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Episcopalians move slowly toward same-sex marriage

Albany bishop espouses traditional view

By Bill BuEll Gazette Reporter



Stromberg



Love

When the General Convention of the Episcopal Church changed its canonical definition of marriage in 2015 to include the term “gender-neutral,” it seemed like a huge victory for proponents of same-sex marriage.

And earlier this month in Austin, Texas, the General Convention took another step and passed Resolution B012, ensuring that all Episcopalians, regardless of sex, could be married in their own church building using same-sex liturgies.

Another victory?

Perhaps, but to Episcopalians in the Capital Region, the impact of the decision isn’t so clear. Rev. Brad Jones at C h r i s t Church on State Street in Schenectady, who aligns himself with the more traditional view of marriage espoused by Bishop William Love of the Albany Episcopal Diocese, isn’t sure how Resolution B012 will actually work.

“The issue went back and forth between the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops, and what they came up with was a compromise resolution that will allow same-sex marriages to take place around the country according to state law and practices,” said Jones, who was a delegate at the General Convention. “The people on the traditional side of marriage, and the people on the progressive side, well, no one came away with what they wanted.”



BILL BUELL/GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

The Rev. James McDonald, senior pastor at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Schenectady, is pictured in this file photo.

Ninety-three bishops agreed with the 2015 decision -- the Episcopalians hold their national meeting every three years -- but Bishop Love in Albany was one of eight bishops from around the country that have prohibited same-sex marriages in their diocese. Those same eight bishops also took issue with Resolution B012 earlier this month, and five of them signed a document stating that if B012 was passed, "they would entrust congregations that wish to perform same-sex marriages to the care of other bishops in the Episcopal Church with whom we remain united in baptism."

Love didn't go as far as signing the document, but he is going to address Resolution B012 at a meeting of the Albany Diocese on Sept. 6. While he declined comment to The Gazette last week, Love did post a statement on Facebook regarding the General Convention's actions in Austin.

"As we move to discussion of same-gender marriage and Prayer Book revision, we first must acknowledge that there are differences of opinion on these issues throughout the diocese," wrote Love. "We respect that people of good conscience may hold different views and expect to continue in love and fellowship with people of all views."

Love went on to say "that the resolution calls on bishops who 'hold a theological position that does not embrace marriage for same-sex couples,' to make those rites available in their diocese, by inviting, if necessary, another bishop to provide

'pastoral support' to those couples and congregations looking to utilize these rites within their congregation. While we are appreciative that this resolution still upholds the canonical authority of the clergy, and some oversight of the bishop, we acknowledge that this General Convention has required dioceses of this church -- including our own -- to permit services which they cannot in good conscience permit."

For Rev. James McDonald at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Schenectady, Resolution B012 is more about how the church works than what it believes.

"It really is a polity issue more than anything else," he said. "The national church is deciding what kind of power the bishops can have in determining what goes on in individual congregations. When they approved same-sex marriage there was a compromise saying that bishops could say no within their diocese. The Episcopal Church is trying to figure out where the bishop's authority begins and ends, and where the priest's authority begins and ends with their own congregation."

That question may not be answered to anyone's satisfaction soon, says Jones, who has been at Christ Church on State Street since 1998.

"We stand in agreement with the stance Bishop Love has taken, and we really need to wait and see what the directives are from the diocese," said Jones. "We need to see what this looks like going forward. As it stands now there are no same-sex marriages in the Albany Diocese, and I don't know how Resolution B012 will impact that. Each diocese is autonomous to a certain degree, and the national body has no direct authority over the diocese."

McDonald likes the idea of each diocese having plenty of autonomy, and for him that extends to each congregation.

"I do appreciate that Bishop Love and others who hold a more traditional view on same-sex marriage are in a difficult situation," said Mc-Donald. "And when issues come up within the congregation, I don't think priests should have their hands tied in terms of what they can and can not do. I don't like the idea that the church can make one blanket statement, and I think the local pastor knows his parishioners better than the bishop does. However, the national church has spoken on this issue."

For the vast majority of Episcopal churches around the country, Resolution B012 is not a big deal. In the Albany area, however, it's creating quite a fuss.

"Those with a progressive view are very much in the minority in the Albany Diocese," said McDonald, who has officiated at a same-sex wedding but not at his own church and well before Bishop Love prohibited them in 2015. "This is a very conservative diocese."

McDonald said he hasn't violated Love's directive about same-sex marriage because the issue hasn't come up with his congregation. The conservative character of the Albany Diocese and Bishop Love, however, was part of the reason St. George's Episcopal in Schenectady's Stockade neighborhood lost its pastor, Rev. Paul Frederick Blanch, in December of 2014. Blanche relocated to California where he found a more liberal diocese. His successor, Rev. Matthew Stromberg, knows all about division in the church, having been in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 2008 when that Episcopal Diocese split over gender issues.

"I think it's a very important issue, but nobody wants to see the church and the diocese divided over this," said Stromberg. "I was in Pittsburgh when that bishop was deposed, and similar things have happened in South Carolina, and it is tragic. I deeply respect Bishop Love and I know he feels strongly about this. But I hope he can find some sort of compromise, some resolution that will hold people with different views together. I would be devastated if what happened in Pittsburgh happens in Albany."

Stromberg said there's little doubt about where most of his parishioners at St. George's stand on the issue.

"I can say that the people here are very much in support of the resolution passed at General Convention which allows same-sex couples to be married in their diocese regardless of whether or not the bishop can, in good conscience, give his blessing to such a union," said Stromberg. "St. George's is a place that does have some same-sex couples and people who have family members that are gay. So it's an important issue to a lot of people here and it sometimes puts them at odds with the position of Bishop Love. I'm hoping he can meet people halfway."

At Christ Church, which broke away from St. George's in 1867, Jones is hopeful that Episcopalians in the Albany Diocese and around the country will be able to agree to disagree on this particular question.

"What's that one expression? 'The devil's in the details,'" said Jones. "Some of the wording in the resolution seems intentionally vague, and there are some caveats. I don't know how this is going to end, but I think we're going to work our way through this. We have a great diocese here in the Albany area, and we will find a way."

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