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Episcopal Split Tests Faith and Law

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Abstract

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Upset with what they say is the increasingly heterodox stance the national leadership of The Episcopal Church, Episcopalians in Texas and throughout the country are leaving their denomination and aligning under Anglican bishops.

In a last-grasp effort to hold on to property and assert control over an often dissident flock, the leadership of The Episcopal Church is arguing Canon law in the unlikeliest of places: the secular courtroom. As parishes and even whole dioceses country break free of the hierarchy and declare themselves independent from the national church, two lawsuits in Texas are raising the stakes and asking the government not just to intervene in land disputes, but to go further and determine the organizational structure of the faith.

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Episcopal Split Tests Faith and Law

As schisms go, it was not messy.

By 2005, 90 percent of the worshippers at St. Nicholas's, a well-attended parish in Midland, Texas, were fed up with the leadership of The Episcopal Church. The folks in the pews and their clergy walked away from their \$3 million property on 16 acres of land in the center of town. They formed Christ Church, an Anglican community under the spiritual leadership of a Ugandan bishop, and spent the next two years holding services in a school gymnasium and raising funds to build a new church.

Coming during an intense debate in the church on whether to bless same-sex marriages and on the heels of the ordination of the first openly homosexual bishop, Gene Robinson, the dissent was characterized in the media as a dispute over human sexuality. But the Rev. Jonathan Hartzler, associate rector of Christ Church, says sexual issues were just the most recent manifestation of heterodoxy brewing in The Episcopal Church.

“In past decades, the Episcopal leadership has gone off in new directions, making cultural accommodations in increasingly blatant ways,” Father Hartzler said. “You end up with this context over the past decades of an increasingly unorthodox approach to Christian spirituality.”

While the newly Anglican parishioners of Christ Church initially wanted to purchase the property from the Episcopal Diocese of Northwest Texas, they decided not to argue or pursue litigation when they were ordered off the land.

“The best path for us was not to litigate. Not to get into a big fight, but to show allegiance to a higher calling and higher values. To move on to preaching the Gospels; preaching and teaching God’s love,” Hartzler said.

But as more Episcopalians in the state and across the country push back against what they see as the liberalization of their church, such clean breaks are becoming rare.

In a last-grasp effort to hold on to property and assert control over an often dissident flock, the leadership of The Episcopal Church is arguing Canon law in the unlikeliest of places: the secular courtroom. As parishes and even whole dioceses break free of the hierarchy and declare themselves independent from the national church, two lawsuits in Texas are raising the stakes and asking the government not just to intervene in land disputes, but to go further and determine the organizational structure of the faith.

Organization of an English Outgrowth in America

The Episcopal Church is the American arm of the Anglican Communion, Henry VIII's contribution to the Reformation. Wanting to be free of papal oversight but not wishing to abandon the historical Catholic faith entirely, the 16th Century king took over Catholic churches in his country and claimed them for his new Church of England. Henry envisioned his church as a "middle way" between Catholicism and Protestantism. But the lack of centralized authority in this middle way allowed for a global church that is as fractured in itself as Protestantism as a whole.

The Anglican Communion takes a big tent approach to practices in its churches across the globe. The various churches are free to hold differing views on everything from which music to play during services to whether woman may be ordained as bishops. Typically, this does not pose much of a problem. As long as worshippers feel comfortable with their local churches, it is not difficult for them to be in a larger worldly communion with those holding different views.

But when Episcopalians in Texas identify more with the Church of Uganda than with their own national church, pleasant talk of spiritual union and brotherhood falls to the wayside. Infighting in The Episcopal Church gives way to breakups. The result is as inevitable as it is difficult to follow.

Along with The Episcopal Church, Texas now has churches belonging to The Anglican Church of North America, and the Anglican Church in America. And not

even paying attention to the names posted on a church's signpost can signal to a worshipper what exact faith the parishioners inside follow. In Fort Worth, both The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church in North America claim the name "The Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth."

