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Blanch frustrated by lack of support for 'radical hospitality'

By Bill Buell

Rector leaving Stockade church for more liberal diocese



The Rev. Paul Frederick Blanch is leaving St. George's Episcopal Church in Schenectady on Nov. 30.

SCHENECTADY — Since the Rev. Paul Frederick Blanch came to the Stockade neighborhood in December 2009 and took over the reins at St. George's Episcopal Church, he's made many new friends and congregates.

At the end of this month, however, the senior rector in charge of the city's oldest church building and one of its oldest congregations will be heading west to Redding, California, where he will continue his ministry in what he describes as a much more liberal diocese than the one in Albany.

Blanch, a native of Durham, in northeast England, feels the "radical hospitality" he offered his parishioners was something he couldn't practice to its fullest because of the conservative views of William H. Love, the 9th bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Albany.

"I feel like I needed to be in a place where I could exercise what I believe is my gospel-based ministry," said Blanch, who came to Schenectady from a parish in Stoke-on-Trent in Staffordshire, England. "I want to be somewhere that will allow me to take care of the needs of everybody, regardless of sexual orientation, color of skin or whatever else it might be. I came to the conclusion I couldn't continue here any longer under that kind of regime, a regime that I see as not open and not very welcoming."

"Radical hospitality," a term popularized by United Methodist Bishop David Schnase of Missouri in 2010, calls for Christians to go above and beyond the call of duty to welcome all kinds of people to their worship service.

"Our church is a place where all people — straight, gay, black, white, whatever — can come and feel comfortable at worship," said Blanch. "It's called 'radical hospitality,' which means it's not my job to judge but to be welcoming, and we've been pilloried for that. We're called a renegade church because we want to be an open church and encourage dialogue with everyone.

"I've been in England and Scotland, where some bishops might have a particular view, but they are still open. I call them statesmen. They appreciate the benefits of a good mix of people. In the Episcopal faith, each diocese has a lot of autonomy, so whoever sits in the bishop's chair has a lot of power. But here in the Diocese of Albany, they're conservative, and they are looking only for like-minded individuals."

In March 2012, St. George's entered into a delegated Episcopal pastoral oversight arrangement with the Central New York Diocese in Syracuse, a more liberal group that allows same-sex marriages. Financial concerns, however, have brought them back to the Albany Diocese, officials of which declined to comment on this story.

"They allowed us to go to Central New York, but you still have to pay your parish assessment to Albany, and then pay whatever you need to pay to Syracuse, so we had to discontinue our DEPO," said Blanch. "Our campus is quite substantial, and it costs a lot of money. We've been operating in the red for a while now, but I think this year, we might be back in the black."

Blanch's departure will be felt beyond the St. George's community.

"We both have churches in the Stockade, so we cooperated on things on a monthly basis," said the Rev. Bill Levering, senior pastor at First Reformed Church of Schenectady. "What a great guy. He's a real kindred spirit that's going to be sorely missed by colleagues and congregates."

Joe Fava isn't a member at St. George's, but he lives on Ferry Street, across from the church, and is a past president of the Stockade Association.

"I support them, I go to their events, and I see the way he runs things," said Fava. "I think he's done a wonderful job. It's like a nice club that anybody can join and be a part of. It's a lot more than a church. It's a community."

Sylvie Briber, editor of Stockade Association's newsletter, the Stockade Spy, said Blanch has been a very welcome addition since coming to St. George's five years ago.

“He was a great team player in many of our neighborhood events and was always very supportive and easy to work with,” said Briber. “Whenever I met him on the street, he was always ready to be cheery and say a good word. He was very accessible, a lovely man.”

Blanch insists that while St. George’s may have lost a handful of members because of his views, he did have the support of the congregation as a whole, and that notion was confirmed by Chris Henry, senior warden at St. George’s.

“I can definitely say we are all very sad to see him go,” said Henry. “We regretfully accepted his resignation, but we respectfully understand why he is leaving, and we’re happy he has an opportunity to continue on his journey.”

The search to find Blanch’s successor has already begun, according to Henry.

“The diocese will have all the input they’re meant to have in the process,” he said. “It is our prerogative to choose who we feel should be the next rector of St. George’s, but we do submit to a higher calling.”