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# A house divided

## Episcopal Church fractured by different beliefs

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Amid the turmoil within the Diocese of South Carolina is a local parish determined to stay the course.

The Rev. David Williams, rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church on Anson Street in downtown Charleston, oversees a parish whose members include lesbians, gays and social liberals. It is a house of prayer for all people, Williams said.

On Dec. 26, the Feast of St. Stephen, the church sent a resolution approved by its vestry to the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, the standing committee of the Diocese of South Carolina and Bishop-elect Mark Lawrence.

The resolution expresses the wish of the parish to disassociate from recent actions of the diocese that recently asked to be removed from under the umbrella of the U.S. Episcopal Church. The congregation embraced the resolution enthusiastically Dec. 31, Williams said. The church is meant to serve all people who come in faith, not only those who pledge allegiance to a specific doctrine, he said.

The parish's resolution is the latest development in a conflict that has been boiling for three years, a conflict that pits those who adhere to Scripture and accuse the church of straying from the word of God against those who have historically trusted in the inclusivity of the Episcopal tradition.

This conflict appears to be leading toward a breakup of one of the country's most historically influential mainline churches.

### Toward schism

In June 2003, the Rt. Rev. V. Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, was elected bishop of New Hampshire. He was consecrated in November of that year.

That act was called the last straw by some in the church and marked the beginning of a plan by some to disengage from the church and "reassert" scriptural teachings embraced by other members of the Worldwide Anglican Communion.

Since then, the Diocese of South Carolina, along with several other dioceses and parishes, has been sending funds originally earmarked for the national church to the Anglican Communion Network, an organization advocating secession, according to Barbara Mann, who serves as treasurer of Province IV, which consists of 20 Southeastern dioceses.

Ten of 109 Episcopal dioceses and about 260 of the church's 7,200 parishes are affiliated with the network. The national church has 2.3 million members.

The Diocese of South Carolina is one of seven in the United States that has recently requested an alternative primatial relationship.

These dioceses, along with eight parishes in Virginia, have repudiated the authority of the Episcopal Church and want to function under the auspices of an Anglican district outside the United States. The reason, they say, is that the Episcopal Church has deviated from essential scriptural teachings, especially — but not only — in its tolerance for homosexual clergy.

### The factions

In a sense, what's happening in the Episcopal Church is easy to explain. There are members who are unhappy about how their church has worked over the years to reconcile its theology and religious practice with changes in culture and society. The church, they say, has strayed from the word of God.

And there are others — the vast majority, more than 90 percent, by all accounts — who, despite some misgiving about their church's evolution, are convinced they need to remain open to a God who operates in the present. Hence, an essential characteristic of the church is its inclusivity, they say.

But naming the people of these two factions can be a challenge. Are they conservative and liberal? Orthodox and ecumenical? Reasserters and reappraisers? In the context of the Episcopal debate, no label fits perfectly. So-called conservatives often hold liberal political views and prefer an evangelical style of worship. So-called liberals are often social conservatives who prefer a highly ritualized, Catholic-like service. And though it's true that all Episcopalians tend to do a lot of reappraising, just what precisely requires further "assertion" depends on whom you talk to.

### **The Episcopal tradition**

The main argument of those advocating unity is that the Episcopal Church relies on a theology of openness and accommodation, not dogma.

"I get angriest when people start talking about the authority of Scripture," Mann said during a recent interview. She has served six years on the National Executive Council and chaired the National Audit Committee, and has served as a deputy at four General Conventions since 1985. She now serves as Province IV treasurer.

The Holy Spirit and its influence change as people change, she said. "As we pray, we believe." It's worship, not credo that has mostly held members of the Anglican community together, she added. "It is not a confessional church."

Kevin A. Wilson shares this view. Wilson is an appointed Episcopal missionary and lecturer in biblical studies at Lithuania Christian College in Klaipeda, Lithuania, and has taught at Warburg College in Waverly, Iowa, and Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Va.

He wrote recently on his blog:

"The reason that there can be godly union and concord between two sides that disagree is based on Anglican polity, which goes back to the Elizabethan Settlement. Queen Elizabeth inherited an Anglican church that was split between a number of factions, including those who wanted to return the country to the Roman Catholic church. No one agreed on theology. Her solution, simply put, was that the church's unity was based on its worship, not on its agreement on doctrinal matters. ... We are a church that lives and dies by its worship, not by its theology. Our unity consists in the one Lord we serve, not in our ideas about that Lord."

The issue dividing the Episcopal Church has to do with polity, not theology, he wrote. Episcopal polity does not preclude theological differences. Those who prefer to worship in a church where theology matches the political and social organization should be free to do so. "There is nothing wrong with such a polity, but it is simply not Anglican."