Anglicanism in England is easier to follow. The Church of England houses its share of dissenters, but there are no major disputes over names or property. The queen is technically the head of the church, and the Archbishop of Canterbury is its spiritual head, sentimentally if not officially.

But while the Church of England is the established church of its native land, its American cousin enjoys no such status. Episcopalians have operated free of government interference, or privilege, since the American Revolution.

It is this independent status that puts the Episcopal Church in a position the Church of England does not face: asking the government for help sorting out the wreckage of major theological disputes.

Filing litigation against its separated brethren is not an ideal solution for any church. But The Episcopal Church has been hemorrhaging members for years. In the 1960s, the small but prominent church claimed 3.5 million adherents. Today, that number hovers around 2.1 million, with an average weekly service attendance of merely 700,000.

A Church in Transition

While the ranks of all the mainline Protestant churches have thinned in recent years as Americans on the whole become less likely to remain in the churches of their parents, The Episcopal Church has been particularly hard hit. The Episcopal hierarchy ended the tradition of its all-male priesthood in 1976, prompting discontent among many orthodox-leaning Episcopalians. And the 2003 ordination of Bishop Gene Robinson, a practicing homosexual, added to the discord. On top of these officially sanctioned changes, some priests—with their bishops' approval—have recently begun blessing same-sex unions and espousing a less literal interpretation of Scripture.

These changes, endorsed by current Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori—who became the first female head of the church in 2006—caused as much joy as they did anger. Some Episcopalians hail the moves as necessary in bringing the church up to date.

The Rev. Alan Conley, a retired priest in the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas, is prohibited by his bishop from blessing same-sex unions. He has, however, been an outspoken advocate of gay marriage and the acceptance of non-celibate homosexual clergymen and women. He founded the Kerrville chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and helps lead the meetings each week.

Father Conley, a self-described liberal, believes tradition can be altered if it is outdated.

“We realize that Scripture stopped being written at the end of the First Century. But God still speaks to His church, and we are still learning about God and what He wants for us,” he said recently. He dismisses allegations that the Episcopal leadership is twisting or ignoring Biblical teaching: “I would suspect that the vast majority of people who don’t want homosexuals to be one in our presence, meaning in our world... use the church and use the few passages of Scripture to bolster their argument. But if there wasn’t anything in Scripture they’d feel the same way, I believe.”

To Father Conley, the acceptance of women and non-celibate gays among the clergy and the sanctioning of same-sex unions are just continuations of the ever-evolving nature of The Anglican Communion. Conley points to changing attitudes about usury, slavery and re-marriage after divorce as examples of theological and social updates his church has undergone in the past.

But though the majority of the Episcopal leadership holds to Father Conley’s views, an ever-growing faction can’t see itself in the church any longer. And they say that it is not just the issues surrounding homosexuality, but the loose interpretation of Scripture, that marks The Episcopal Church’s move away from the true faith.

A new translation of the Book of Common Prayer, approved by the Episcopal hierarchy in 1979, remains a sore point for many former Episcopalians and liturgical traditionalists.

Father Conley says the changes merely bring the language up to date with modern style, replacing “thees” and “thous” with contemporary vernacular. But traditionalists say such tampering is insidious.

Mary Jane Butler is one of them. The former Episcopalian says her old church is moving further and further from the Christianity she was raised on. Fed up, she found a new home in The Anglican Church of North America.

“The language weakens it, the whole theology is watered down,” Mrs. Butler said of the new translation. Mrs. Butler said the changes in the Prayer Book mirror the Episcopal leadership’s move away from literal interpretation of the Bible.

“The further we get from the Bible the worse off we are. And too many of the Episcopalians are saying, ‘Well we’re not really sure who wrote the Bible because it was just a bunch of people.’ And the answer to that is: Yes a great many people did write it, but they wrote it under the direct direction of God,” she said. “And the Episcopal Church continues to tell us, ‘Well that’s not what God meant.’ But you see, it’s what God said.”

