

Anglican diocese to defy ban, perform same-sex blessings

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Mike Carroccetto / Canwest News Service

The Diocese of Ottawa has said it will perform same-sex blessings, becoming the first Canadian Anglican diocese to make such a move since a ban was imposed on the practice by the international church.

The diocese said it is developing a liturgy and protocol for the rite and once they are created it will start performing the ceremonies for gay couples on a limited basis. But critics of same-sex blessings say those steps will widen the schism in the Canadian church.

In 2004, the worldwide church called for a moratorium on the rite after the Diocese of New Westminster in British Columbia struck out on its own and began performing same-sex blessings. That move was considered a seminal event that led to the Canadian split.

But Archdeacon Ross Moulton of Ottawa said what his diocese is doing does not violate the moratorium because performing the ceremonies will help the diocese understand whether it is the right path to take.

"There is nothing in the moratorium that says we cannot continue to discern," he said.

In a press release issued on Monday night, the diocese said: "Just as the Church was not able to come to a clear mind regarding the benefits of the ordination of women to the priesthood until it experienced the priestly ministry of women, Bishop [John H.] Chapman has taken the process of discernment with regards to same-sex blessings to a place beyond discussion."

In 2007 the Anglican Church of Canada said it interpreted the moratorium to mean that New Westminster could continue with the rite but no Canadian bishop could authorize new parishes to take part in same-sex blessings.

On Tuesday, a spokesman for the Anglican Church of Canada said what the Diocese of Ottawa is doing is not a breaking the ban but rather a continuation of their "discernment process."

In the past two years, the issue of same-sex marriage has driven a wedge into the Anglican Church of Canada. To date, 27 parishes have separated from the national body and have aligned themselves with an orthodox bishop.

Those parishes, known collectively as the Anglican Network of Canada, are now in the process of creating a new jurisdiction that would take in orthodox churches here and in the United States.

Ephraim Radner, a U. S. Anglican priest who teaches theology at Wycliffe College, a seminary in Toronto, called what Ottawa is doing "provocative and hostile."

Rev. Radner is against same-sex blessings but he has also opposed those conservative factions that have struck out on their own.

He said Ottawa "is making things much worse by ratcheting up the antagonisms."

There is still a chance in Canada "to get people to talk to each other before they actually walk off opposite cliffs ... but if everyone goes off in these different directions how is there going to be any room for the communion to talk?"

David Short, the pastor of St. John's in Vancouver, the largest Anglican parish in Canada with 2,000 members, left the Anglican Church of Canada over the issue of same-sex blessings in February, 2008. He said what is going on now in Ottawa confirms for him what that leaving the national Church was the right thing to do.

"There have been a weasel words about what the moratorium means. I think the Canadian Church is saying, 'Here is what we must do: We're not going to comply with what the international Church is saying.'"