

Episcopal Church to Allow Bishops to Bless Same-Sex Unions

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Episcopal Church officials voted on Friday to allow bishops the latitude to bless same-sex unions -- the second vote this week in favor of gay rights and one that may further divide the worldwide Anglican community.

On the last day of the church's triennial national convention in Anaheim, officials stopped short of creating liturgical rites to bless same-sex unions, but approved a compromise measure that allows bishops, especially in states where same-sex unions are legal, to bless the relationships. The key portion of the legislation says bishops "may provide generous pastoral response" for such unions.

The vote came three days after the church passed a resolution allowing for the [ordination of gay bishops](#). Both moves have prompted strong reactions among the larger worldwide Anglican Church, of which the Episcopal Church is a part.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the preeminent Anglican clergyman, had asked the Episcopalians before the convention not to take up issues that would further divide the church. This week the influential bishop of Durham, England, wrote an [essay](#) describing the ongoing crisis as "a slow-moving train crash" and the most recent actions of the Episcopal Church as marking "a clear break with the rest of the Anglican Communion."

Meanwhile, gay rights advocates said this week's victories lay the groundwork for future moves. Friday's resolution included a call for bishops to "collect and develop theological, and liturgical resources" on same sex unions to report to the next convention. Three years from now, they may consider creating a standard liturgy for same-sex unions with the eventual goal of including a rite for gay marriage in the church's prayer book.

Mike Angell, who is studying to become an Episcopal priest at the Virginia Theological Seminary, said Friday's decision comes as a relief. "I have a number of friends -- straight and gay -- who requested me to perform their weddings once I'm ordained," said Angell, who believes in equality for gay parishioners. "I would have felt limited and compromised blessing hetero couples but not gay couples. It's an issue of justice."

The church's recent moves may also have a wider influence on denominations that are watching how the issue of homosexual clergy and marriage plays out among Episcopalians.

"These actions could show other denominations that progress can be made without destroying the church," said Harry Knox, religion and faith director at the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay rights group.

But some believe the recent moves have come at a cost. A number of parishes and dioceses have left the 2.3 million member Episcopal Church and affiliated with overseas branches of the Anglican Communion. Last month, some conservatives who left the Episcopal Church over issues of Scripture and sexuality formed the Anglican Church in North America.

Rev. John Sheehan, who leads the Church of Our Redeemer in Loudoun County, said his congregation decided three years ago not to leave the Episcopal Church even as several other similarly conservative churches in Northern Virginia decided to split.

"Now that the convention is over, we need to see what impact all this will have on us as a parish," he said Friday. "This is something we'll hold meetings about and talk over."

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