The Dissidents

Mary Jane Butler and her husband George are two of the former Episcopalians who say they have had enough. The married couple—he is 84 and she is 78—were baptized into the Episcopal Church as infants. They remained lifelong Episcopalians, until January of 2007. That’s when their parish, the Church of the Good Shepherd in San Angelo, faced a decision. With two-thirds of the roughly 100 attendees fed up with the hierarchy’s changes, they took a vote. The Butlers, members of the vestry—the church’s board of directors—and most of their neighbors in the pews voted to leave the Episcopal Church and align under Bishop Dunstan Bukenya of Netyana, Uganda. Finding a new spiritual leader was not difficult.

“One of our congregation called that bishop and told him what our situation was,” George Butler said, after a recent Sunday worship service. “And he welcomed us with open arms.”

The bishop quickly brought the dissenting parish into his flock, flying to San Angelo to meet the worshippers and familiarize himself with the parish.

As welcoming as Bishop Bukenya was to his San Angelo flock, he no longer has to travel nearly 9,000 miles to visit them. The Butlers’ church is now one of 800—97 in Texas, including almost the entire diocese of Fort Worth—that are part of the Anglican Church in North America. The denomination formed in December of 2008, uniting many of the parishes that disaffiliated from The Episcopal Church.

The leader of the Anglican Church in North America, Archbishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburg, is a former Episcopal bishop. Before Bishop Duncan made the switch, he allowed a priest under his command, the Rev. Stanley Burdock, to align under the Ugandan leadership and travel to San Angelo to take over the ministry at Good Shepherd.

Though they are locked in a nasty land battle and face eviction from their parish home, the Anglicans of San Angelo have had an easy time navigating the spiritual realm of their new faith.

The Anglican Church in North America claims only 100,000 members, which pales in comparison to The Episcopal Church's 2.1 million. But it can boast of an 80 percent attendance rate at weekly services. And with the Episcopal Church showing no signs of slowing or reversing its theological transformation, Anglicans are confident they will see exponential growth in the near future.

"Our presiding bishop's goal is for us to plant a thousand missions in ten years," Mr. Butler said.

The Anglicans in San Angelo say they will do their part to make this happen. Once they are out of their own lawsuit limbo, they plan to assist in church-building operations in nearby communities.

They are confident they will reach other dissatisfied Episcopalians in neighboring towns. Father Burdock said their small parish has received 15 new members in the past three years—a growth of more than 20 percent—and he

believes more Episcopalians would welcome the Anglican option were it offered to them.

The numbers support the priest's optimism.

"If you look at the trend lines in The Episcopal Church and the ACNA, they're going in opposite directions as far as membership, baptisms, attendance," said Jeff Walton, of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, a non-profit Christian association working to uphold Biblical orthodoxy. "The ACNA as far as growth has done quite well."

The Almost-Catholics

But some disgruntled Anglicans believe the Anglican Church in North America doesn't go far enough in its quest to return to a more traditional Episcopal faith. While Bishop Duncan's flock rejects new interpretation of Scripture, gay marriage and the appointment of actively homosexual priests and bishops, it has no problem with female priests.

The Anglican Church in America, which predates the Anglican Church in North America by 17 years, is comprised of churches that reject most Episcopal innovations since 1976. These churches joined with likeminded worshipers internationally and named themselves the Traditional Anglican Communion. No longer in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury, these traditional Anglicans believe they are upholding the true faith of the Apostles.

Bishop Steven Strawn, who was born, bred and educated as a Texas Episcopalian, is now stationed in Illinois, from where he oversees the two Texas parishes of his conservative Anglican faith.

Bishop Strawn's Texas charges, located in Dennison and Hurst, are just two of the 120 churches in the United States that are members of the Anglican Church in America. But the roughly 5,200 adherents in the state are all now fated to join another former Episcopal parish in the state, St. Mary the Virgin in Arlington, and join in full communion with the Catholic Church under the Pope. Texas is also home

to the first Catholic Church devoted solely to Anglican worship style in the country, Our Lady of Walsingham in Houston.

