing."

Called the "most dangerous man in the American Church" by a senior conservative bishop, Robinson came third in the 1998 race to succeed the Rt. Revd. Jack Spong as Bishop of Newark. In 1999 Robinson placed second in the race for Bishop of Rochester, New York, he was considered by most Church insiders to have been the odds on favourite to succeed Mary Adelia MacLeod as Bishop of Vermont.

Considered by many to be the most liberal of the 50 American states, Vermont returns the only socialist, Bernard Sanders, to the US Congress. In June Vermont became the first American state to formally recognise homosexual "marriages" or "unions" in Civil law. Registry offices in Vermont may now perform same-sex civil "unions" or "weddings" that give the participants the same standing in Vermont law as traditional marriages.

The prospect of an openly "Gay" bishop in the US Church has caused several conservative bishops to privately state that they would leave the

Church. "That is the line in the sand, which if crossed, would cause me to leave" said one Southern bishop. What troubles many American conservatives is that Robinson is very different from the other leaders of the Gay movement in the US. "He is well qualified to be bishop and would be a bishop, were it not for his being an open and active homosexual" stated a senior American cleric. Robinson himself distances himself from gay movement's *enfant terrible*, Jack Spong. "One of the things that lots of Americans and most of the people outside of this country need to learn is that Jack Spong is not the rest of us [gay movement]. And as much as Jack has helped us, Jack has hurt us as well" stated Robinson.

When questioned as to how he would work with Evangelical or Traditionalist clergy were he elected their bishop Robinson responded that his record as Canon to the Ordinary of New Hampshire for 12 years, and as a priest of 26 years standing, spoke for itself. "My answer to you is to invite you to talk to some of the people in the diocese where I have served for twenty five years who to this day believe that being Gay or Lesbian, or certainly acting out sexually as a Gay or Lesbian person could not be further from God's will. And...you will find that every single one of them...will tell you that I have never been anything but gracious and kind and caring towards them," stated Robinson. "I have learned over the years how to care for people for whom I am very problematic and frankly who are problematic for me, but my job is to serve them, and I take that very seriously."

Overseas reactions to a Robinson episcopacy have been harsh. "It would be an abomination" for a sexually active gay man to be a Bishop stated the Most Revd. Peter Akinola, Primate of Nigeria. Other African and Asian bishops have expressed themselves in stronger terms about the prospects of a non-celibate homosexual bishop. Robinson's response to the condemnation of his homosexual lifestyle has been muted. "I am not surprised or angry about what the Bishop from Nigeria said, I don't doubt his sincerity, or faith to our Lord. In fact quite the opposite, I don't doubt it I assume it. In fact he is being true to his own journey to God, so am I. And I don't know if any of us can do anymore than that. To stay in touch with one another, to stay in touch with God and to live a life as consistent with that as possible. I have no doubt that we can believe exactly opposite things each walking our faithful journey with God, for our walk is imperfect. Mine certainly is, and I am assuming that the Primate of Nigeria's is as well. My hope is that somehow we can keep coming to the communion rail together until we get it figured out. I am going to continue coming to that communion rail and I hope that the Primate of Nigeria would come as well."

Robinson has already had one conflict with the overseas Church over his homosexuality. After a 1998 New York Times profile of Robinson as that described his relationship with his partner, Mark Andrew, the Archbishop of the West Indies, Orland Lindsey, wrote to Robinson stripping him of his license to officiate at a part-time chaplaincy on the island of St. Barth's in the French West Indies. "It broke my heart" stated Robinson. "He [Lindsey] took that action without talking to a single person in that congregation. Not the warden, not the vestry, not the treasurer, not a single person in that congregation. They learned about it from me... I didn't want them to think that for some reason I just got interested in some place else... My partner has been with me in the rectory for ten or eleven years... He is the one who served cookies and juice after the service in the rectory."

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