

Gay priest in Britain named diocesan dean: Withdrew last year from appointment as Anglican bishop

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The issue of homosexuality has come back to haunt the Church of England with the appointment of avowedly gay Canon Jeffrey John as dean of the diocese of St. Albans—the same priest who was forced to withdraw last year from an appointment as a bishop.

John had been appointed a year ago as bishop of Reading, a suffragan see of the diocese of Oxford, but was forced to quit the post barely seven weeks later because of the furor his nomination had aroused both inside the Church of England and within the worldwide Anglican Communion. Opposition arose both because of his advocacy of greater respect for homosexuals by the church and because of his longstanding relationship with another man, even though the relationship has been celibate for a considerable time.

While a dean is not a bishop, John's appointment to the prestigious St. Albans post has met with opposition from those within the Church of England, largely evangelicals, who oppose gays. Rod Thomas, spokesman for Reform, an evangelical network within the church, said the appointment is "very disturbing" because he feels what John teaches is clearly in contradiction both to the New Testament and to the stance adopted by the Church of England's bishops.

In a news conference at St. Albans on April 19, John said he recognized the issue of blessing gay relationships—on which he had changed his mind "more than once"—was like "red rags to bulls" as far as conservatives are concerned. "I support the state and the church offering gay people a framework of living their lives," he said. "I think that ultimately the church will be able to bless that kind of relationship too. It can be sacramental because it can reflect that love."

John's appointment—as with all appointments of deans in the Church of England—was made by the prime minister on the advice of his appointments secretary and has been warmly welcomed by the bishop of St. Albans, Christopher Herbert. —*Religion News Service*