

Virginia judge rules against breakaway Episcopal parishes

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [February 8, 2012](#) issue

Seven congregations that broke with the Episcopal Church in 2006 over its liberal policies on homosexuality are not entitled to keep parish property estimated to be worth millions, a Virginia judge has ruled.

The ruling by Fairfax County Judge Randy Bellows in January reverses a decision he made in 2008—and hands a major victory to the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Virginia, which had fought hard to keep the property.

One of the churches, the Falls Church, traces its roots to colonial times and has counted among its members a former CIA director, a onetime White House speechwriter, members of Congress and numerous media mavens. Several of the congregations meet on valuable real estate in Washington's booming Northern Virginia suburbs.

Bellows said the property must now be returned to the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Virginia. In a statement, the congregations said they will consider appealing the decision.

Since leaving the Episcopal Church, the seven congregations have joined the Anglican Church in North America, which is seeking recognition as an official branch of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

In 2010, the Virginia Supreme Court ruled that Bellows misapplied a state law that allows some breakaway congregations to keep parish property and sent the case back for his reconsideration.

On January 10, Bellows wrote that the parishes had the right to break from the Episcopal Church but "had no right to take these seven Episcopal churches with them."

Under Episcopal

Church law, property owned by any member congregation, parish or mission is held in trust for the national denomination. Citing that provision, secular courts have generally ruled against the dozens of breakaway parishes that have split from the Episcopal Church since it elected an openly gay bishop in 2003. —RNS