

Dissident Episcopal diocese backs off from outright split: Maintains distance from national church

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A small Episcopal diocese in California distanced itself from the national church this month over disagreements about homosexuality and the Bible, but stopped short of the full split it had been considering.

The Fresno-based Diocese of San Joaquin was closely watched by Episcopalians and Anglicans across the globe, especially after Bishop John-David Schofield said it could become the “vanguard” of a new Anglican jurisdiction in North America.

But San Joaquin backed away from earlier language calling for a full split because it was “too specific” and would have “locked us into something” at a time when the Anglican landscape is shifting, said Van McCalister, a priest-spokesperson for the diocese.

Instead, delegates to the diocese’s convention removed language from its constitution that calls for agreement and consent with the laws of the national church. The amendment must be approved by two-thirds of the delegates at the next convention—in October 2007—before it takes effect, McCalister said.

Home to an estimated 10,000 Episcopalians, San Joaquin is one of three U.S. dioceses that do not ordain women, putting it at odds with the new presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori.

Conservatives are also concerned about Jefferts Schori’s support for ordaining gay bishops and blessing same-sex unions. Since her election, seven U.S. dioceses—including San Joaquin—have asked to be put under the guidance of someone else.

Jefferts Schori said Monday that she “deeply lament[s]” the San Joaquin diocese’s actions to “repudiate” its membership in the Episcopal Church. Earlier, Jefferts

Schori had warned San Joaquin of legal consequences, which typically include battles over church property, should the diocese secede. "I will continue to consult with others involved in responding to this extracanonial action," she said.

Last month Jefferts Schori announced that she would dispatch a deputy into dioceses where she is unwelcome because of her progressive theology or her gender. That deputy would be a "primatial vicar" to perform her duties—such as consecrating new bishops—in dioceses hostile to her leadership.

A deputy bishop had not been named as of December 11, though the plan is for the appointee to start on January 1, according to a spokesperson. Some conservatives, however, said the idea was dead on arrival because they had no say regarding who Jefferts Schori would send them.

San Joaquin decided to back off its diocese secession plans, said McAlister, after meeting with Anglican leaders from Africa, the West Indies and Southeast Asia in November. "After that meeting it became apparent that many bishops were acting very deliberately and very rapidly" to come up with an alternative structure for disgruntled U.S. conservatives, he said.

Some conservative parishes have left the Episcopal Church and placed themselves under the guidance of theological allies in other branches of the worldwide Anglican Communion. In late November, Virginia bishop Peter Lee warned two historic parishes in his diocese that their leaving the Episcopal Church invites legal consequences. Church leaders at Truro Church in Fairfax and the Falls Church in the city of Falls Church voted to affiliate with the Anglican Church of Nigeria. *-Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*