

Episcopalians sidestep crisis: New bishop supports gay rights

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The Episcopal Church sidestepped a potential crisis early this month when a married father of two was elected bishop of San Francisco over three openly gay contenders. The winner, however, was no less supportive of gay rights in the church.

Mark Handley Andrus, 49, of Alabama won a seven-person race May 6 that drew national attention just weeks before homosexual issues come to a boil again at the mid-June U.S. Episcopal convention in Columbus, Ohio.

Speaking by phone to diocesan delegates at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral after the vote, Andrus promised to maintain support for full involvement of gay Christians in the church—a position that has not been popular during his ministry in Birmingham, where he was an assistant bishop.

“Your vote today remains a vote for inclusion and communion—of gay and lesbian people in their full lives as single or partnered people,” Andrus said. “My commitment to Jesus Christ's own mission of inclusion is resolute.”

The three gay candidates—Michael Barlowe of San Francisco, Bonnie Perry of Chicago and Robert V. Taylor of Seattle—all trailed in the final voting after Andrus was elected on the third ballot to replace Bishop William Swing in the five-county Diocese of California surrounding San Francisco Bay.

Had any of the three gay candidates won, conservatives said, it would likely have led to permanent schism in the 2.3-million-member Episcopal Church and with sister churches in the worldwide Anglican Communion.

The U.S. church has been deeply divided over the inclusion of gays and lesbians in ministry since 2003, when an openly gay bishop, V. Gene Robinson, was elected in New Hampshire.

The church's top leader, Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, had warned that "definite difficulty" would occur if San Francisco elected the church's second openly gay bishop. In April a special church panel warned dioceses to proceed with "very considerable caution" when considering gay bishops.

Conservatives, who were grateful that the three gay candidates were defeated, nonetheless chastised the diocese for presenting them for election and warned that the church has not fought its last battle over a gay bishop. "Moving slowly with caution is not stopping, and [the church] is practicing a theology contrary to scripture, Anglican doctrine and 2,000 years of Christian teaching," the American Anglican Council said in a statement.

Earlier, Paul Zahl, dean of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, likened the election of another gay bishop to "a terrorist bomb, which is timed to destroy a peace process." His statements prompted calls for an apology from the Human Rights Campaign, a secular gay rights group. Harry Knox, the Washington-based organization's religion and faith director, called the remark "one of the most outrageous comments made by a radical conservative fringe in the church."

Gay Episcopal groups said they were not disappointed that the three gay candidates lost the election because Andrus supported Robinson's election and is viewed by many gay groups as an ally.

"Bishop Andrus is a person of vision who has led our diocese in confronting poverty and racism," said Brad LaMonte of Alabama, a local leader in Integrity, a national network of gay Episcopalians. "He has given a voice to the voiceless. He is a great champion for human rights, including equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people."

Andrus's election will need to be ratified by the church's General Convention meeting next month. On the horizon: many church observers think an openly gay bishop could be elected in Newark, New Jersey, this fall since the liberal diocese has long been supportive of gay rights. *-Religion NewsService*