

South Carolina Bishop: Episcopal Split Clarifies Future

By Bruce Smith, Associated Press

CHARLESTON - With years of angst and controversy now over, the split of the Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina from the national church has brought clarity and allows the faithful to look to the future, Bishop Mark Lawrence said.

“We as a diocese can begin to dream,” he said recently in a wide-ranging interview with The Associated Press. “We can dream of how God would have us fulfill our vision. We can dream of planting new churches and strengthening existing churches and working with Anglicans around the world.”

The diocese in eastern and lower South Carolina, one of the oldest Episcopal dioceses in the nation, left the more liberal national church after years of disagreements over doctrine, including the ordination of gays.

“It’s been a tremendous distraction,” Lawrence said. “Personally, now there is clarity. It’s time to move forward.”

The diocese has sued the national church in state court seeking to protect the estimated half-billion dollars worth of church property in those parishes that are leaving. It also wants a judge to declare that the diocese has the legal right to the name The Diocese of South Carolina.

There has been confusion over that issue because the handful of churches remaining with the national church are forming a new Episcopal diocese and using the name.

The Diocese of South Carolina was one of the original nine dioceses that joined together in 1790 to form the Episcopal Church and has a legal right to leave, Lawrence said.

“We as a diocese have existed since 1785 and helped create what many are calling the mother church,” he said. “We associated with it in 1790 and disassociated with it in 2012.”

Lawrence said there is nothing in state law or canon law preventing the diocese from leaving. He sees the national church as revising theology and morality while the diocese strives to be the guardian of the Gospel.

“Likewise we are the guardians of the buildings and property that the Gospel has inspired people in the diocese to build and give to,” he said. “Just as we are guardians of one, we are guardians of the other.”

When the diocese split from the national church, it had 70 congregations with about 29,000 parishioners. But 19 parishes and six worship groups are remaining in the national church.

“We are not saying the Episcopal Church cannot create a new diocese here. But they should

Bishop Lawrence Interviewed by Associated Press

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not be seeking to supplant this diocese and assume our identity,” Lawrence said, adding that the Diocese of South Carolina is a legal name.

Lawrence said the diocese has no intention of trying to coerce the 19 parishes staying with the national church into leaving or going to court for their property.

“If there is one arena of life people like freedom in, it’s their faith and religion,” he said. “I think it’s important we keep relationships with people the best we can. If we are very clear in who we are, then people can choose whether they want to relate to us or affiliate with us.”

In recent months, he said, the diocese has had messages of support from archbishops and presiding bishops representing about 50 million Anglicans, recognizing him as a bishop and the diocese as an Anglican diocese.

The 2-million-member Episcopal Church is the U.S. branch of the Anglican Communion, which has 77 million members worldwide.

Lawrence said the diocese may affiliate at some point with a larger church group but for now will take its time.

“If you have been in a dysfunctional relationship and no longer in that relationship as an individual, you’d be wise to take your time before you go into another one,” he said.

He said the diocese will set up a task force to have conversations with groups like the Anglican Church in North America, the Reformed Episcopal Church and the Anglican Catholic Church.

“All these are communities around us that we need to have a deepening relationship with and see where God will lead us,” he said.