

A network for 'orthodox' Episcopalians: A church within a church

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Dissidents in the Episcopal Church, angered by last year's consecration of an openly gay bishop, have formally launched a new "network" to act as a church-within-a-church for traditionalists. Some 100 conservative leaders from 12 dioceses met January 19-20 at Christ Church in Plano, Texas, to approve a charter for the Network of Anglican Communion Dioceses and Parishes.

The group hopes one day to be recognized as a "true and legitimate" expression of Anglicanism on U.S. soil. Bishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh, who was elected the group's first moderator, said creation of the new network is a "significant and joyful moment" for conservatives who feel besieged in the 2.3 million-member church.

"There is now no reason for orthodox Episcopalians to leave Anglicanism," he said, referring to the 77 million-member Anglican Communion, which includes the Episcopal Church. The group's constitution said the decision to ordain the openly gay V. Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire has caused "immense harm." The group vowed to maintain a "faithful Anglican witness in submission to the sovereign authority of Holy Scripture."

The 12 dioceses supporting the new network are Pittsburgh; Albany, New York; Central Florida; Dallas; Florida (Jacksonville); Fort Worth, Texas; Quincy, Illinois; Rio Grande (New Mexico); San Joaquin, California; South Carolina; Springfield, Illinois; and Western Kansas. Under the framework adopted in Plano, the network will be divided into five regional "convocations," each overseen by a bishop. That presumes that the network's bishops would cross traditional lines of authority and jurisdiction held by other Episcopal bishops.

At the same time, a heated war of words has erupted between the group's patrons in the Washington, D.C.-based American Anglican Council and some progressive

Episcopalians who support the church's position on the issue. A leaked memo written on December 28 by Geoff Chapman, an AAC priest in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, said the network is prepared to mount "faithful disobedience . . . on a widespread basis" in an effort to "replace" the Episcopal Church.

AAC leaders downplayed the memo as "nothing new," but critics say the memo reveals the group's intentions to "create anarchy" in the church. One bishop vowed to fight such tactics. "I will use all the power of my office to see to it that our clergy and congregations will not be in any formal membership arrangement with this or any other such group seeking to destroy the Episcopal Church," said Bishop Don Johnson of Memphis, Tennessee.

A coalition of "Via Media" progressives in the 12 dioceses said "the letter speaks for itself. Property, not piety, is keeping dissident parishes in the Episcopal Church." But Ephraim Radner, a priest who directs the conservative Anglican Communion Institute in Colorado Springs, said the "process for deciding who is 'the real Episcopal Church' is well under way." -Kevin Eckstrom, *Religion News Service*