

Charges delay bishop confirmation for gay reverend

Claims including inappropriate contact prompted a council to delay a vote for Rev. V. Gene Robinson

By Mark I. Pinsky
The Orlando Sentinel (KRT)

MINNEAPOLIS — The confirmation of the first openly gay bishop of a mainline Protestant denomination was derailed Monday — at least temporarily — when sexual allegations surfaced regarding the Rev. V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire.

In an e-mail to bishops of the Episcopal Church, USA, a man identifying himself as David Lewis of Manchester, Vt., wrote that Robinson "put his hands on me inappropriately every time I engaged him in conversation" at a church event several years ago.

Lewis did not respond to phone calls.

Another allegation charged that a

Web page created by the Portland, Maine, chapter of a gay-youth group Robinson helped found more than a decade ago had links to sexually explicit sites. That allegation was posted on a Web site operated by a conservative religious activist.

The New England-based youth group, Outright, issued a statement late Monday saying that Robinson had no involvement with the Portland chapter. The statement also said Portland chapter officials had no idea it was possible to link to the sexually explicit page.

Outright called the charge tying Robinson to the sexually explicit site "an attempt to discredit his important nomination."

The denomination's House of Bishops, which had been poised to confirm Robinson, instead ordered an immediate investigation of the charges.

The timing of the allegations "seems a little curious to me," said James Solheim, a spokesman for the denomination. Both of the charges "could have been brought up at any other time in the process."

Nonetheless, Solheim said, Frank Griswold, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, USA, "is taking this very, very seriously."

Denomination officials were unable to say how long the investigation would take. If it is not completed when the convention ends Friday, the bishops could vote later by mail.

Some of those closest to Robinson reacted emotionally to Lewis' allegations.

"This is horrible. It's character assassination," Robyn Cotton, an Episcopalian in Concord, N.H., told The Associated Press.

However, the leaders most intensely involved in the debate about ho-

mosexuality were more cautious.

The Rev. Michael Hopkins, head of Integrity, a group of gay Episcopalians and their supporters, said he has "absolute confidence in Gene Robinson," adding that the charges were "frustrating" and "disappointing."

But Hopkins said he was not angry and, as a pastor, was not willing to dismiss the charges simply because of the timing.

"Part of me wants to be suspicious," Hopkins said, "but it is not infrequent that victims come forth at the last minute."

The Rev. David Anderson, head of the conservative American Anglican Council, which opposes both the Robinson nomination and the blessing of same-sex unions, urged caution in responding to the allegations.

"Gene deserves the right to defend himself," Anderson said, noting that the Lewis allegation may be "spurious."

"I don't want to pass judgment," he said. "It may be that he is completely innocent."

Anderson acknowledged that members of his organization brought the gay-youth group's Web site to the attention of denomination officials.

But he also said that, while Robinson helped organize and publicize the Outright organization, "He may have no responsibility" for the links put up by the Portland, Maine, chapter.

"We need to take a deep breath and cool off a little bit," Anderson said. "Those of us who find ourselves in the spotlight know that some really strange things can be said about us," said Bishop John Howe of the Central Florida diocese. "At this point, I'm praying for Gene Robinson."

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Homeland Security to suspend 'Travel Without Visa' program

A Department of Homeland Security directive will suspend in the name of security two programs that allow travelers to speed through airports

By Doreen Hemlock
and Tanya Weinberg
South Florida Sun-Sentinel (KRT)

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Airlines scurried Monday to inform thousands of passengers flying through the United States to other countries that they will need U.S. visas starting Tuesday, sending e-mails, posting notices at airport counters and offering refunds to those clients who won't be able to travel.

At issue is a U.S. Department of Homeland Security directive issued Saturday that suspends two programs — Transit Without Visa and International-to-International — that allowed foreigners to make connections at U.S. airports without a U.S. visa. About 615,000 travelers used the programs last year, most from Latin America.

Authorities suspended the programs for an initial 60 days after recent intelligence reports suggested potential terrorist threats at U.S. airports in the East Coast.

By itself, the new rule will have a limited impact yet to be quantified, aviation executives said Monday.

The measure won't affect citizens of 27 countries, mostly rich nations in Europe, who don't need a visa to enter the United States anyway. Nor does it affect those travelers from developing nations who already have U.S. visas, including many top executives from South and Central

America who frequent the United States on business.

But it could stop tens of thousands of travelers a year from traveling through Miami International Airport, mainly Latin Americans who would not qualify for a U.S. visa or don't want to endure weeks or months waiting for visa approvals. They could re-route their in-transit business instead to Panama, Mexico, Canada or other nations.

