

THE GENE DIVIDES

GAY RIGHTS SPLIT EPISCOPAL CHURCH. BY SETH WALKER

It's a warm, still summer morning in Eugene, and 59 congregants at St. Thomas Episcopal Church sit silently in dark brown pews. Sunlight pours through towering orange, yellow and blue stained glass windows as the parishioners watch Rev. Jeremy Tyndall approach the pulpit.

Tyndall, 49, with pale skin, a red moustache and a lean frame, is nervous. On this day, August 10, 2003, he knows his generally conservative congregation is not

happy about the week's promotion of Rev. Gene Robinson — the country's first openly gay bishop — to the top spot of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire. Now he must deliver a hastily prepared Sunday sermon that addresses their concerns.

"While some are delighted at the confirmation of Rev. Robinson, an openly gay man living with a long-term partner," he begins in a gentle British brogue, "many others are feeling deep pain, including me."

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— REV. GENE ROBINSON



GOD LOVES EVERYONE,

including those with a same-sex orientation, he says. But to him, Robinson's promotion feels like a Trojan horse. Robinson was elected because he was the best candidate, but the action by the national Episcopal Church says it's not only comfortable with an openly gay bishop, but it also implies support for even greater liberties for gay men and lesbians.

To Tyndall's surprise and slight embarrassment, the congregation applauds. It's the first time they've done so for him in the several years that he's run St. Thomas.

An hour later, Rev. Nick Parker — a good friend and former assistant of Tyndall's in England — kicks off the Sunday worship at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in the center of town. About 15 minutes into the service, Rev. Nancy Muhlheim, a church deacon, steps up to the pulpit to deliver the sermon.

Muhlheim, whose big smile, well-manicured fingernails and youthful face belie her true age of 60, stands at the front of the main parish hall. Above her, the ceiling in the shape of an upside-down boat hull symbolizes the ship of faith.

Muhlheim begins to deliver her words softly but clearly, assuming an even-keeled tone that subtly demonstrates support for Robinson while creating an atmosphere of inclusiveness for those who don't agree with his election.

"The continuity of the Episcopal denomination and its traditions does not lie in the

hands of one person, event or social issue," she says. As the congregation lives through the controversies and changes within the national church, she says, everyone should remember that they are united in their religion. In the Bible it says nothing, not even death, shall separate them.

The leadership and many parishioners at Eugene's four local Episcopal churches stand evenly divided along theological and moral lines on Robinson's promotion: Most at St. Mary's and Church of the Resurrection stand for it, and most at St. Matthews and St. Thomas are against it.

The church-goers are more than talking about the issue. Two members left St. Mary's and about 10 people complained after Robinson's election on Aug. 6 by the Episcopal national convention. One family left Church of the Resurrection. Both churches, however, claim that they eventually increased their rolls because of their inclusive approach to the issue.

St. Matthews and St. Thomas

face more trying times. Despite the leadership standing against Robinson's election, St. Matthews has lost 20 families. They've either left for different parishes or simply quit attending church. The picture is similar at St. Thomas, where they've lost at least an estimated five percent of their congregation and received dozens of complaints.

Those against Robinson argue that the two-million-member U.S. Episcopal Church is rapidly moving away from the policies of its governing body, the 70-million-member Anglican Communion. The titular head of the Anglican Communion, the Church of England, neither elects nor consecrates openly gay church leaders.

The main arguments against Robinson revolve around his active sexual status with his partner, not his sexual orientation. The church welcomes celibate gay priests, but it frowns upon sexually active ones. It has never promoted — until now — an openly gay one to the powerful position of bishop.

Scripture is also used against Robinson. The Bible denounces homosexuality at

seven different points, depending on how you read it, with the story of Sodom and Gomorra being one of the most famous. To some, Robinson's consecration shows that the U.S. Episcopal Church is now willing to make policy decisions that directly conflict scripture.

For Robinson, the arguments against him in Eugene are similar to those all over the country, though he believes the discussions here miss the point entirely. He believes the issue at hand is much larger than sexual activity or conflicts with scripture.

"What's really going on here is the end of patriarchy. We're facing the end of straight white men making all the decisions," he says.

To him, gay men and lesbians are now fighting what he says is possibly America's last great civil rights battle, and like other civil rights battles, it's going to be long and vicious.

"The patriarchal system that's been there for centuries is going to be resistant. Despite struggle, people of color and women continue to rise to positions of leadership. Now the last fight is for homosexuals. It's mostly white men who are driven crazy by my election."

In the 1960s, he says, the main issue in the country was race. In the 1970s, it was women's rights. Now, just past the turn of the century, the issue is civil liberties for gay men and lesbians.

"We must ask whether citizenship is full and equal for all, or whether there's still an asterisk next to certain names," he says. Homosexuals, he says, are fighting to see

REV. BILL SWAN
& REV. RALPH
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