



Rev. Paul Blanch stands in the choir loft overlooking the sanctuary of St. George's Episcopal Church on Tuesday.

PETER R. BARBER/
GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER



SCHENECTADY

Seeking outside counsel

St. George's looks to Central N.Y. diocese for spiritual leadership

BY KELLY DE LA ROCHA
Gazette Reporter

An unusual arrangement is enabling St. George's Episcopal Church to break from the spiritual leadership of the Episcopal Diocese of Albany.

The pastor and congregation of the historic Stockade-based church will now look to the more progressive Episcopal Diocese of Central New York for spiritual counsel — a more appropriate fit for the congregation, said the Rev. Paul Blanch, rector of St. George's since 2009.

"The Diocese of Albany, now for the last maybe 15 years, deliberately, openly and all above-board, has taken a very conservative, narrow line on interpretation of Scripture and how you live out that in your daily life, and therefore how your church, as a part of the diocese, should and must function. And I didn't feel that that's necessarily a good

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thing for St. George's and the congregation didn't feel that, so we then had to look for what we could do," Blanch explained.

St. George's made the change in spiritual leadership through a process called Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight (DEPO), which was originally established in 2004 to allow theologically conservative churches based in liberal dioceses to partner with more conservative-minded dioceses. St. George's, a liberal church based in a conservative diocese, used the rule in reverse — something that had never been done before.

Blanch approached the Rt. Rev. Gladstone "Skip" Adams III, bishop of the Syracuse-based Central New York diocese, and he helped with the process. Negotiations began in December. Albany's bishop, the Rt. Rev. William Love, agreed to allow St. George's to partner with the Central New York diocese but required the church to remain under the jurisdiction of the Albany diocese and to abide by its rules.

"This only happened because Bishop Love and I have a trusting relationship with one another," said Adams. "We're friends, and what I think is great about that is that he and I have many commonalities theologically, but also there's some significant differences theologically. But in the middle of that, we remain committed to who we are as people of faith, even while we hold these differences."

A major theological difference between the two dioceses is their view on homosexuality.

The Albany diocese only recognizes what Love called "the traditional understanding of marriage," while the Central New York diocese gives its blessing to same-sex unions.

FREEDOM TO BELIEVE

The DEPO arrangement allows for "breathing space" for parishes that have different views on such issues while allowing them to work with their dioceses in areas where they are of common mind, Love said. But while the arrangement provides some flexibility, the churches remain part of their original dioceses.

"They are still expected to abide by the constitution and canons, not only of the Episcopal Church but of this diocese specifically, and so the fact that Bishop Adams may be at a different place than I am on understandings regarding marriage and human sexuality and I'm allowing him to come and to minister to this congregation, he is not permitted to perform same-gender blessings, and he's here to minister to the congregation as best he can and to provide an opportunity for them to have a more formalized connection with the parts of the church that they currently feel somewhat isolated from," Love said.

Blanch said he and his congregation don't feel they should be hemmed in by such restrictions, but "we're still under all of the authority of the bishop of Albany and we have to respect that, and we understand Bishop [Love's] views."

The change in spiritual alignment was not made with animosity, he noted.

"It's not about triumphalism over Albany and it's not about taking on the bishop for a scrap or a fight. It's just about saying, 'We too have views, and we are passionate about our views like you, Bishop Love, but now we find a father in God who is understanding of our views.'"

St. George's has a tradition of being welcoming and inclusive,



PETER R. BARBER/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER
St. George's Episcopal Church on North Ferry Street in the Stockade section of Schenectady.

'The Diocese of Albany, now for the last maybe 15 years, deliberately, openly and all above-board, has taken a very conservative, narrow line on interpretation of Scripture and how you live out that in your daily life, and therefore how your church, as a part of the diocese, should and must function.'

THE REV. PAUL BLANCH

Rector of St. George's Episcopal Church

Blanch said, noting that the DEPO arrangement has not changed the way the church is run or how he delivers his sermons. Despite that, the switch in spiritual alignment was necessary, he said.

"We just feel that when we need to consult with our father in God, our bishop, we have someone in Bishop Skip Adams whose intellectual abilities, experience of life and of the church fit well with ours and with the kind of people who worship at St. George's. And we are no longer, as it were, made to feel that we are the hard-line liberal or the progressive. We don't see it in terms of liberal thinking or progressive thinking. We talk about following the Gospel."

COMFORTABLE FIT

On Sunday, St. George's celebrated its first Mass under the new ar-

maybe in a different place along the spectrum."

Junior Warden Rick Forshaw said the change has brought with it positive, open communication.

"Everything's very strong. Everybody's feeling great," he said.

The unconventional use of the DEPO process took some in the religious community by surprise, Blanch said.

"There has been some vociferous kinds of criticism of the fact that we've made use of something which was set up for conservatives. And to me that's not what it's about. If it's given to the church, it's there for the benefit of all, and if it facilitates growth and commitment and openness, then it's doing its job," he said.

Three other churches in the Albany diocese, St. John's in Essex, St. Luke's in Saranac Lake and St. Andrew's in Albany, are considering a similar switch in spiritual alignment.

Once in place, the DEPO arrangement is something that is evaluated at least annually, Adams noted.

"It's not forever," he said. "The hope always is reconciliation and staying together in unity in Christ, not around issues."

Reach Gazette reporter Kelly de la Rocha at 395-3040 or kdelarocha@dailygazette.net.