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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Among Episcopalians, Grief Over Gay Bishop

Protests Grow, but Risk of Schism Still Uncertain

By Alan Cooperman

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When the Episcopal Church confirmed a gay bishop, Paul Wilcox put on black trousers, a black shirt and a black tie. Then he got out a can of black Rust-Oleum and painted over the word "Episcopal" on the lawn sign at St. Andrew's Church in West Nashville, Tenn., where he has been a parishioner for 15 years.

"I just felt that this was a very grave mistake and a very mournful day," said Wilcox, 45, who received permission from the church's rector to alter the sign.

Across the country, conservative Episcopalians have been grieving since the church's general convention voted Aug. 5 in Minneapolis to accept the election of the Rev. V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire as the first openly gay bishop in the worldwide Anglican Communion.

But Episcopal leaders say it is too soon to tell whether these emotional outpourings will prove cathartic -- and soon pass -- or continue to swell until they wreak a full-blown schism in the church.

As arguments over sexuality and Scripture reverberate through the nation's 7,364 Episcopal congregations, more than 500 priests and 3,200 lay people have signed a petition calling the convention's action illegitimate. Nearly a dozen dioceses have scheduled meetings to discuss whether to affiliate with Anglican splinter groups or conservative bishops overseas. Some priests and parishioners -- how many is unknown -- have left, and many others are withholding donations to the national church.

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Yet in interviews with more than 20 Episcopal priests and lay people across the country who have been dismayed by the church's decisions, most said they have not yet decided what to do. Many are waiting to see what happens at a gathering of more than 1,400 traditionalist Episcopalians in Texas on Oct. 7-9 and at a meeting in England a week later of the primates, or presiding bishops, of the 38 regional churches that make up the Anglican Communion.

"We just don't know where we are right now," said the Rev. Martyn Minns, rector of Truro Episcopal Church in Falls Church. "We're still reeling."

In Monroe, Ga., the Rev. Foley Beach conducted a funeral service without a corpse on Aug. 10, the first Sunday after the convention approved Robinson's election and formally recognized that some Episcopal priests bless the unions of same-sex couples.

Beach titled his sermon "The Death of the Episcopal Church." But he counseled the 550 members of his parish to show patience -- and most have. Just three families have quit because they "don't want their kids brought up in what they call the gay church," and two families left because they "disagreed with my personal position" that homosexuality is contrary to the word of God, he said.

Like many traditionalists, Beach hopes that African and Asian bishops at the primates' meeting in London on Oct. 15-16 will persuade the archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, to threaten to cast the Episcopal Church USA out of the Anglican Communion unless the U.S. hierarchy reverses course.

Leaders of the U.S. church doubt Williams will go that far. The Anglican Communion is an association of self-governing churches. And though the 2.3 million Episcopalians in the United States are a small part of the world's 75 million Anglicans, the U.S. church is a major source of money for Anglican missions around the world.

Some conservatives allege that the U.S. church is throwing its financial weight around. The primate of Central Africa, Archbishop Bernard Malango, said in a telephone interview that his vocal criticism of the Episcopal Church has led one of the wealthiest U.S. parishes, Trinity Church at Wall Street in Manhattan, to shut off grants that previously provided \$60,000 worth of computers and communications equipment.

Malango, 60, has offered to take disaffected U.S. parishes under his wing. Last year, he enrolled a Philadelphia clergyman as a priest in his jurisdiction. Now, he said, he is discussing formal links to an entire U.S. diocese, Quincy, Ill. "My interpretation of Scripture on the question of marriage is one man, one wife, and it's between male and female," he said. "I will not give up and will not stop talking."

The Rev. Oge Beauvoir, who oversees Trinity's grants to African churches, denied cutting off money to the 700,000 Anglicans in Malango's province of Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia and Botswana. But, he said, he did have a blunt conversation with the African archbishop in February.

"I said to him that since he's promoting schism in the American church, I would like to hear from him about where he stands in terms of our ongoing partnership. Does he want to continue it, or not?" Beauvoir said. "I'm still waiting to hear from him."

In a letter last month to the other 37 Anglican primates around the world, the presiding bishop of the U.S. church, Frank T. Griswold, argued that the Anglican tradition allows for various readings of Scripture. "How we have been shaped and formed as Christians and the context in which we live have a great deal to do with how we interpret various passages in the Bible and the weight we give them in making moral decisions," Griswold wrote.

Some Episcopalians are not waiting for the rift among Anglican leaders to play out. At St. Timothy's Church in Catonsville, Md., the Rev. Steven R. Randall resigned as an Episcopal priest three weeks ago.

"The gay issue is not the real issue," he said. "The real issue is: Does the Bible mean what it says, or can you make it mean whatever you want?"

Randall preached at St. Timothy's for the last time yesterday. Next Sunday, he plans to hold the first services of a new congregation. Even though he's not sure what denomination it will belong to, he expects "a very high percentage" of his parishioners to go with him.

Still, Randall's case illustrates how hard leaving can be. "We walk away with nothing -- not a pencil, not a book, nothing," he said. "I'm 52 years old, and I have no financial security. . . . We're just going out on faith."

Randall's predicament results from a bylaw passed by the Episcopal Church in the wake of its 1975 decision to begin ordaining women, when scores of priests and parishes previously broke away. The bylaw placed ownership of each parish's property in the hands of its diocese -- a stratagem that the national church has used successfully to hold on to real estate, and that conservatives may soon try to undermine.

A leading opponent of the church's recent decisions, Bishop Robert W. Duncan Jr. of Pittsburgh, has called a special convention in his 20,000-member diocese Sept. 27. On the agenda are resolutions that would declare the national church's actions "null and void" and give parishes legal control of their buildings.

But Duncan's backlash against the church has produced a local backlash of its own. Progressive Episcopalians of Pittsburgh, a group that supports gay clergy, is fighting the bishop's proposals. So is a theologically diverse group of both liberals and conservatives who have started a petition that says, "However painful our divisions, we believe that a split of the Episcopal Church over them would be more painful, and would not advance God's kingdom."

Elsewhere, supporters and opponents of the church's recent decisions are proving equally resolute.

At St. Alban's Church in the small town of McCook, Neb., the Rev. R. Samuel Williams lowered the flag to half-staff after the vote to confirm Robinson, who has lived with a male partner for 13 years.

The next day, a parishioner raised it back to the top of the pole.

Williams lowered it again.

Then it disappeared.

Williams, 63, who spent 23 years in the Marine Corps before joining the clergy, said he "wanted to do something that would help people in the congregation face their friends in the community."

But Linda Clark, 54, a high school English teacher, told the congregation that she and two other parishioners removed the flag because they did not like "our priest spitting in the face of the national church." Moreover, she said in an interview, she was afraid that the priest's display would be hurtful to a gay parishioner and her family, "who are some of the most supportive members of St. Alban's and have been for generations."

Williams said he does not regret his actions. "Some of the people who supported what the general convention did would be happy to see me leave the church," he said, "but I'm not going to."

Clark said she isn't about to budge, either.

"I will not leave the Episcopal Church, and I will not leave St. Alban's, because I love it and I need my church in my life," she said. "We're a family and will come together. This is not going to tear us apart."

The Rev. Steven R. Randall resigned as rector of St. Timothy's Episcopal Church in Catonsville, Md., and plans to lead much of his congregation to a new denomination. "We walk away with nothing -- not a pencil, not a book, nothing," he said. "We're just going out on faith." St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in West Nashville has blacked out the word "Episcopal" on its sign to protest the naming of a gay bishop.