

Episcopal bishop resumes post in Philadelphia

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [October 5, 2010](#) issue

The embattled Episcopal bishop of Philadelphia said he erred in not investigating his brother's sexual abuse of an underage girl 35 years ago, but he also brushed aside calls for his resignation, saying it is more "interesting" for him to remain in office.

Bishop Charles Bennison was removed from ministry in 2007, when he was charged with "conduct unbecoming of a member of the clergy." A church court found him guilty in 2008. But Bennison returned to his Philadelphia office on August 16 after a church appeals court ruled in July that the ten-year statute of limitations on the charge had expired.

Even so, prominent Philadelphia Episcopalians—including members of the diocese's elected standing committee—said Bennison should resign. "We do not believe that Bishop Bennison has the trust of the clergy and lay leaders necessary for him to be an effective pastor and leader of the Diocese of Pennsylvania, nor that he can regain the trust that he has lost or broken," the panel said in a statement.

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Clergy (SNAP) has also called on the Episcopal Church to remove Bennison, saying his resumption of duties endangers children. But in an interview on August 18, Bennison, 66, said his return to office "has gone extremely well." Added the bishop: "I have had a lot of time to think during the last three years. And I learned through discernment that it would be more interesting for me to return. There's a lot more opportunity to go deeper into relationships with each other."

Even though the appeals court reinstated him, it said Bennison's actions 35 years ago were "totally wrong." Bennison was a rector at a church in Upland, California, when his brother, John, began a three-year "sexually abusive relationship" with a 14-year-old parishioner, according to Episcopal investigators. At the time a lay youth minister in the parish, John Bennison was later ordained as a priest.

"I know that I made some mistakes in the 1970s of hiring my brother and not overseeing him and not investigating with scrupulosity what was going on," Bishop Bennison said. "I own that. But I also know that once I had actual knowledge of what was taking place I forced him to go to the bishop, and [John] was defrocked."

John Bennison was defrocked in 1977 but later reinstated. He resigned in 2006 when the sexual abuse charges resurfaced. —RNS