

# Property fight in Virginia costs millions: Episcopal church assets

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The court battle over church assets between the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia and 11 breakaway congregations has already cost both sides more than \$2 million between them, according to representatives.

The secessionist Anglican District of Virginia has spent about \$1 million on legal fees thus far and anticipates spending as much as \$3 million to \$5 million on the litigation, said vice chair Jim Oakes. The money is being raised through donations from the 11 churches, Oakes said, though only five had contributed by early January.

Patrick N. Getlein, a spokesperson for the Diocese of Virginia, said it has spent “over a million” on legal fees to date. The diocese recently reported that it has taken out a \$2 million line of credit for the litigation.

Financial figures from the national Episcopal Church, which is also a party in the litigation, were not immediately available. The national church is not helping the diocese pay its legal fees, Getlein said.

Citing theological disagreements with the national church’s increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians, the 11 congregations split from the diocese and the Episcopal Church in January 2007. They have since joined the Convocation of Anglicans in North America, which is headed by Nigerian archbishop Peter Akinola.

Oakes said the properties in dispute are worth approximately \$30 million; Getlein said he could not provide an estimate of their worth.

The Episcopal Church, which maintains that church assets are held in trust for the national denomination, is attempting to block efforts by the congregations to assert ownership of the property.

The first phase of the trial was being heard by a judge in Fairfax County, Virginia. Arguments initially have centered on whether a Civil War-era Virginia law allows a

congregation to leave a religious body with its assets intact if that body is undergoing division.

The court has scheduled arguments on church ownership to begin this October, Oakes said. The litigation could take as long as three years to complete, he added. - *Religion News Service*