

Dissident bishops hold defiant service: "Unauthorized and clandestine"

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 6, 2004](#) issue

Episcopal church leaders have reacted sharply to what one called an "unauthorized and clandestine" service in Ohio at which five retired conservative U.S. bishops, joined by a bishop from Brazil, confirmed 110 persons without the permission or presence of the diocesan bishop.

The confirmation service was held March 15 in the Presentation of Our Lord Orthodox Church in Fairlawn, Ohio, with the help of the conservative American Anglican Council and five area congregations unhappy with their bishop, J. Clark Grew II. Grew supported the election and consecration of openly gay Bishop V. Gene Robinson, who was officially invested March 7 as bishop of New Hampshire.

The secretly planned service, probably the most defiant step by dissidents to date, was held in an Orthodox church so that Grew could not act to stop it.

Since the triennial national convention last summer of the Episcopal Church, when Robinson's election was ratified and delegates allowed same-sex rites to continue without sanctions, traditionalist opponents have said the unprecedented steps have plunged the denomination and the wider Anglican Communion into a crisis.

Grew, who heads the Diocese of Ohio, which has 24,000 members in 104 parishes in the northern half of the state, termed the service "unauthorized and clandestine." He said "there is no crisis in the Diocese of Ohio except the one created by a group that hopes to hold on to attention that is slipping away as time passes." Bishop-elect Mark Hollingsworth, who will succeed Grew, also criticized the action, saying the Diocese of Ohio, meeting last November, "clearly articulated [its] support of an inclusive theology."

Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold said the bishops taking part in the ceremony “have arrogated to themselves the right to perform” services without the permission of a local bishop. Griswold disputed the claim of participants that they had a pastoral mandate from the archbishop of Canterbury and other Anglican primates abroad.

Griswold, in his statement released March 15, said he surmised that the defiant action was taken “to co-opt the bishops’ agenda” at their spring meeting in Texas the following weekend and elicit sympathy for a program to provide pastoral exceptions for “dissenting minorities.”

Meanwhile, the dissident American Anglican Council called the service “an unprecedented and historic move.” Bishop William Wantland, retired bishop of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, was the celebrant of the confirmation Eucharist and retired Bishop C. FitzSimons Allison of South Carolina was the preacher.

Bishop Robinson Cavalcanti of Northern Brazil was described in an AAC news release as a special guest at the service. Others participating were Maurice Benitez, retired bishop of Texas; William Cox, retired assistant bishop of Oklahoma; and Alex Dickson, retired bishop of West Tennessee.

“We came as pastors to give them some hope, some encouragement and to try to assure them that there is a future for them in the Episcopal Church,” Benitez told Religion News Service after the service. A priest from a sponsoring congregation, R. James Tasker of St. Barnabas in Bay Village, said he was uncertain what the ramifications of the service will be for him and his congregation. But it was “a wonderful day,” he said. “This was a great statement of biblical faith. It was a real highlight of my life.”

Bishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh, moderator of a new network of “Orthodox Episcopalians,” expressed his support for the newly confirmed laypeople in Ohio. “I also pray for the retiring bishop of Ohio and for the bishop-elect that they might respond with grace to the canonical irregularities with which they now find themselves confronted,” Duncan said through the American Anglican Council.

Just prior to the U.S. bishops’ spring meeting (which concluded after press time for the Century), ten bishops who head provinces in the denomination and act as Griswold’s Council of Advice issued a joint statement expressing “our strong disapproval” of the unauthorized service in Ohio. The ten bishops said they did not all agree with the actions of the 2003 General Convention but added that their

common bond of mission is more enduring than forces “which seek to sow the seeds of division.”