

Charismatic Episcopalians Jump Ship Over Liberal Policies

Twenty-one congregations left the Episcopal Church after the denomination took an ambiguous stand on gay marriage

For the first time, Episcopal priests and congregations that are frustrated with the liberal policies of the Episcopal Church can now separate themselves from that entity and yet still remain an active part of the worldwide Anglican community.

The alternative was made possible when the Anglican archbishops of Rwanda and Southeast Asia met in Singapore in January and declared the United States a “mission field.”

In a bold and unprecedented step that crossed strict territorial lines dividing the worldwide Anglican community into 38 provinces, Rwanda and Southeast Asia joined forces and formed the Anglican Mission in America (AMIA). They also consecrated and deployed two citizens, the Right Revs. Charles H. Murphy III and John H. Rodgers Jr., as missionary bishops to the United States.

According to Murphy, their original mission was to plant

churches and extend pastoral care to parishes that had been coerced or restrained in a way that inhibited them from fulfilling the Great Commission. But as the group clarified its vision, the mission of the AMIA expanded to include

“receiving churches that want to be part of the Anglican Church, but can no longer stay in the Episcopal Church for reasons of conscience.”

And there are plenty of churches in the Episcopal denomination that have been looking for a place to transfer their loyalty.

So far, 21 Episcopal congregations and 35 ordained Episcopal clergy have joined the AMIA. They took the action in July after the General Convention of the

Episcopal Church issued a resolution containing ambiguous language that seemed to disregard and ignore the sanctity of marriage.

That document was also condemned by the American Anglican Council (AAC), a separate organization that attempts to work within the Episcopal Church to bring about transformation and revitalization. The AAC released an official statement saying it “deeply regrets and deplores the ambiguity of resolution D039, which appears to support sexual partnerships outside the bonds of marriage.”

During the general convention, held in Denver, the House of Bishops took a soft position on gay unions. They said that “while the issues of human sexuality are not yet resolved, there are currently couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in marriage and couples in the Body of Christ and this Church who are living in other life-long committed relationships, and be it further resolved [that] we expect such relationships will be characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication; and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.”

Mike Hesse was among those priests who saw the resolution as a signal that it was time to turn their efforts toward the harvest field and away from doctrinal debates within the Episcopal Church. The former rector of St. Andrews By-the-Sea, a charismatic Episcopal church in Destin, Fla., saw the Denver resolution as another step by the bishops to question basic biblical morality.

"This resolution openly espouses, advocates and calls holy a lifestyle which Scripture clearly states is sin," Hesse told Charisma.

Mark Di Cristina, formerly the rector of St. Francis of Assisi Episcopal Church in Gulf Breeze, Fla., said a split now exists "between orthodox Episcopalians who read the Bible in the traditional way and revisionists who believe that God's truth is in process."

Murphy said the unfolding of recent events is a more critical reformation than when the Anglican Church pulled away from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century. "Revisionists are calling into question the person of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture," he said, adding that they also are challenging the authenticity of Scripture by ordaining practicing homosexuals and affirming unions outside the bonds of marriage.

"Actually, because of incompatible belief systems, there are a great number of organizations and people working toward establishing a whole new alternative province," Murphy said. "And archbishops of other provinces are talking to us about joining our efforts in the U.S."

Murphy expects to see lawsuits over land and properties surface because the Episcopal Church is seizing facilities that have been paid for by local congregations.

Hesse, who has been holding church services at a community center since his congregation unanimously voted on Aug. 27 to join the AMIA, said he had expected to lose the church property and buildings. He said he was taken by surprise, however, when his priesthood was called into question by Bishop Charles F. Duvall of the Central Gulf Coast Diocese.

Duvall sent a pastoral letter, to be read in all churches in his diocese, announcing his intention to "depose" priests who had left the Episcopal Church "if after six months they have not returned, with the approval of the standing committee."

Bruce Mason of the AAC board said he considers priests like Hesse and Di Cristina as now being under the direct authority of the provinces of Rwanda and Southeast Asia.