Bishop Strawn said he was dissatisfied with the Episcopal Church for many years before he finally left.

“With the addition of women’s ordination—so-called women’s ordination—to the priesthood, I certainly had a big problem with that,” he said recently. “I, like many people, felt that what we needed to do was to work to reform the church to bring it back to its Catholic heritage of male-only priests and bishops and deacons. However, the ordination of homosexuals, that pretty much was the end for me.”

Bishop Strawn abandoned his hopes of reforming his church from the inside, and formally abandoned the Episcopal faith altogether. But unlike the Anglicans of the Anglican Church of North America, he does not predict a big influx of Episcopalians into the churches he oversees.

“I really think that what our church has to do,” he said, “is probably focus more on growth through the un-churched.”

He does not know what will happen to the struggling Episcopal Church eventually, and refrains from making any predictions. He believes, however, that Episcopalians are moving away from the faith of their spiritual fathers. “And what will happen to them as a result of that direction is entirely up to God,” he said.

In a radical move, the bishops of the Anglican Church in America and their brethren in the Traditional Anglican Communion asked the Vatican to make

allowances for them to convert as one body. Pope Benedict XVI responded with an offer that would let them become Catholic while retaining their own distinct liturgies and traditions. Married Anglican priests will be ordained as Catholic priests, and married Anglican men will be permitted to seek ordination for the next 100 years.

Married men will not be permitted to be bishops, though they will be permitted to fulfill many of the leadership functions bishops normally handle. This is not a problem for Bishop Strawn, who says he is excited to become a priest in full communion with Rome.

“The union of the church is the most important of anything,” he said.

This March, the bishops of the Anglican Church in America voted to begin the process of unification. While the number of American Anglican converts to Catholicism will not be huge, the ramifications of Henry VIII’s spiritual descendants returning to Rome are not lost on those involved in the process.

“This will certainly rival the Reformation,” Bishop Strawn said. “The Reformation is one of the big deals in the church history. Well, this certainly will rival that if not be bigger in the years to come.”

San Angelo Land Battle

There is nothing new in churches splitting up and splitting off. How this is handled varies by religion. In hierarchical churches like the Catholic Church, all land is owned by the governing diocese, in the name of the bishop. If worshippers in a church wish to split off, they have no chance of keeping the land: the people can go, but they never owned the deed to the property anyway. In congregational faiths like the Baptist churches, land is always owned by the individual community. A church is free to walk away, and no squabble over buildings will result.

The Episcopal Church is a hierarchical church. But unlike the Catholic Church, occasionally parishes are given legal control of their own land. And loyalist Episcopalians and breakaway Anglicans disagree on whether the hierarchy extends past the level of the diocese.

The presiding bishop of The Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori, is faced with a difficult dilemma when churches wish to walk and take their property with them. She can allow it, and hear from unhappy loyalists who wish to remain in the churches their parents and grandparents helped build, or she can fight it in court. Bishop Jefferts Schori has chosen to pursue the latter option. In addition to increasing the pain and tension among those who worshipped together in the recent past, litigation invites the U.S. courts to weigh in on the policy of The Episcopal Church, bringing spiritual matters into the temporal realm.

In San Angelo, the approximately 20 loyalist Episcopalians of Good Shepherd and their priest, the Rev. Celia Ellery, are currently worshipping in a nearby Evangelical Lutheran church. They want their church building back, and are willing to traverse the court system to get it.

The diocese and Rector Ellery referred requests for comment to their attorney.

Guy Choate, the San Angelo lawyer representing The Episcopal Church in its case against the Anglican Church of the Good Shepherd, says the Episcopal hierarchy is actually protecting religion from government intervention by filing suit.

“If we do nothing, if we just let them take the church, that is more damaging to the First Amendment than enforcing our rights under the law as we believe them to be,” he said.

