

North Carolina Catholics leave council of churches

by [Amanda Greene](#) in the [October 30, 2013](#) issue

At a time when Pope Francis is calling for the church to give up its obsession with homosexuality and abortion, North Carolina's Roman Catholic dioceses are severing a long-held ecumenical bond over those issues.

Unable to resolve their differences, the dioceses of Raleigh and Charlotte have decided to withdraw their membership from the North Carolina Council of Churches effective at the end of the year.

For more than 30 years, North Carolina enjoyed a unique ecumenical alliance between Protestants and Catholics.

The council's members joined to address issues such as economic justice, equality and peace. Recently, they pressed the U.S. Senate for transparency on torture of detainees held after 9/11, for example.

But in a joint statement, Bishop Michael Burbidge of Raleigh and Bishop Peter Jugis of Charlotte, said the alliance has resulted in religious leaders being associated with positions "that are at times in contradiction with their practice and the teaching" of their faith.

Specifically, the state council opposed a state constitutional amendment prohibiting same-sex marriage. The amendment passed in 2012 with the enthusiastic support of the two Catholic dioceses. And while the council has no position on abortion, the Catholic Church views it as an evil that must be opposed.

"We just were not able to resolve those issues, and they felt they could not continue as members," said George Reed, the council's executive director.

The North Carolina Council of Churches was founded in 1935 and today includes members of 18 Christian denominations and eight individual congregations.

The Raleigh diocese joined in 1977. Over the years, the council staff included a Catholic nun who helped the group craft its farmworker, immigration and peace initiatives, said Aleta Payne, the council's press director.

The loss of the membership of the two dioceses will cost the council 10 percent of its yearly budget or about \$12,000.

The Catholic Church is not a member body of the National Council of Churches, but regional councils sometimes include Catholics, said National Council of Churches press liaison Philip E. Jenks.

The North Carolina bishops said they hoped to continue working with the council on issues they agree on such as immigration reform, just wages, poverty and ending the death penalty.

"Half of the purpose of the Council of Churches was to promote a model of Christian unity across denominations that have divided us," Reed said.

Lifelong Catholic Alberta Hairston, the council's board president, said the move "has been personally difficult."

"I understand where the bishops are coming from," she said. "But there's not that many vehicles for people of varying faith traditions to come together and discuss issues that promote the common good." —RNS