

Gay bishop 'retiring' to build bridges in D.C.

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [December 26, 2012](#) issue

When V. Gene Robinson became the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church in 2003, it triggered shock waves and fears of schism across the worldwide Anglican Communion. Hundreds of parishes left the Episcopal Church in protest.

As this lightning-rod figure prepares to retire on January 5, he's leaving New Hampshire for a city that knows polarization all too well: Washington, D.C.

But rather than throw fuel on the culture wars, Robinson foresees a new role as a bridge builder for a nation strained by divisive issues.

First up: helping his new church home, St. Thomas' Parish in Dupont Circle, found a Center for Nonviolent Communication. "Our big goal is to change the nature of the debate in Washington," Robinson said during an interview at his Concord office. "We're mostly shouting at each other these days."

Robinson, 65, is carving out multiple platforms for weighing in on national issues. He'll be writing essays and doing public interviews as a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning think tank. He'll likely be preaching once a month in his expected role as bishop-in-residence at St. Thomas' Parish, a church known for its advocacy on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues.

The cause of fostering civil dialogue won't mean backing off hot-button issues, however. He plans to keep campaigning for coast-to-coast legalization of same-sex marriage, which is the topic of his new book, *God Believes in Love*. "There is a better way of injecting religious belief and faith into the public debate, and it starts with a certain kind of humility," he said.

For Robinson, causes from gay rights to the environment and a robust social safety net fall under a single rubric: defending the vulnerable. That overarching principle, he hopes, will color each endeavor in the next chapter of his life. He's already raised \$500,000 for a new \$6.3 million sanctuary at St. Thomas' Parish, which was

destroyed by arson in 1970. A chapel will be named for him there, and he's pitching it as a pilgrimage destination.

Yet no matter how he frames his retirement, observers say, he'll be hard-pressed to reinvent himself as a bridge-building figure. Conservative critics say he's defied scriptural authority and flaunted nearly 2,000 years of Christian tradition, first as an openly gay bishop and then by marrying his partner, Mark Andrew, in 2010. They contend he's done untold damage to the 77-million-member Anglican Communion.

Robinson's greatest promise for building bridges might be through private relationships out of the public eye, rather than in the high-profile roles he's lined up, according to Wendy Cadge, a sociologist of religion at Brandeis University.

"To go from being an activist, and from playing the central role that he has played in debates over homosexuality, to being someone who helps people . . . come together would be very difficult," says Cadge, who studies mainline Protestant attitudes toward homosexuality. "But maybe he has some other idea for building relationships that we just don't know yet." —RNS

This article was edited Dec. 12, 2012.