

Episcopal division widens in Virginia: Historic parishes vote to leave

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Conservative Episcopalians' steady exodus from the Episcopal Church accelerated before Christmas as eight Virginia congregations—including two large, historic parishes—voted to leave the national body.

The Diocese of Virginia has lost 12 congregations and about 18 percent of its average Sunday worship attendance in recent battles over homosexuality and the authority of scripture, according to figures provided by the diocese.

The size of the breakaway parishes, their historical importance and their success at starting new congregations all sent shivers through the Episcopal Church, said influential conservative theologian Kendall Harmon. "This is terribly significant," said Harmon of South Carolina. "When you lose large churches, you don't just lose an individual parish, you lose a great big part of the family."

The fight in Virginia will be closely watched by both sides—by the conservative minority, to see how hard it is to cut ties with the national church, and by church lawyers, who will fight aggressively to maintain control of property.

The eight Virginia congregations announced their decision to leave December 17. Three more were considering similar action. A looming legal scrap will determine if the diocese loses more than \$27 million in property as well.

A "saddened" Virginia bishop Peter Lee promised a fight. "As stewards of this historic trust, we fully intend to assert the church's canonical and legal rights over these properties," he said in a statement.

The Virginia congregations have thrust themselves to the front line of a conservative movement in which U.S. parishes are aligning with theological allies in the wider Anglican Communion.

While conservatives are a small part of the 2.2-million-member Episcopal Church, a majority of the world's 37 other Anglican provinces agree with their belief that the Bible trumps cultural accommodations on issues like homosexuality.

Tensions in the U.S. church, mounting since the decision to ordain women three decades ago, exploded after an openly gay man was elected bishop of New Hampshire in 2003.

Since Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, who supports the consecration of gay bishops and the blessing of same-sex unions, was elected in June, seven dioceses have rejected her authority. One diocese—San Joaquin, California—has taken preliminary steps to leave the Episcopal Church.

Jefferts Schori, commenting after the Virginia votes were taken, asked Episcopalians "to pray for everyone involved—those who feel a need to leave and those who remain." But she also said that the eight separating congregations are "a very, very small percentage of the church, and the vast bulk of the church is healthy."

Two of the breakaway Virginia parishes—the Falls Church in the city of Falls Church and Truro Church in Fairfax City—have American roots that stretch back to the 18th century. George Washington was on the vestry of the Falls Church.

Now, however, both churches are members of the Convocation of Anglicans in North America (CANA), a branch of the Anglican Church of Nigeria. That church is headed by Archbishop Peter Akinola, an outspoken and powerful conservative who has publicly supported Nigeria's strict antigay laws.

The U.S. convocation will be headed by Martyn Minns, rector of Truro Church, whom Akinola has appointed a missionary bishop. The Episcopal Church "has been our spiritual home and separating from it is very hard," Minns said in a statement. "But there is also the promise of a new day. A burden is being lifted. There are new possibilities breaking through."

Bishop Lee, who has attempted to play a centrist role, nevertheless took a hard line with Truro Church and Falls Church, which he said "have created Nigerian congregations occupying Episcopal churches."

The Anglican Communion's secretary general in London, Kenneth Kearon, said December 15 in a statement that Akinola's CANA had "not petitioned the Anglican Consultative Council for any official status with the Communion's structures, nor has the Archbishop of Canterbury [Rowan Williams] indicated any support for its establishment."

Episcopal officials announced on December 18 that parish leaders who voted to secede agreed not to attempt transfer of church property to their ownership for 30 days. In return, the diocese promised not to begin any litigation for some time "to help bring healing in any way we can."

Lee reminded dissidents in the same statement that "all real and personal property is held in trust for the Episcopal Church and the diocese." —*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*