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Area Episcopal churches in global debate

Leaders of world organization issued ultimatum on gays.

By Michael Duck Of The Morning Call

Those connections between members of the international body will continue, no matter what U.S. Episcopal or Anglican Communion leaders decide, Bishop Marshall said. "Relationships exist and grow on levels that institutions ... can abet, but can neither create nor destroy,

"If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you," Jesus told his disciples, according to the Gospel of Matthew.

Now, roughly 2,000 years later, it's the body of the worldwide Anglican Communion that could be torn apart over questions of sin and homosexuality.

Bishops from throughout the U.S. Episcopal Church, including Bishop Paul V. Marshall of Bethlehem, will gather today in Texas in the wake of a Feb. 19 ultimatum from leaders of the global church: Scale back ministry to gays, or risk being severed from the worldwide church.

For Marshall, that all-or-nothing approach by leaders of the communion's 38 member churches runs counter to the way he's shepherded the 14-county Diocese of Bethlehem's 67 parishes. Even while he's pushed for greater inclusion of gays, Marshall also has refused to cut off and cast away congregations that believe homosexual acts violate Scripture.

Like many leaders in the U.S. church, Marshall sees acceptance of gays as an outgrowth of the Gospel's message of justice. In 2001, he ordained a gay priest, the Rev. Patrick Malloy, to serve at Grace Episcopal Church in Allentown.

"The church must continue reaching all persons with the love of God," Marshall said. "Gays and lesbian persons are part of its ministry."

At the same time, Marshall is unwilling to antagonize conservatives by sanctioning blessings of same-sex unions.

"I have asked the clergy not to act unilaterally," he said, adding he believes that no same-sex unions have been blessed in the diocese.

He's also been open to a handful of traditionalist parishes, such as St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Whitehall Township. In addition to siding with the worldwide communion on the issue of homosexuality, St. Stephen's congregation disagrees with the ordination of women and uses a worship form that predates the format nearly all other Episcopalians have used for the last 28 years.

The 2003 consecration of the Episcopal Church's first openly gay bishop, V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, was a flashpoint for members of St. Stephen's and traditionalists around the world. The Rev. Mark W. Lewis, who then led worship at St. Stephen's, said at the time he felt as if the national church had "raped" him.

The fine line Marshall has walked between both sides has been appreciated at Grace Episcopal, where about a third of the members are gay, according to Malloy.

"I think we're at a place of great transition right now. ... That requires a kind of patience both ways," said Malloy, who's served at Grace Episcopal since his ordination – two years before Robinson's consecration.

Malloy said his diocese's support of Robinson seems to reflect the view that "the liberation of gay and lesbian people is, in fact, the logical unfolding of the Gospel."

But Marshall has never tried to force that viewpoint on St. Stephen's, said Beverly Doneker of Palmer Township, who heads the church vestry, or parish council.

Instead, Marshall has helped the congregation try to find a traditional-minded priest to replace Lewis, who left a year ago in February.

The bishop "has been very gracious to us," said Doneker, adding that Marshall has led services himself at St. Stephen's on holy days. "We have nothing but good things to say of how he has supported us."

As a result, St. Stephen's has not joined the roughly 45 Episcopal parishes – out of nearly 7,200 across the country – that have severed themselves from the national church in the wake of Robinson's consecration and the 2006 election of Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, a supporter of gay relationships, as the head of the U.S. Episcopal Church.

Jefferts Schori's controversial election triggered more debate, and six U.S. dioceses, out of 111 in the Episcopal Church, have rejected her leadership.

In February, after months of negotiations, leaders of the Anglican Communion's member churches met in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and gave the American church a deadline. The U.S. House of Bishops has until Sept. 30 to agree to a moratorium on blessing gay unions and consecrating openly gay bishops, or the church risks losing its status in the communion.

Today's gathering near Houston, which will last through Thursday, is the House of Bishops' first meeting since the ultimatum was issued.

Marshall, who has said the U.S. church shouldn't cave in to the Anglican leaders, hasn't disclosed what opinions he'll offer in Texas and said he doesn't expect a decision to come out of the meeting.

Instead, Marshall said the gathering will mark "the beginning of discussion throughout the church" that must include priests and lay people.

While the ultimatum was directed at bishops, Marshall pointed out that they share power with a House of Delegates that includes priests, deacons, and lay people. The next scheduled meeting of both houses isn't until 2009.

In the meantime, Marshall, Malloy and Doneker agreed – despite their different perspectives – that the international debate "is not really consuming us," as Marshall put it.

Malloy and Doneker said their congregations are more focused on ministering to their local communities. Even internationally, the Diocese of Bethlehem is more concerned about aiding its sister Diocese of Kajo-Keji in southern Sudan, Malloy said.

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