### **Church organization**

Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, from which it split when Henry VIII wanted to remarry in 1534, the Church of England and the Anglican and Episcopal organizations it spawned rely on an authority at the diocesan and Episcopal (bishop) levels rather than one central authority.

It is a "broad tent" under which worshippers congregate, a tent that has accommodated many points of view. There is no equivalent to the pope, no figurehead who dictates doctrine.

The Anglican Communion relies instead on canon law, church missives that are established through a convened election and which are administrative in nature. Theological doctrine is drawn from worship traditions and the Book of Common Prayer.

When Episcopal officials voted to ordain women in 1976, for example, individual dioceses and priests were not obligated to endorse the practice. Indeed, three dioceses — San Joaquin, Calif., Fort Worth, Texas, and Quincy, Ill. — still do not ordain women. The Diocese of South Carolina currently includes seven women among its ordained clergy, according to Episcopal Church data.

### **Milestones of concern**

A number of theological disagreements have cropped up among Episcopalians over the years, including some divisive enough to prompt longtime adherents to leave the church. But none of the controversies caused an institutional schism.

Until now.

It might be said that the current conflict started with the church's decision to permit ordination of women. When the Book of Common Prayer was revised in 1979, modernizing the liturgy in an effort to appeal to a broader range of parishioners, it prompted a small exodus.

Then, in 2003, Robinson was made bishop of New Hampshire, and "conservatives" called the move the last straw.

Some critics of the Episcopal Church also are troubled by the liberal tendencies of new presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, who does not oppose gay ordination. Even the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev. Rowan Williams, who replaced George Carey in 2003, has come under fire from some quarters for his relatively tolerant views.

Steve Skardon, who maintains an unofficial Web site about the Episcopal Church and who is an active member at Grace Church, said that many issues, large and small, have rubbed conservatives the wrong way over the years, and that among those are desegregation, ordination of women and now gay ordination.

A new Book of Common Prayer made the language more neutral and accessible, but some complained that it de-emphasized the subject of sin, a fundamental catholic concept, Skardon said.

In the 1980s, laypeople began administering the Communion chalice. "At my dad's church in Florence, a lot of congregants walked out," he said. This retreat from tradition and a willingness to reconcile Scripture with contemporary society is what caused some to complain and, eventually, rebel.

"At the General Conventions, conservatives were getting voted down again and again," Skardon said. They were feeling increasingly alienated and ignored.

Barbara Mann theorized that the conflict is less a theological disagreement than a power struggle.

"It's not really about the gay issue or Scripture," she said. "It's about loss of power among the good-old-boy network."

### **A theological argument**

The Rt. Rev. Lawrence said gay ordination is the catalyst prompting the actions, not "the reason" for contemplating secession. Lawrence was elected the new bishop of the diocese in September and now waits to receive consent from the national House of Bishops and diocesan standing committees.

Lawrence said the controversy over ordination and election of gay clergy has only by chance served as the crowbar used to pull the church apart.

"The tendency for the media is to zero in on the sexual component of the story, sometimes ignoring that it's a larger issue of commitment to the authenticity of Holy Scripture," he said in a

recent interview. "It could very easily have been a controversy over other matters. In some ways, it would have been better had it been."

Episcopal Church leaders in the Lowcountry have said that they hope the church will recognize that it has alienated an important element of its membership and work to reconcile the differences between factions.

They say the national church has willfully disregarded its own canons, the Windsor Report and the wishes of the larger Anglican Communion in making Robinson a bishop.

Alternative relationship with a church primate other than Jefferts Schori is a way to establish a holding pattern while a resolution to the conflict is worked out, they say.

In a June 28 address to his parish, Steve Wood, the rector at St. Andrew's Church in Mount Pleasant and former candidate for bishop, blamed the Episcopal Church for straying too far away from the rest of the Anglican Communion.

Wood was elected to the diocese's standing committee in 2005 and serves on the steering committee of the Anglican Communion Network, which has worked toward separation and supported an alternative relationship as a step in that direction.

"Evil always, ultimately, overplays its hand," he told his congregation.

Some say it might be too late for reconciliation.

John Burwell, rector at Holy Cross Church on Sullivan's Island, said the Episcopal Church is now "under judgment."

"We have erred and strayed from his ways like lost sheep," he said in a September interview. "We have done ourselves in, and as a consequence, the church is under judgment. Schism is caused by sin. ... We are two churches under one roof. It's like oil and water — it's just not going to work. Unfortunately, it appears that there will be a realignment."

Burwell said that the genius of Anglicanism has been an adherence to law when all else is uncertain. You can't put Scripture to a vote, he said. "Christians can't be pluralists." Though the church is for everyone, he said, "don't expect blanket acceptance when we are all sinners."

That sentiment is shared by many in the pews.

