

GAY ISSUES CHALLENGE CHURCHES EPISCOPAL PRIESTS GRAPPLE WITH MARRIAGE

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The controversy over homosexuality and religion has long been defused at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church.

This pioneer Palm Beach County church established a ministry especially for gays and lesbians almost two years before Episcopalian leaders tackled the vexing issue at a national convention last week, triggering a debate that reverberated across the United States and into the White House.

Through a program called Integrity-Palm Beach, Christian services aimed at gay worshippers are conducted each Saturday evening by the Rev. Richard T. Nolan, a retired Episcopal priest who has been in a committed gay relationship for almost five decades.

Now the Rev. William Hamilton, St. Andrew's rector, said he is prepared to take the next step: join same-sex couples in holy matrimony.

Hamilton said he expected to discuss the matter Tuesday with Leo Frade, bishop of the Diocese of Southeast Florida, who has invited about 100 diocesan leaders to lunch at the church's Duncan Center in Delray Beach. "I have never thought of myself as a renegade," said Hamilton, 62. "But if my bishop gives the OK, I am ready."

In a telephone interview Sunday from Key West, where he is vacationing, Frade said he was unlikely to accede to Hamilton's request. "My policy is, and will continue to be, not to authorize the blessing of same-sex unions," said Frade, who presides over 82 churches in a diocese stretching from Martin County to Key West. "The time is not here yet."

At its national convention in Minneapolis, the Episcopal Church voted to confirm openly gay Rev. Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire in what many of those in the majority termed a move toward inclusiveness. Frade said he had first planned on abstaining but voted in favor of Robinson's confirmation "after prayer and fasting."

The convention also agreed that dioceses conducting same-sex blessings are operating within doctrinal boundaries. But in what was seen as a compromise with conservatives, church leaders stopped short of authorizing a common liturgy for celebrating same-sex unions.

Nonetheless, in an address to Integrity on Saturday, Nolan lauded the convention's vote on Robinson as "an extraordinary occasion in the evolution of the Christian Church. ... It is a moment not of winning or losing, but one of exceptional evolution," he said.

Still, the ecclesiastical battle over homosexuality is far from complete. At St. Benedict's Episcopal Church in Plantation, the Rev. Robert J. DeShaies preached tolerance but acknowledged the schism is rocking the faithful. "What saddens me is the polarization and division that will occur in the church due to these actions of the convention," the minister told the congregation Sunday.

Among the aggrieved was St. Benedict's congregant Roy Aguilar, 69, of Sunrise. "I have always stood up against homosexuality and I am personally thinking of leaving the church," he said. "A lot of parishioners are taking it very hard."

Episcopalians are not the only believers roiled by the issue. In the wake of the June U.S. Supreme Court decision striking down state sodomy laws, the Roman Catholic Church, several conservative Protestant denominations and President Bush have voiced strong opposition to same-sex unions.

Although public opinion surveys track a growing acceptance of homosexuality and gay marriage over the past decade, a recent Gallup/ USA Today poll shows some backlash among Americans since the high court decision. Respondents who said they support legalizing homosexual relations between consenting adults dropped from 60 percent in May to 48 percent in July.

In his homily to about 60 worshippers Sunday, Hamilton said little about the historic convention vote. Instead, he mentioned the power of God evident in Thursday's tornado that ravaged parts of Palm Beach County, the life lessons imparted by his junior high school biology teacher and the inspiration to be found in the 1990 movie Edward Scissorhands. "God wants us to do our thing, naturally, without being forced," he said, turning the journey of Johnny Depp's character into a parable.

Over coffee and dessert in the social hall of St. Andrew's, established 89 years ago, Hamilton said that although the convention's closely watched vote was much on his mind, "I thought the most important thing I could do was not to make an issue of what we do as individuals. Our concerns are still what they always are: the poor, the hungry, the abused."

Indeed, for Vance Oden and other gay and lesbian church members, the fight for acceptance at St. Andrew's was won in October 2001, when Integrity was formed and a handful of parishioners walked out in protest. For many gay and lesbian church members, formal recognition of same-sex unions seems not to be a pressing issue.

"I am willing to wait on the church at large to get there," said Oden, 36. "I don't feel my relationship has to be blessed to be valid. Acceptance at this church is wonderful."