The rule adds to a host of security directives issued after Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks that together have dealt a serious blow to international business in the United States and threaten to undermine future business.

For example, starting last Friday, most applicants for U.S. visas must now appear for personal interviews at U.S. consulates overseas, a requirement that could add "a few weeks" to the time it already takes to apply for a visa, said a spokesman for the U.S. State Department's consular bureau.

"We may well win the war against terrorism but at the expense of strangling our economy," said John P. Bauer, president of food importer-exporter Basic Foods International of Fort Lauderdale and honorary consul of Guatemala in an e-mail Monday.

Security and visa problems have contributed, for instance, to a more than 12 percent drop in international passengers since 2000 at Miami International, one of the largest airports nationwide for international traffic. Miami handled nearly 2 million fewer international passengers last year than it did in 2000.

Headaches at Spain's Iberia Airlines illustrate the nagging and

growing problems.

Last year, Iberia considered moving its hub from Miami after changes in U.S. security procedures forced delays of up to four hours for passengers switching between international flights. Gov. Jeb Bush intervened to save Florida jobs and Iberia traffic, persuading federal authorities to streamline in-transit procedures in Miami.

On Monday, the carrier scrambled to contact passengers — especially in Central America — about Saturday's new rule on U.S. connecting flights, suggesting alternate routes through Mexico and other nations.

And more rules are coming.

"Our big concern is that come Oct. 1, new rules say Europeans will need a U.S. visa unless they have a machine-readable passport," Iberia spokeswoman Margarita Blanco said from Madrid.

Spain and other nations are now working to issue the new high-tech documents, but it's unclear they'll all be ready in time to meet the needs of millions who visit the United States each year, European officials have said.

Amid the scramble, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security said it will seek alternatives over the next 60 days to reinstate the two suspended in-transit programs which already have seen usage drop sharply since Sept. 11, 2001.

Authorities said 381,065 travelers used the Transit Without Visa and 233,454 used the International-to-International programs last fiscal year. That's down by more than half from a total 1.6 million passengers a year ear-

lier, before the International-to-International plan was temporarily halted and re-instated.

American Airlines, which dominates traffic at Miami International, handled the most passengers under the Transit Without Visa program: roughly 93,000, or one-fourth of the total.

Los Angeles International and Miami International ranked as tops among airports using the program, each with roughly 79,000 passengers last year. And Latin America was the region benefiting most, with roughly 89,000 from Brazil and 69,000 from Mexico. Brazilians mainly use Miami as their hub; Mexicans tend to transit through Texas.

American Airlines said Monday it will give refunds to all ticketed passengers who won't be able to travel because of the new suspensions.

ture trips with U.S. transfers can't bypass the waits, which already can take months in some countries.

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Today's crossword solution

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Fire

continued from page 1

Only 14 members of the fraternity are residing at the house this summer, Theta Chi member Alec Horley said.

Justin Brownlie, one of the five fraternity members living on the third floor where the bulk of the fire burned, said the house's fire alarm went off shortly before 7 p.m., prompting fraternity members to rush to the third floor room to investigate. Brownlie said he ran downstairs to check the fire alarm system, and when he ran back up the room was engulfed in flames.

He said a few members attempted to extinguish the fire before deciding it was too big to handle.

"We tried to put it out, then we de-

ecided to get the hell out of there," he said. "It was out of control. There was no way we could put it out. It was pretty nuts."

Firefighters responding to the alarm arrived shortly after.

Diego Kelly, a member of the adjacent Delta Tau Delta fraternity, said he and fellow fraternity member Skylar Borman saw the beginning of the fire. Borman then called 9-1-1 to report the outbreak.

"All of the sudden it just grew a lot," Kelly said. "Luckily, the fire trucks came at the right time."

When firefighters arrived at the scene, two crews laid lines for fire hoses and broke a hole in the roof to get access and attack the fire, DeWitt said.

Fewer than 100 students stood on East 19th Avenue watching the fire,

and members of Delta Tau Delta sat in lawn chairs and watched the cleanup process from a balcony. By 8 p.m., no more smoke could be seen escaping from the roof, and many of the firefighters were milling around the front of the house, resting from their efforts.

Crews remained at the scene to investigate the fire's cause, and DeWitt said EFD will begin work with the University today to complete a damage assessment.

Horley said he was told fraternity members would be able to move back into the house Monday night, and that it was not yet clear who would foot the bill for damages to the house.

Contact the managing editor
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