Episcopal bishops demand Philadelphia bishop resign

The Episcopal Church's House of Bishops has called for the "immediate and unconditional resignation" of Bishop Charles Bennison of Philadelphia, who had been charged with not reporting his brother's relationship with an underage girl.

"As the House of Bishops, we have come to the conclusion that Bishop Bennison's capacity to exercise the ministry of pastoral oversight is irretrievably damaged," the bishops said September 21 in a resolution passed overwhelmingly during their meeting in Phoenix.

Bennison was removed from ministry in 2007 after being charged with "conduct unbecoming a member of the clergy." He was found guilty in 2008 for failing to investigate or discipline his younger brother and fellow priest John Bennison for an affair with an underage parishioner in the 1970s.

The elder Bennison was reinstated as bishop in August, however, after a church appeals court ruled that the statute of limitations on the charge had expired.

Episcopal Church spokeswoman Neva Rae Fox said the vote by the House of Bishops was unprecedented. "It was a very emotional time," she said on September 22. "The bishops took it very seriously."

Bennison is defiantly refusing to resign, saying his three years of "suffering" through various church trials has "strengthened" his ability to lead his diocese.

He told Religion News Service in August that he had erred but had no intention to resign, despite calls by his diocese's elected leadership, the head of the Episcopal Church's lay and clergy delegates, and victims' advocates to step down.

"I know that I made some mistakes in the 1970s of hiring my brother and not overseeing him and not investigating with scrupulosity what was going on," said Bennison. "I own that."

Bennison said when he had "actual knowledge" of his brother's actions, he made John go to their bishop. John Bennison was defrocked in 1977, later reinstated and then resigned in 2006 when sexual abuse charges resurfaced. *—RNS*