First Amendment law pertaining to breakaway churches is ill defined, said Douglas Laycock, a professor at the University of Michigan School of Law and an authority on religious liberty who is not involved in the current Texas cases. In a 1979 decision, *Jones v. Wolf*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that judges may rely on secular aspects of internal church documents when deciding cases.

“That was just opening the door to local trial judges to do whatever the hell they wanted, and many of them have done it,” Professor Laycock said. “The mistake was to invite courts to read these documents in the first place. But the court went there, and now it’s in this kind of half-and-half world where the civil court can read

the document until the questions start getting too religious and then the court has to defer [to the religious authority that both sides recognized before the dispute]. And getting judges to back off and defer at that point has been a struggle. They got the case, and they want to decide it.”

The Anglicans of Good Shepherd argue that unlike most Episcopal churches, theirs was owned by the people of the parish, and not by the diocese, The Episcopal Diocese of Northwest Texas.

In 1982, during a property expansion, the parish took control of the land, forming a church corporation to manage it.

“They actually changed the title in the local corporation’s name,” Father Burdock said of Good Shepherd’s former diocese. “They transferred ownership.”

Mr. Choate and the diocese are not disputing the transfer of ownership. Rather, their argument is that the very nature of The Episcopal Church makes the deed moot.

“We say that’s just irrelevant,” Mr. Choate said. “There’s not anything that has happened in the deed records... that changes the fundamental issue that we are a hierarchical church and you do what the hierarchy tells you to do.”

Thus far, the courts have sided with the diocese and ordered the Anglicans to vacate the premises. But the Anglicans of Good Shepherd are appealing, convinced that Texas land and property law should hold more sway than Episcopal Canon law as argued by the diocese. The Anglicans’ appeal brief charges, “the Court erred in

declaring that the corporation Good Shepherd may not use its own property except for the mission of the Episcopal Church.” The brief describes the order to vacate as “an order to use the property for a particular religious purpose in violation of the First Amendment, and is a taking of private property for private purposes prohibited by the Texas Constitution.”

The San Angelo case hinges on whether church law trumps property law, a murky proposition for any Texas court. But in the litigation over ownership of the Diocese of Fort Worth, the case is just as murky, and the stakes are even higher.

Fort Worth Land Battle

Episcopal bishops enjoy a large degree of autonomy and the bishops of the Diocese of Fort Worth made use of theirs.

Despite the 1976 decision to allow women's ordination to the priesthood, the priests in Fort Worth remained all male. The diocese eschewed actively homosexual priests and bishops as well as same-sex unions. Bishop Jack Iker made no secret about his disgust with the liberalization of The Episcopal Church. When Bishop Jefferts Schori was elected as the head of the church, Bishop Iker released a public statement saying the majority of primates in the Anglican Communion do not recognize female bishops, and a female presiding bishop's election "introduces an additional element of division and impairment."

The majority of Bishop Iker's flock shares his resistance to the direction in which the church is moving. In 2008, delegates met at a diocesan convention and decided to align the diocese under the Anglican Church of the Southern Cone, in South America. A short time later, the diocese joined the Anglican Church of North America, just as Good Shepherd in San Angelo did.

While Good Shepherd's move to Anglicanism left a couple dozen worshippers wanting their Episcopal parish back, the mass migration in Fort Worth opened a much bigger rift. Fifty-five of the 58 churches in the diocese are in the control of Bishop Iker's Anglican faction. The loyalists in the area managed to hold on to two churches, and are working to get the rest of the property back through the courts.

On top of the legal battle, the diocese is in an identity crisis as well. Bishop Iker's group, now Anglican, is still called the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth. And the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church appointed temporary bishops to the area to lead the loyalists. They are also calling themselves the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth.

An official from the diocese sanctioned by The Episcopal Church's leadership declined to comment on the record, citing the on-going lawsuits. But from the happenings of the church over the past year, it is clear the loyalists have been busy bringing their new diocese up to speed with contemporary changes in the church. In the past year, the new provisional bishops ordained two women to the priesthood and appointed female priests from other dioceses to positions in Fort Worth area communities.