Stephen Coker, a cradle Episcopalian and parishioner at St. Andrew's Church, bemoaned what he called a 30-year deterioration of traditional Christian values.

"I think we're at the bottom of the curve now," Coker said.

The inclusiveness of the church is good to a point, but the leadership has tried to be everything to everybody, he said.

"When you start altering biblical standards to accommodate everybody, it's just not going to work," he said.

Others say Christian responsibility entails introspection and tolerance.

Lynn and Dottie Pagliaro believe that to see controversial issues clearly, one requires the "lens of Christ."

"What would Jesus Christ say?" Lynn Pagliaro said in a recent interview.

In 2004, the Pagliaros helped found the Episcopal Forum of South Carolina, a group working to keep the church united.

Lynn Pagliaro differentiated "liberal" and "conservative" attitudes this way: Religious liberals, he said, believe God created the world and humankind so that people could love the Creation and one another, and flourish. Conservatives believe in following guidelines they say were established by God in an attempt to avoid evil.

The former, he said, is focused on a dynamic and inspirational Holy Spirit, the latter on the word of God.

"What do you do if you're part of an institution that does something repugnant to you?" asked Dottie Pagliaro. "Do you stay and try to change it? Or do you leave?"

## **Who's behind the split?**

Some Episcopalians charge that the breakaway has been deliberately orchestrated by ideologues from both inside and outside the church.

The American Anglican Council was founded in 1995 by a small faction within the Episcopal Church. According to its mission statement, the council is "a network of individuals (laity, deacons, priests and bishops), parishes and specialized ministries who affirm biblical authority and Christian orthodoxy within the Anglican Communion. ... We are uniting in order to fulfill our apostolic mission and ministry, working to build a faithful Anglican witness in the Americas."

The council has been funded extensively by five secular foundations and one individual, according to a report by Jim Naughton that appeared last year in *The Washington Window*, which is published by the Diocese of Washington (D.C.), a diocese loyal to the Episcopal Church.

The contributors included the Bradley, Coors, Olin, Scaife and Smith-Richardson family foundations, as well as savings-and-loan heir Howard F. Ahmanson Jr., the report stated.

In 2004, the council spawned the Anglican Communion Network and the Anglican Communion Institute after the Windsor Report urged the Episcopal Church to place a moratorium on gay ordination.

The institute functions as a think-tank promoting conservative Anglican theology, according to its Web site. The network, considered by its critics to be a church within the church, has advocated schism since the ordination of Gene Robinson.

On Dec. 23, 2003, Geoff Chapman, senior pastor of St. Stephen's Church in Sewickley, Pa., and active in the network, wrote a letter to select members of the church summarizing the work of the council's Strategy Committee. He asked recipients to keep the letter confidential, but it was leaked to the press.

"Our ultimate goal is a realignment of Anglicanism on North American soil committed to biblical faith and values, and driven by Gospel mission," Chapman wrote. "We believe in the end this should be a "replacement" jurisdiction with confessional standards, maintaining the historic faith of our Communion, closely aligned with the majority of world Anglicanism, emerging from the disastrous actions of General Convention (2003)." And he went on: "We seek to retain ownership of our property as we move into this realignment."

Two stages are defined in the letter:

Stage One would consist of a "spiritual realignment" during which efforts would be made to build up the network and its support structures, "creatively redirect finances," and refocus on gospel initiatives.

It would enable congregations to keep their buildings, Chapman wrote.

Stage Two would involve forging closer relationships with church leaders outside the United States, and reaching negotiated settlements concerning property, jurisdiction, pastoral succession and communion.

"If adequate settlements are not within reach, a faithful disobedience of canon law on a widespread basis may be necessary," Chapman wrote.

The Episcopal Church and its internal critics are now in Stage Two.

The Diocese of San Joaquin announced Dec. 1 that it was repudiating its membership in the Episcopal Church, a step in the process of realignment.

And the Diocese of South Carolina elected Lawrence its new bishop in September. Lawrence, a priest in the San Joaquin diocese, has indicated a willingness to break away from the national church if it fails to adhere to Scripture.

"I shall commit myself to work at least as hard at keeping the Diocese of South Carolina in the Episcopal Church as my sister and brother bishops work at keeping the Episcopal Church in covenanted relationship with the worldwide Anglican Communion," Lawrence wrote in a Nov. 30 response to a question posed by bishops and standing committee members.

Several churches that are members of the network, including Holy Trinity in West Ashley and St. Andrew's in Mount Pleasant, have already removed the word "Episcopal" from their church signs.

### **A proposed covenant**

The "covenanted relationship" Lawrence referred to has to do with the network's advocacy of a formal pledge that every Episcopalian must sign in order to be recognized as a member of the church.

