

Gay Episcopal bishop treated for alcoholism: Robinson plans to return after treatment

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New Hampshire bishop V. Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, is undergoing treatment for his “increasing dependence on alcohol,” he wrote in a letter to the 49 churches in his diocese.

Robinson, 58, voluntarily checked himself into an undisclosed facility on February 1 for a four-week stay. Robinson said in the letter, dated February 13, that he has the support of his partner, Mark Andrew, and his two daughters.

“Over the 28 days I will be here, I will be dealing with the disease of alcoholism—which, for years, I have thought of as a failure of will or discipline on my part, rather than a disease over which my particular body simply has no control, except to stop drinking altogether,” Robinson wrote.

Robinson was elected as the church’s first openly gay bishop in 2003, a move that has threatened to split the U.S. Episcopal Church and permanently alienate it from sister churches in the worldwide Anglican Communion.

Robinson’s letter was first made public on a blog run by Kendall Harmon, a conservative church leader from South Carolina. Mike Barwell, Robinson’s spokesman, confirmed the contents of the letter.

Barwell said the bishop “absolutely” intends to return to work after his treatment, and a statement from the diocese’s elected standing committee voiced support for Robinson.

Though some opponents of Robinson wished him well in his treatment, one outspoken activist, David W. Virtue, faulted the bishop for not making an “admission that it is personal failure.

“[The] Episcopal Church Left is already spinning to make him [Robinson] look like a victim of his own drinking,” wrote Virtue, who edits an Anglican Web site that campaigns for “orthodoxy,” VirtueOnline. “It is one more example of the Left trumpeting sin as a noble cause.”

Prior to his election as bishop, Robinson specialized in working with clergy on health and wellness issues, and led clergy wellness conferences in more than 20 dioceses in the U.S. and Canada.

It is not the first time an Episcopal bishop has sought treatment for alcoholism. In 1999, Bishop Carolyn Tanner Irish of Utah took a leave of absence for alcoholism after a rocky tenure as bishop exacerbated her disease.

In 1993, Bishop Frank Vest of the Diocese of Southern Virginia also sought treatment for alcoholism. The man who succeeded him in 1998, Bishop David Bane Jr., was a recovering alcoholic.

The church’s General Convention in 1985 approved a resolution calling alcoholism a “three-fold impairment of body, mind and spirit,” and said church employees suffering from the disease should “be treated with pastoral love and concern.”

Robinson said in the letter that he has “learned so much” during his first weeks of treatment and that the experience would “inform my ministry for years to come.” – *Religion News Service*