Integrity USA, a gay and lesbian group that had butted heads with Bishop Iker's faction in the past, set up a booth at the loyalists' annual convention. When Bishop Jefferts Schori visited and celebrated Holy Communion in February 2009, she was flanked by two female deacons. A note about the changes on the diocese's new Web site states, "the sight of three women at the altar made crystal clear the change we were witnessing."

Bishop Jefferts Schori hired Robert Bruce Mullin, a historian at General Theological Seminary in New York, as an expert witness in the suits. Professor Mullin did not respond to a request for comment for this article.

His legal affidavits, also submitted in the San Angelo case, argue that from the early days of its founding after the American Revolution, The Episcopal Church has been hierarchical and made this clear in its canons. Professor Mullin says this hierarchy does not end at the diocesan level, but extends to the national General Convention, of which the presiding bishop is the head. With the church so structured, each diocese that is formed is beholden to church law. The historian cites the requirement obliging each diocese to “an unqualified accession to the Constitution and Canons of this Church.”

Bishop Iker’s contingent, of course, does not agree. The now-Anglican diocese argues that the secular courts lack jurisdiction to interpret and rule on an ecclesiastical argument. In addition, Bishop Iker and his co-defendants in the suit reject the claim that the hierarchy of The Episcopal Church is as canonically powerful as the presiding bishop believes. The national governing body has authority over individual bishops, they argue, but not over dioceses.

Other breakaway dioceses and churches have contested the hierarchical claims of The Episcopal Church, with varying success. Courts in Virginia have favored breakaways, while The Episcopal Church has prevailed in cases in California and Connecticut.

Professor Laycock said the U.S. Supreme Court has shown no interest in revisiting religious liberty claims in the more than 30 years since *Jones v. Wolf*, and decisions will likely end with each state’s supreme court.

It is difficult to predict how these cases will ultimately be decided in Texas.

The briefs and affidavits on both sides are flooded with competing references to church law. Much as the liberals and the conservatives don't agree on Biblical interpretation, they are not reading their church's founding documents with the same eyes.

It is the eyes of the judges who will matter in the days ahead. And it is not likely many judges have had to wade through so many arguments that boil down to faith and doctrine.

"Lots of judges don't see the religious liberty significance of these cases because they don't have any sense of the history of religious conflict over forms of church governance," Professor Laycock said.

Whether or not judges come into cases with knowledge of the workings of The Anglican Communion, they certainly get a good dose of spirituality when presiding over these land battles. Mark Brown, one of the San Angelo vestry members who voted to leave The Episcopal Church, even ends his friend of the court brief for the Fort Worth case with a short prayer.

Fallout from Lawsuits

About the only thing both sides can agree on is that they don't like being in court.

Mr. Choate, the San Angelo attorney for The Episcopal Church, acknowledged that a legal remedy was no one's first choice. "Obviously this is terribly painful for the people in this church and on the other side of the issue," he said.

Father Conley says there is more at stake than money: Many churches have sacred areas where ashes of the faithful departed are buried. Litigation may be distasteful, but so is the thought of abandoning the buildings and the remains of those Episcopalians who came before.

Those on the Anglican side say they don't want to be in court, but they have no choice. "Scripture clearly states: don't take another Christian to court," said Suzanne Gill, chancellor of the breakaway Fort Worth Diocese. "We didn't start the lawsuit."

Even some faithful Episcopalians wish the hierarchy would be less aggressive in getting back the land. George McGonigle is one of them. A layman currently living in Austin, Mr. McGonigle has served on delegations to the General Assembly.

While more conservative than the general thrust of The Episcopal Church, he is tolerant of those dioceses that ordain practicing homosexuals and bless gay unions and says he would not leave the church if his began to as well. He cast his vote in favor of female priests in 1976, despite his initial reservations.

Yet Mr. McGonigle is critical of Bishop Jefferts Schori's pursuit of legal remedies against the breakaway Anglicans, despite his belief she has every right to seek them.

