

Mainline Churches Face Intensified 'Gay' Debates This Summer

The role of gays in church life promises to be debated hotly this summer in the nation's mainline Protestant denominations. The conflict, which comes as states wage legal fights over same-sex marriage, could well influence whether some of the denominations remain intact or splinter into smaller factions. In some churches, the hard-fought court battles over civil marriage for gay and lesbian couples run parallel to religious struggles that are strikingly similar and often just as heated.

An example of this has been in California, where last week the issue of same-sex marriage influenced separate decisions by the state's Supreme Court and a regional diocese of the Episcopal Church USA.

Last Tuesday, California's Supreme Court upheld Proposition 8, a state constitutional amendment defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman. But the court also ruled that the estimated 18,000 gay couples issued marriage licenses in the state before the law took effect may remain legally married.

This past Wednesday, 61 Episcopal clergy of the Diocese of San Joaquin near San Francisco received letters from the bishop notifying them that they had been deposed from ordained ministry. The priests and deacons who received the notices had split from the Episcopal Church in 2007-disaffected by the liberal theology of the Episcopal Church, especially its permitted local blessing of same-sex marriages and its unsettled debate over the ordination of gay priests-and had realigned themselves with the more conservative Anglican

Province of the Southern Cone in South America. The notices charged that they had abandoned the Communion of the national church.

In July, leaders of the Episcopal Church USA will consider proposals at their national convention in Anaheim, Calif., to sanction a religious rite for blessing same-sex unions and ease restrictions on the ordination of gay and lesbian bishops. If approved, the steps could further alienate theological conservatives, giving them reason to join four Episcopal dioceses and hundreds of parishes that split last year to form a separate church.

The country's largest Lutheran denomination, meanwhile, is scheduled in August to consider a long-anticipated statement on human sexuality that, among various elements, says that Christian tradition recognizes marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman.

Even as they acknowledge deep divisions over homosexuality, members of the member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will decide at their meeting in Minneapolis whether they should enable local congregations to recognize same-sex unions and allow "practicing homosexuals" in committed relationships to serve in the ministry.

Other Protestant groups are embroiled in similar struggles, including the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Methodist Church.

Scholars are watching the Episcopalians and Evangelical Lutherans especially closely, seeing them as a gauge for other denominations. The experts are waiting to see if the intensified debate and turmoil leading up to the national conventions produces any consensus on issues that have long divided U.S. Protestants.

"What has been emerging for the last several years is becoming even clearer now: We're on a trajectory toward the blessing of

same-sex unions and the ordination of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people,” said the Rev. Jay Johnson, a professor of theology at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, Calif., and director of academic research at its Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry.

A recent survey of clergy from the seven historic mainline Protestant denominations found that most mainline Protestant clergy do not support legalizing gay marriage, even if they’re not required to officiate at same-sex ceremonies.

The Clergy Voices Survey, conducted by Public Religion Research, was based on responses by clergy from the United Methodist Church; Evangelical Lutheran Church of America; Episcopal Church; United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church USA; American Baptist Church; and the Disciples of Christ. It asked questions on sexuality and the “the role of (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people in the church and broader society” as well as theological questions on views on the Bible.

Only 33 percent said gay couples should be allowed to marry; 32 percent would allow civil unions; and 35 percent called for “no legal recognition” for same-sex couples.

Support for same-sex marriage grew, however, to 46 percent if laws specified that clergy would not be required to perform a religious ceremony in contradiction with their denomination’s teachings. Clergy were also asked to estimate how their views on gay and lesbian issues had changed in 10 years: 45 percent called themselves more liberal now, 40 percent unchanged, and 14 percent more conservative.

U.S. Christians also appear divided over homosexuality. One recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that 56 percent of all mainline Protestants believe it should be accepted by society. Just 26 percent of evangelical Protestants felt that way.

Few denominations have been as torn by the homosexuality in the church issue as the Episcopal Church, the U.S. branch of the Anglican Communion, a 77-million-member fellowship. Theological conservatives are a minority in the Episcopal Church but a large majority among Anglicans worldwide.

The conflict between church liberals and conservatives escalated in 2003 with the consecration of an openly gay priest, V. Gene Robinson, as bishop of New Hampshire. Amid pressure from traditionalists within the U.S. church and Anglican officials elsewhere, Episcopal leaders agreed at their last General Convention in 2006 to urge local church authorities not to consecrate any bishop "whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church." Still, 700 conservative parishes in the United States and Canada defected last year and formed a new church affiliated with overseas Anglicans.

Now, as Episcopalians approach their July convention, dioceses around the country are submitting resolutions to ease restrictions on gay bishops and to authorize same-sex marriage blessings. The issue of blessings is now left up to local Episcopal authorities.

The convention's host, the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, has tried to send a message by approving a policy at its December convention that gives local priests permission to officiate at rites of blessing for same-sex couples.

"I think it's about time we get about the business of having marriage equality in the church," said the Rt. Rev. J. Jon Bruno, bishop of the Los Angeles Diocese. "I am waiting with bated breath to see what happens" at the Anaheim meeting.

Conservative Episcopalians argue that liberalized policies will not only alienate U.S. parishes but will also add further strain to the church's troubled relationship with church leaders in Africa and elsewhere in the global Anglican

Communion. This month, one of the communion's worldwide leadership bodies affirmed its support for moratoriums on consecrating non-celibate gay bishops and on blessings for same-sex couples. The group was led by Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the communion's spiritual leader, who is scheduled to attend the Anaheim convention.

Evangelical Lutherans are weathering an equally emotional debate as they prepare for their Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis, a gathering that many predict will expose deep divisions over homosexuality and biblical authority.

Denomination leaders will vote on a lengthy social statement-"Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust"-that has been eight years in the making and identifies marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Such statements are intended to guide church members in setting policy and forming judgments about social issues, officials have said.

Lutheran leaders also will consider a new policy that asks whether the church "should commit itself" to finding ways to allow local congregations, if they choose, to recognize "life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships." Another policy asks whether the church should find a way to allow gay people to serve in ordained positions. Current Lutheran policy bars "practicing homosexuals" from ministry.

Consensus has been elusive, a point readily acknowledged by those who developed the sexuality statement and ministry proposals. Lutherans Concerned/North America, a gay rights group, praised the sexuality paper for extolling the importance of committed relationships but criticized it for failing to include a marriage blessing for same-sex couples.

Conservatives, meanwhile, argue that any such shift in policy will alter fundamental biblical teachings about homosexuality. A coalition of Evangelical Lutheran members and congregations issued a letter last week to voting members of the upcoming

Churchwide Assembly meeting, urging them to defeat proposals they believe would put the denomination at odds with fellow Lutherans in Asia and Africa.

“There are going to be some congregations that leave,” said the Rev. Mark Chavez of the Lutheran Coalition for Reform, a group that supports traditional Lutheran positions on marriage and other issues.