

Episcopal bishops agree not to help breakaway congregations

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [April 17, 2013](#) issue

The Episcopal Church has a new commandment for its bishops: thou shalt not assist former Episcopalians who are trying to take the church's assets.

Church leaders have reached an agreement with nine bishops who had supported breakaway congregations in Texas and Illinois court cases. Courts have been sorting out who controls properties and other assets when congregations leave the denomination.

Under the terms, the nine bishops "express regret for any harm" to the dioceses of Quincy, Illinois, and Fort Worth, Texas, as a result of their actions, which included filing amicus briefs that were sympathetic to the breakaway groups.

The bishops also pledged to stop supporting breakaway groups in court cases, at least until the church's General Convention addresses the matter in 2015. They also agree to help defray costs incurred by the church in reaching the accord.

The accord is billed as an outcome of "conciliation," which is a step in the church disciplinary process. But tensions remain unresolved.

Conciliation "doesn't achieve full reconciliation," said Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori. "It is a step in that direction."

The Episcopal Church has lost hundreds of congregations over the past decade as conservatives left in protest of new blessings for gay bishops and same-sex couples, among other issues. As congregations have departed and ensuing property disputes have landed in court, bishops from dioceses that are not involved in the litigation have sometimes weighed in to help interpret church rules and organizational structures.

The bishops who signed the accord did not admit to any misconduct or wrongdoing, according to a recent blog post by Bishop Daniel Martins of Springfield, Illinois. Nor

are the named bishops content with the disciplinary process.

“All nine of us are processing some degree of anger and are feeling substantially alienated from those who brought the charges against us,” he wrote. “We feel manipulated and victimized. We are nowhere near happy about this outcome, even though we stand by our decision to accept the accord.”

Church leaders were briefed on the accord during the House of Bishops’ recent meeting in North Carolina. They received the report with minimal questions and didn’t focus on it during the retreat, according to Bishop Todd Ousley of Eastern Michigan.

Signatories to the accord, meanwhile, have no plans to reconsider what they’ve told the courts.

“We have made our point about the polity of our church in Texas and Illinois courts. Those points are now matters of public record,” Martins said in his March 10 blog post. “There is no more reason for us to intervene as we did to protect the truth about [the Episcopal Church’s] polity and interests of our own dioceses.”

Five of the nine bishops named in the accord are retired. —RNS

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