"I just wish she'd quit taking a harsh stand on these properties," he said. "Sell it to them, or give it to them," he suggested.

Mr. McGonigle's suggestion is about both charity and rationality.

If The Episcopal Church is successful in its suits in Texas and across the country—there are about 50 going on at the moment—it will leave the denomination with many empty pews. It could be hard to attract new worshipers to a church that's been through such a heated dispute.

"One of the hardest things you can do is restart a parish that is vacant," Mr. McGonigle said. "New people don't want to be part of your old fight."

And Anglicans won't revert to the Episcopal faith just because they lost some property. George Butler outlined Good Shepherd's plans should it ultimately lose in the quest to keep their church building and land, valued at \$3.5 million.

"We'll go down the street and rent a storefront," he said. "We've already priced one and got quotations on having it revised. The church is not a building, as we often say. We'll find someplace to make a church."

Possible reconciliation in the future?

Despite the anger and the litigation, some Episcopalians and Anglicans aren't writing off the possibility of a future reconciliation. Robert Prichard, author of several books on the history of the Anglican Communion and a professor at the Episcopal Virginia Theological Seminary, said there are precedents for hope.

"This kind of messy thing has happened before," he said.

Professor Prichard pointed to an argument that started to split The Episcopal Church between the 1840s and 1870s. Though gay marriage and female ordination may be the hot-button topics of today, the concern then was over the use of the word regeneration: whether it was normative for adults to have conversion experiences.

This dispute, which boiled down to how Protestant Henry VIII's spiritual children wanted to be, was contentious at the time. But the furor died down and was largely forgotten after a hundred years. A similar situation popped up around the same time in Scotland when some churches felt their fellow Scottish members of the Anglican Communion were too Roman Catholic in their theology. The more Evangelical-leaning Scots tried to put themselves under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Sierra Leone.

"It does sound familiar in some cases," Professor Prichard said.

Still, a reconciliation between the separated American brethren could be a long time in coming, if ever.

“I think enough people have gotten mad at each other that there is going to be no reunion of the various splintered parts of the Episcopal church in the United States within two generations,” Professor Prichard said. “A lot of mad people have got to pass from the scene before that’s going to be happening.”

Suzanne Gill, of the Anglican Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth, isn’t ruling out reconciliation either. “It would be great to have some reconciliation,” she said. “We just don’t know.”

But despite hopes for future reconciliation, Gill doesn’t say it would be easy, or even desirable at this point. Forming the Anglican Church of North America gave disjointed Anglican groups in the United States support and unity. And the Anglicans are free to run their churches without fear of irritating the liberals who once sat with them in the pews. “It’s better now,” she said.

Mary Jane Butler said Good Shepherd Anglican Church is more conducive to fellowship and worship than it ever was: “One of the young women who came back who had been gone for a long time said, ‘I can’t believe it! This place is so peaceful. Everybody likes everybody.’”

Father Hartzler at Christ Church in Midland expressed similar sentiments about a change in mood once his congregation made the switch to The Anglican Church.

“Two things happened: An immediate sense of liberation, an immediate sense of freedom to get back to what is important,” he said. “And the second thing

behind liberation was the recognition about how really much more sick this whole situation was than we really realized.”

While splits may have relieved some areas of the tensions of infighting, as Father Hartzler says, they also reveal the deep extent of the rift. As more parishes break away, the remaining Episcopal Church is still plagued by the question of how far to take the faith’s liberalization. Professor Prichard says debates over homosexuality have become tedious and ever-present in his seminary.

“There was a point in time when I heard the word sex I thought about my wife,” he said. “Now I hear the word sex, I think about meetings.”

In Austin’s Seminary of the Southwest, administrators take great pains to make sure disagreements do not become squabbles. The seminary instituted guidelines for discussing controversial issues in 2004, just after Gene Robinson’s anointment as bishop. The guidelines that make up the “Conversation Covenant” state that all students and faculty strive to “consider the possibility that we might be mistaken” and “engage ideas without attacking or dismissing those that hold them.”

