



Episcopal Diocese Splits from U.S. Church Over Gay Support

By GayWebMonkey.com

Los Angeles, CA - The diocese of San Joaquin in Central California has voted to secede from the U.S. Episcopal Church over its tolerance and growing support of gays, according to United Press International. Delegates at San Joaquin's annual convention approved the split this weekend and accepted an invitation to align the diocese with conservative Anglican leader Archbishop Gregory James Venables of Argentina.

More liberal policies toward homosexuality within the Episcopal Church have strained the Anglican community to the point of breaking apart the 77 million-member worldwide communion. The consecration in 2003 of Bishop V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, who is openly gay, became a rallying point on both sides of the issue—sparking debate, controversy and the eventual threat of a split within the Anglican Communion. In addition, in recent years some Episcopal churches have relaxed their policies to allow the blessings of same-sex marriages, which has added to the outrage of more conservative sects.

In late September, U.S. bishops agreed to roll back liberal policies regarding gays in the Episcopal Church, the American branch of the Anglican Church, to prevent a split in among Anglicans over the issues of homosexuality. The decision was reached after a six day summit in New Orleans attended by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.

The decision to cease ordinance of gay bishops and to step back from the blessing of same-sex marriages came only days before a September 30th deadline imposed by Anglican leaders in Tanzania to resolve the issue or face a "a damaged at best" relationship with the U.S. branch of Anglicanism.

The resolution adopted at the meeting called for the Episcopal House of Bishops to "exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion," according to a report on the Episcopal Church's official web site. Church leaders also vowed "not to authorize or use in our dioceses any public rites of blessing of same-sex unions until a broader consensus emerges in the Communion or until (the) General Convention takes further action."

However, the resolution did not specifically forbid clergy from presiding over unauthorized same-sex unions, instead saying that they should "respond with love and understanding to the people of all sexual orientations... (and) maintain a breadth of private responses to situations of individual pastoral care." The Episcopal House of Bishops also pledged opposition to any "actions or policies that does violence to them [homosexuals], encourages violence towards them or violates their dignity as children of God."

According to the Associated Press, the diocese of San Joaquin voted 173-22 to secede from the Episcopal Church. All references to the U.S. national church will be stricken from the diocese's constitution. About 50 congregations have moved to cut ties with the national Episcopal church, but San Joaquin is the first full diocese to do so, according to the Los Angeles Times. The diocese will now look to South American Archbishop Gregory James Venables for leadership.

"This is the first time, I believe, that a diocese has finally said 'enough' in terms of the liberal theology of the Episcopal Church," said the Rt Rev John-David Schofield, the Bishop of San Joaquin, according to Telegraph.co.uk. The diocese, located in central California, holds 47 churches with about 8,500 members.

"The Episcopal Church receives with sadness the news that some members of this church have made a decision to leave this church," Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori said in a statement, according to the Associated Press. "We deeply regret their unwillingness or inability to live within the historical Anglican understanding of comprehensiveness. We wish them to know of our prayers for them and their journey. The Episcopal Church will continue in the Diocese of San Joaquin, albeit with new leadership."

A legal battle over the diocese's church property and assets could result from the split.

Written By Ann Turner