

Gay church's bishop-elect answers Anglican warning

By Anne Saunders
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MANCHESTER, N.H.—The Episcopal Church's first openly gay bishop-elect said Sunday he agonizes over the turmoil he is causing but believes God wants him to go forward.

"This is one of the hardest things I'll ever do," the Rev. V. Gene Robinson told about 40 people during religious education hour at Grace Church. "I do have this sense I'm supposed to go forward, and I do feel that's coming from God and not my own ego. But I don't know."

Robinson was elected by New Hampshire clergy and parishioners in June and confirmed by the national Episcopal Church in August. He is scheduled to be consecrated as bishop of New Hampshire in two weeks.

The election and confirmation of Robinson outraged some conservatives, who threatened to divide the Episcopal Church in the United States and the worldwide Anglican Communion of which it is part.

At an emergency meeting in London last week, Anglican leaders warned that if Robinson is consecrated Nov. 2, "the future of the communion itself will be put in jeopardy." However, the Anglican Communion's spiritual leader, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has no authority to discipline the self-governing national churches.

Conservative Episcopalians at the meeting said they plan to form an independent network of churches opposed to Robinson's elevation. The announcement came a week after 2,700 dissident Episcopalians met in Dallas.

In a close vote Saturday, the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas voted to withhold \$512,000 from the national church to protest Robinson's election.

"I'm a little surprised that it went this far," diocese spokesman Jim Goodson told The Dallas Morning News. "A majority of our delegates disagree with the policies of the national church."

In New Hampshire on Sunday, parishioner Paul Apple of Mont Vernon asked Robinson to consider stepping aside in the interests of preserving the larger church.

"I personally think it's not worth losing the family," Apple said.

Anglican leaders, representing 77 million members worldwide, have called homosexuality "contrary to Scripture." Robinson and his supporters say that is outweighed by the Scripture's call for love and acceptance of all.

"We've always had gay bishops," Robinson said at one point. "The difference is I'm being honest about it."

Robinson, 56, is widely known and admired in the state, where he has been assistant to the retiring bishop for years. He has lived openly for years with partner Mark Andrew, who was applauded by the congregation when he was introduced on Sunday.

Robinson said the vigorous and sometimes bitter church debate over homosexuality will continue even if he leaves the stage.

"It's not all going to go back to being nice and pretty again. It's going to be messy for a while," he said. He added: "This is not our church to win or lose. It's God's church."

Robinson predicted the church ultimately will survive the turmoil.

"I've been here an hour and look! The roof's still on. I think it will calm down when people see not a lot has changed," he said.

"I do have this sense I'm supposed to go forward, and I do feel that's coming from God."

—The Rev. Gene Robinson
bishop-elect

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
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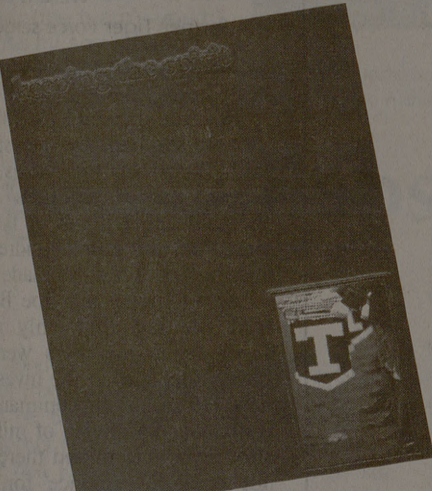
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