Nancy Springer-Baldwin, the seminary’s communications director, says the covenant holds everyone at the seminary to a standard of respect. “That has made a difference here,” she said.

But Father Conley says that in his experience, hot topics are leading to hot tempers.

“These are important issues and because of that people began to set up politics in the Church,” he said. “And I don’t see that as a bad thing. But the attitude about how we do things is what is unfortunate. And I see that pretty much across the board in America, just like we’ve got going on between the two political parties. They’re at each other’s throats. We used to be more gentlemanly. We’re not now.”

Father Conley acknowledges that the polite arguments that used to go on in The Episcopal Church were over comparatively minor issues.

“We’d argue about high church or low church, which doesn’t really make that much difference except to a high churchman or low churchman,” he said, referring to disagreements over musical selections, vestments and church architecture. “There was never any argument or fight that was at all serious to the structure of the church.”

The fighting that Father Conley laments is not limited to The Episcopal Church. It has affected the entire Anglican Communion. When Episcopal churches began to break away and align under African bishops—Conley believes those African bishops to be guilty of “poaching” congregations—harsh letters went back and forth between Episcopal bishops and the presiding bishop and the African bishops who were welcoming the dissidents.

John Shelby Spong, a retired Episcopal bishop and a leader among liberal Christians, faced charges of racism after making critical comments about the African

Anglicans having a weak understanding of Scripture. But Father Conley defends Bishop Spong.

“Bishop Spong got in trouble when he said something that was really quite true,” he said. “Most of the African clergy don’t have a very good education” in Scriptural interpretation.

Besides personal insults, The Anglican Communion is faced with problems when Episcopal dioceses break away and still want to be recognized by Canterbury. The Communion as a whole does not sanction the Anglican Church of North America, but some individual dioceses in good standing do. And Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has publicly expressed support for finding a pathway to acceptance for divergent traditions, but has not yet proposed a formal structure to make this happen.

Moving Forward with a Diminished Flock

For now, The Episcopal Church lives on, trying to iron out the wrinkles. Despite their declining membership, Episcopalians are not lacking in leaders or aspirations. Ms. Springer-Baldwin, at the Seminary of the Southwest, said that in recent years, dioceses are ordaining more new priests than they can place. And under Bishop Jefferts Schori's leadership, Episcopalians have become more active in social justice issues like caring for the homeless and protecting the environment.

Since bishops do have a certain amount of autonomy, many dioceses, including several in Texas, are not ordaining practicing homosexuals or blessing same-sex marriages. Some dioceses do not send donations to the national church, believing their money should not be spent on innovations they oppose.

When a diocese shuns the innovations of the national church, it can sidestep much of the dissent that causes Anglicans to break away. St. David's Episcopal parish in Austin, where George McGonigle is an active member, is thriving. Regardless of how the pastor feels about same-sex marriage, he is prohibited from performing such ceremonies by his bishop. While this is disappointing to some more liberal-minded members of the congregation, Mr. McGonigle said it saves the parish from much internal debate. Since it is not a possibility, no one on either side of the issue sees it prudent to argue much about it.

It seems unlikely, however, that too many dioceses will be able to avoid confronting changes in the church for long.

Just this March, a California diocese ordained a lesbian bishop. Articles in newspapers and blogs about her relationship with her life partner became the fodder for both praise and criticism.

While the disputes of the past may have been hashed out at church meetings and in letters mailed across the country, today's confrontations are children of the Internet age.

For now, most Episcopalians and Anglicans in the United States are concerned with practicing their faiths as they see fit, and keeping peace where possible. The Butlers, who raised six children and have five still living, say their family is now split between the Episcopal and Anglican churches. They try not to dwell on what separates them, as difficult as that might be.

"I have a daughter who writes me letters and refers to God as 'She,'" Mrs. Butler said. "And rather than argue with her I write her letters back and refer to God as 'He.' We agreed not to disagree."

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This report was typed by the author.