The covenant, which would have to be approved at General Convention, would require Episcopalians to "ensure an orthodox Anglican Province in North America that remains connected to a faithful global Communion," and "create a unity in the essentials of our Anglican faith that respects our varied styles and expressions."

In other words, work toward the establishment of a new province in the United States and a promise to adhere strictly to its orthodox resolutions, canons and bylaws.

A companion "Common Cause Theological Statement" would require Episcopalians to affirm that "Holy Scripture is the word of God containing all things necessary for salvation."

Williams, rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, rejected the idea on its face. Never before have Episcopalians been asked to enter into a formal covenant relationship with the church, he said.

### **Money business**

The network has provided parishes that prefer an orthodox interpretation of Anglicanism with an alternative administrative body to support financially.

Typically, dioceses send 21 percent of their income to the national church to help fund its operation and various programs. But the Diocese of South Carolina's Canon Theologian Kendall Harmon said it troubles him that money has left local ministries to help fund a large national bureaucracy. Fueling the diocese's growth — it's among the fastest growing in the country — is its emphasis on local ministry and its skepticism of bureaucracy, he said. So more money should stay local.

The diocese has adopted a "10-10-10" formula proposed by Bishop Edward Salmon.

Parishioners give 10 percent of their income to the church, the church gives 10 percent of its income to the diocese and the diocese gives 10 percent of its income to Episcopal church headquarters in New York City.

Parishes must specify if they want their share earmarked for the national church.

If they don't specify, Harmon said, the diocese decides how to spend the money, which typically goes to various recipients, including the Network.

Rev. Jan Nunley, spokeswoman for the national church, said there is no binding obligation for a diocese to send any particular amount to national programs.

"In other words, it's not like membership dues, or a tax," she wrote in an e-mail. "However, the General Convention does set a percentage of income — lately it's been around 21 or 22 percent — that's the recommended "fair share" of a diocese, and most dioceses that are able to pay that amount do so or get as close to it as they can."

The inability of an "economically stressed" diocese to pay, or pay its fair share, does not affect its membership in the General Convention, she wrote.

"Of course, there's always the "free rider" problem in religion, as in economics," Nunley wrote, and that's what the church seems to be dealing with in the case of those congregations and dioceses unwilling to shoulder their share of the financial responsibility.

The Diocese of South Carolina, most of whose 76 parishes do not agree with the trajectory of the national church, has expressed dissent financially before, Mann said.

“The last time the diocese withheld money from 815 (Second Avenue, New York City church headquarters) was during the 1950s over desegregation,” she said.

### **The options**

Among the most pressing immediate issues for the Diocese of South Carolina is Lawrence’s consecration as bishop.

The diocese and its bishop-elect must receive consent from the bishops and standing committees of the Episcopal Church before Lawrence can assume his new post. His consecration is planned for Feb. 24.

Should the majority of bishops and standing committees fail to provide consent, two possibilities remain, Mann said.

Lawrence can accept the results or agree to be consecrated anyway. Consecration requires the participation of three bishops.

Any three bishops willing to consecrate Lawrence would by definition be already disassociated, or willing to be disassociated, from the Episcopal Church.

If he moves to Charleston, he will oversee a conservative diocese on a path toward realignment, a path he has said he is willing to walk.

Years of negotiations with African bishops has set the stage for an alternative primatial relationship.

The diocese could follow in the footsteps of the eight Virginia parishes, seeking oversight from Rwandan Archbishop Emmanuel Mbona Kolini or Nigerian Archbishop Peter Akinola. Both men have reached out to American (and Canadian) parishes and dioceses.

Akinola is an outspoken opponent of homosexuality who supports legislation in Nigeria that would make it illegal for gay men and lesbians to form organizations, read gay literature or eat together in a restaurant, the New York Times recently reported.

Any such realignment would inevitably result in drawn-out court battles over church property.

American parishes would have to buy their property from the Episcopal Church (if the national church would agree, and if the congregations could afford the price) or fight for it in court.

Furthermore, a realignment with the Church of Nigeria or Rwanda would likely come with a good dose of culture shock, Episcopal Church spokeswoman Nunley said. For example, the African primates were instrumental in getting a resolution passed at the 1988 Lambeth Conference condoning polygamy. And women are not allowed to be priests.

Many of those seeking realignment say the national church has oppressed them, but it’s likely that one of the African churches will eventually impose its theology and practice on its American brethren, and “the constitution of the Church of Nigeria offers no possibility for appeal,” Nunley said.

“It’s going to be different, and I don’t think they appreciate how much.”

And what will happen to the few parishes who choose to remain affiliated with the Episcopal Church? They, too, will realign, perhaps becoming part of the Diocese of Upper South Carolina, which is based in Columbia, or part of a reborn coastal diocese, albeit one a fraction of its former size.