

Episcopal Church dissidents aim for new church

Thu Nov 20, 2008 3:24pm EST

By Michael Conlon, Religion Writer

CHICAGO (Reuters) - Conservatives who have abandoned the U.S. Episcopal Church by the thousands in recent years are trying to form a separate-but-equal church, a move that could leave two branches of Anglicanism on American soil.

"I have tried to see if we can create a safe haven (for traditional views) within the Episcopal Church, but failed," said Bishop Martyn Minns, a leader of the conservatives.

He is helping write a constitution for a new church, to be unveiled December 3, in an effort to be recognized as a new entity within the worldwide Anglican Communion.

Long-time divisions over scriptural interpretation and gay rights had already fragmented the 2.1-million-member Episcopal Church by 2003 when it consecrated Gene Robinson of New Hampshire as the first bishop known to be in an openly gay relationship in more than four centuries of Anglican church history.

That act further roiled the U.S. church and the 77-million-member Anglican Communion of which the Episcopal Church is the U.S. presence.

In recent months four dioceses out of 110 have split from the church in California, Pennsylvania, Texas and Illinois. The church says that fewer than 100 out of 7,100 congregations had either left or voted to leave before that.

RECOGNITION AS A PROVINCE

Robert Lundy, spokesman for the conservative American Anglican Council, estimates that the recent splits have pushed the number higher.

The next step, he said, is for those and like-minded others to create a church that can be recognized as a province. Provinces, such as the

Episcopal Church, are divisions of the Anglican Communion, each headed by a presiding bishop called a primate.

The global church is a federation of such provinces with no strong hierarchical authority as exists in the Roman Catholic Church.

Minns, a former Episcopalian elevated to bishop by the Church of Nigeria and leader of the Convocation of Anglicans in North America, said the new province could count on 100,000 people as its average weekly attendance. The Episcopal Church says its average weekly attendance is about 727,000.

Becoming a province would require approval from two-thirds of the primates and recognition from the Anglican Consultative Council, another church body.

"More than half of the Anglican world will support us," Minns said in an interview, referring to the primates. "My guess is that we have provincial recognition from at least a majority."

GLOBAL SUPPORT LIKELY

The primates meet in February and, if they approve a new province, the matter would go to the Consultative Council when it meets in Jamaica in May of 2009, according to church publications.

The effort likely will draw support from many church leaders in Africa, Asia, Latin America and other parts of the world that represent a conservative wing that is the fastest-growing in worldwide Anglicanism.

The creation of a province, Minns said, has backing from most of the conservatives in the church in the United States. It could also lure some conservatives who have remained loyal to the Episcopal Church despite misgivings.

Frank Kirkpatrick, a professor of religion at Trinity College in Connecticut and author of "The Episcopal Church in Crisis: How Sex, the Bible, and Authority Are Dividing the Faithful," said the church probably has seen the worst of it.

"I absolutely think there will be a strong and vibrant Episcopal Church left. Look at the number of people in their 20s, 30s and 40s. The vast majority don't (care) about whether someone is gay or straight. ... As the older people begin to die off, the rage and passion will begin to disappear," he said in an interview.

Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori said, "The gospel work to which Jesus calls us demands the best efforts of faithful people from many theological and social perspectives, and the (church) will continue to welcome that diversity."

(Editing by Andrew Stern and Xavier Briand)

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