

Episcopal Church Moves to End Ban on Gay Bishops

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By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

ANAHEIM, Calif. — The bishops of the Episcopal Church voted at the church's convention on Monday to open "any ordained ministry" to gay men and lesbians, a move that could effectively undermine a moratorium on ordaining gay bishops that the church passed at its last convention three years ago.

The resolution passed on Monday was written in a way that would allow dioceses to consider gay candidates to the episcopacy, but does not mandate that all dioceses do so.

A similar measure was passed on Sunday by the church's other legislative body, the House of Deputies, which is made up of laypeople and clergy. On Tuesday, the bishops' version will probably go back to the House of Deputies for reconsideration.

The resolution, if approved, would probably add to the strife in the [Anglican Communion](#), the world's third largest family of Christian churches, of which the Episcopal Church is the American branch.

The battle over homosexuality in the Episcopal Church has been watched closely by other mainline Protestant churches that are also divided internally on the issue. Many are looking to the Episcopal Church as a bellwether that could foretell whether their denominations can survive the storm over homosexuality intact.

Conservative provinces in the Anglican Communion, especially some in Africa, have broken off their ties with the Episcopal Church in recent years after the church consecrated Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the communion, who was elected in the diocese of New Hampshire six years ago.

The moratorium that the Episcopal Church had passed at its convention three years ago was an attempt to calm conservatives in the communion and in the Episcopal Church. While not explicitly labeled a moratorium, it urged Episcopal dioceses to refrain from consecrating bishops whose "manner of life" posed a challenge to the rest of the Anglican Communion. In fact, a few openly gay candidates were considered for election in the last three years, but none of them won sufficient support, and the moratorium was never tested.

In the end the moratorium pleased no one: neither conservatives who observed that some in the church did not really intend to abide by it, nor liberals who saw it as a codification of discrimination and injustice to gay clergy members who otherwise were qualified to be considered as bishops.

The Rev. Susan Russell, a priest in Los Angeles who is the president of Integrity USA, an advocacy group for gay men and lesbians in the church, said in a statement late Monday, "There is no question that today's vote in the House of Bishops was an historic move forward and a great day for all who support the full inclusion of all the baptized in the Body of Christ."

The Episcopal News Service reported that Bishop Henry Parsley of Alabama, who voted against the resolution on Monday, said it would be interpreted overseas as a rejection of the moratorium, even though he thinks it is more nuanced.

"I long for us to be an inclusive church, but not a polarized church," he said. "We need to be a part of the larger Anglican Communion in what we do in this matter. I think it will be interpreted internationally as a rejection of B033," the legislation that instituted the moratorium on gay bishops three years ago.

The moratorium had done little to forestall the fracturing both within the Episcopal Church and in the Anglican Communion. Conservatives in both bodies have formed their own alliances in the last three years, asserting that they represent the true Anglican tradition.

In the United States, four dioceses — Fort Worth; Pittsburgh; Quincy, Ill.; and San Joaquin, Calif. — have voted to split from the Episcopal Church (although some parishes within those dioceses elected to remain). Last year, they joined with other disaffected parishes and groups that had splintered from the Episcopal Church over many years to form the "Anglican Church in North America." That group held its first convention, in Texas, last month. They claim 100,000 members, while the Episcopal Church claims about 2 million.

The new group says that Scripture clearly prohibits homosexual relationships. Church liberals, meanwhile, insist that the Anglican tent is large enough to tolerate multiple approaches.

The debates at the convention in Anaheim over the last few days have made it clear that the liberals increasingly have the upper hand within the Episcopal Church. At a debate over whether to develop formal rites for same-sex blessings, 50 people testified in favor and 6 against.

A committee on Monday overwhelmingly approved a measure that would permit same-sex blessings, and the House of Bishops will take that up later this week.

The debate before the House of Deputies voted on Sunday to overturn the moratorium on gay bishops sometimes grew emotional. Sally Johnson, a lay delegate from Minnesota, who had supported the moratorium three years ago, proclaimed that she had decided now to support D025, the measure to overturn the moratorium, because it is a more accurate reflection of where the Episcopal Church stands.

"I stand before you now asking us to give D025 to the church and the communion as a gift, reflecting our messiness in our church but an authentic, truthful statement about who we are as the Episcopal Church," she said.

But speaking in opposition, the Rev. Ralph Stanwise, from the diocese of Quincy, said, "If we overturn the B033 moratorium we will in effect be urging many remaining conservatives and moderates among us and in our home dioceses, especially our most fragile ones, to search for the exit signs."

Told of the vote to undo the moratorium by the House of Deputies, the Archbishop of Canterbury, [Rowan Williams](#), who as head of the Church of England is considered "first among equals" among the communion's archbishops, said that he regretted the move because it could further fracture the communion, which he has been struggling to keep intact.

Dr. Williams addressed the General Convention in Anaheim as it opened last week, saying, "Along with many in the communion, I hope and pray that there won't be decisions in the coming days that will push us further apart. If we — if I — had felt that we could do perfectly well without you, there wouldn't be a problem."

Rebecca Cathcart contributed reporting from Los Angeles.

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/15/us/15episcopal.html?_r=1&em=&pagewanted=print