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Episcopalians: Ruling will change little here

Sanctions imposed over same-sex marriage

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Gazette Reporter

Much as they did in 1776, many Episcopalians in America are turning a deaf ear to the Church of England.

A ruling announced on Jan. 15 by the Anglican Communion in Great Britain imposes sanctions on the Episcopal Church for its decision last summer to allow clergy members to perform same-

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sex marriages.

While members of the church in the Capital Region may differ in their feelings about the sanctions — the Episcopalians are the American branch of the Communion —

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Sanctions

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they seem to agree that the ruling by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican bishops will have very little impact in the U.S.

"I think it's a sad day for the Anglican Communion," said Dave Kenison, a lifelong member and a former warden at St. George's Episcopal Church in the Stockade in Schenectady. "I think the meeting was hijacked by a number of bishops that come from parts of the Anglican Communion, such as Africa and the global South [Southern Hemisphere], that are virulently anti-gay. In those countries, there are homosexuals who have actually been killed. But nothing will change immediately in our country, and I suspect the Episcopal Church will not change its position."

The Episcopal Church was formed in America when it broke away from the Church of England during the American Revolution because of a requirement forcing all Anglican priests to take an oath of loyalty to the king.

But while Episcopalians have remained part of the Anglican Communion, they have their own ruling body here in the U.S. and a diverse group of members.

The sanctions, which only limit the Episcopalian participation in the Communion and do not call for a change in policy, came as a major disappointment to Michael Curry, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church who was one of 38 bishops at the Canterbury conference.

"This has been a disappointing time for many, and there will be heartache and pain for many, but it's important to remember that we are still part of the Anglican Communion," Curry said in a statement last week. "The truth is, it may be part of our vocation to help the communion and to help many others grow in a direction where we can realize and live the love that God has for all of us, and we can one day be a Church and a Communion where all of God's children are fully welcomed, where this is truly a house of prayer for all people."

SERIOUS ISSUES

The Episcopal Diocese of Albany, led by Bishop William Love, is more in line with the Anglican Communion and less in sympathy with its own church hierarchy. Albany is the only one of six dioceses in New York that prohibits its priests from officiating at same-sex weddings. Love is planning to release an official statement this week regarding the Canterbury decision, but on Thursday afternoon he agreed to discuss the controversy.

"There is a lot of division in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion over this issue," he said. "In Albany, we are more theologically conservative because we continue to uphold the church's traditional understanding of marriage. But human sexuality and gay marriage are serious issues, and I applaud the archbishop and the other 38 bishops, including our presiding bishop here in America, for their willingness to come together and to talk about it. We are going to continue to walk together as best as we can to try to figure out our way through the current issues that are so divisive to the church."

At Christ Church on State Street in Schenectady, the Rev. Brad Jones is firmly in Love's camp, and doesn't have a problem with the Anglican Communion's ruling.

"To me, it was good to have that affirmation of our traditional understanding of marriage in the church," he said. "So, I'm fine with what they decided, but I'm just not sure how much difference it will make. Every diocese has a certain degree of autonomy, and I don't think it's any secret that our diocese here in Albany is conservative. And, if you went to five different churches in the Albany area you'd get five different styles of worship and plenty of variety of opinion."

SEPARATION HURTS

At St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Schenectady, the Rev. James MacDonald said the sanctions carry some weight, but only symbolically.

"There's something in us that wants to be a part of something bigger, and the Episcopal



BILL BUELL/GAZETTE REPORTER

The Rev. James MacDonald is the senior pastor at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Schenectady.

Church in this country is not that large," said MacDonald. "The Anglican Communion worldwide has always kind of held us together in some ways, but it has been 'ungluing' for years now. This was another major step in that direction, and while I understand where the African bishops are coming from, it's still a separation and it hurts."

As for his own congregation, MacDonald said the bishops' ruling in Britain will mean very little here.

"To the average person sitting in our pew it doesn't really affect them," he said. "When I first became a priest, new people came to us looking for the right Episcopal church for them. Now, things are different. Now people are not interested in the national Episcopal Church. They are interested in becoming involved in a community. They don't need to look for a specific denomination."

"As part of the national church, it's still my responsibility to hold that up in front of people," continued MacDonald, "but the national church is pretty removed from us, and the Anglican Communion is one step further removed from us."

BIGGER THAN US

At St. Luke's on the Hill in Mechanicville, the Rev. David Haig said life will go on as normal.

"I'm of the opinion that all politics is local, so in our diocese and in my parish I don't think what happens in Canterbury will have much of an impact at all," said Haig. "We may be one of the few conservative dioceses remaining in the Episcopal church, but my job is to take care of my flock and this won't affect the people that I deal with. My job is to give God's love where it needs to be spread, and that's what I'm focusing on."

At St. Luke's, according to Haig, political terms like liberal and conservative don't have a home.

"I don't use those words and I don't know if Jesus was a liberal or a conservative," he said. "Folks at my church may have different reactions to the sanctions, but I don't know how many are really engaged at that level. For me, God has asked me to bloom where he planted me, and that's what is important. We deal with local issues, and we understand that God is bigger than all of us."

Much of the Anglican Communion had been divided

since 2003 when the Episcopal Church consecrated an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire. Then, when the Episcopal Church's 2015 National Conference ruled that clergy members could marry same-sex couples, it heightened the controversy. The Episcopal Church's next general convention will be in 2018.

"That's why the sanctions are for three years," said Kenison, who pointed out that he was speaking only as a member of St. George's and not as a representative of the congregation, which is currently without a pastor. "I'm guessing that they would want us to repent at our next general convention, and not be accepting of gay marriage, but I think that possibility is very remote. We don't have a pope. The Anglican Communion has the Archbishop of Canterbury, but in Latin that means he is the first among equals. We are a confederation. We have an association with them. They only issue guidelines. We make our own rules every three years at the general convention."

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