

FROM THE NATIONAL FRONT

Continuing Episcopalians making plans to reconstitute Diocese of San Joaquin

By Mary Frances Schjonberg

December 11, 2007[Episcopal News Service] — Local leaders, along with those from the wider church, are already making plans for the continuation of the Diocese of San Joaquin following a vote to disassociate from the Episcopal Church.

Michael Glass, a San Rafael, California-based attorney who represents congregations and individual Episcopalians who wish to remain in the Episcopal Church, told Episcopal News Service (ENS) December 11 that he, local leaders, Chancellor to the Presiding Bishop David Booth Beers, and leaders from Episcopal dioceses surrounding San Joaquin “are coming together very soon to finalize our coordinated efforts to provide for the leadership needs, the legal and pastoral issues, and the financial concerns of our brothers and sisters in San Joaquin, and to provide for the continuation of the diocese.”

The Rev. Robert Moore will meet with the group as well. Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori appointed Moore “to provide an ongoing pastoral presence to the continuing Episcopalians in the Diocese of San Joaquin,” said the Rev. Charles Robertson, canon to the Presiding Bishop.

Moore is the husband of Bishop Suffragan Bavi Edna “Nedi” Rivera of Olympia, the daughter of San Joaquin Bishop John-David Schofield’s predecessor, Bishop Victor Rivera.

“The Presiding Bishop wants the people of San Joaquin to be assured of her prayers and also of her support in the coming days,” Robertson said.

Delegates attending San Joaquin’s 48th Convention on December 8 overwhelmingly voted to leave the Episcopal Church and align with the Anglican Province of the Southern Cone.

Robertson said that, while the action in San Joaquin is unprecedented, “so is the support and love that is rising up in the Episcopal Church.”

At the same time, San Joaquin’s canon to the ordinary says parishes in the diocese can go through a “period of discernment” to “determine whether or not they are comfortable with the decisions made by their delegates.” If a parish-wide vote shows members are not in agreement, the parish may “appeal to the bishop for release,” the Rev. Canon William Gandenberger told ENS.

Speaking from diocesan offices in Fresno, California, where phones are being answered with the greeting “Anglican Church offices,” Gandenberger said he did not know how much time parishes have to discern their future, and added that mission congregations cannot participate in such a process.

Glass and another person who requested not to be identified told ENS that Schofield threatened the personal livelihoods and congregational finances of priests who opposed his efforts to lead the diocese out of the Episcopal Church.

The unnamed person said Schofield told him during a break in the convention that diocesan support of his mission congregation will stop at the end of December because he abstained in the December 8 vote. Glass confirmed Schofield’s threat. The warning came, the person said, despite the fact that money was earmarked in the 2008 diocesan budget for support of the congregation.

The person said both Schofield and Gandenberger told him and another congregational leader a month ago that diocesan support might cease, since any funds in the diocesan budget for mission would have to go towards Schofield’s legal defense.

Asked whether such a threat had been made, Gandenberger replied, “absolutely not.”

Gandenberger said aid to all missions that asked for diocesan support in 2008 was included in the budget approved December 8 and that the leadership would “absolutely not” amend the budget to use that money elsewhere.

Glass said Schofield told the convention that \$1.6 million has already been set aside for legal and other costs involved in their departure. He and others are worried, he added, that Schofield and his supporters will “sell down assets that no longer belong to them to pay their legal fees.” Glass’ clients will “strenuously object” and seek help from secular courts, he said.

Gandenberger denied that Schofield would sell property to raise funds for legal fees. “The bishop is loathe to close any churches” and has never closed a congregation for any reason other than “the local congregation’s inability to maintain itself financially,” he said. Even then, closures happen “with regret,” Gandenberger added.

Describing the discernment process envisioned for parishes, Gandenberger said any parish that has no outstanding debt would be told to “go with God.” Parishes that have received loans from the diocese must satisfy their debt, and those for which the diocese

was a co-signer of a loan must find another co-signer before they can leave, he said.

Parishes that decide to remain in the Episcopal Church, even if their convention delegates supported Schofield, must make their choice known, "otherwise the bishop might consider them to be a part of this historic vote."

Mission congregations of the diocese do not have the same option, Gandenberger said. "They are not free to move in the same way a parish would be," he said.

Meanwhile, Glass said his clients are withholding their diocesan assessments, expected to total \$200,000 annually, because they are concerned about paying money to people who are no longer part of the diocese or the Episcopal Church.

Glass told ENS that he and the vestry of St. Matthew's Parish in San Andreas have so far successfully opposed Schofield's efforts to move the parish into mission status. Schofield, he said, attempted to have their rector fired and then wanted to change the congregation's status because they did not have a rector. Glass said a vestry member showed the Diocesan Council that canonical processes had not been followed and the council tabled the plan.

Gandenberger said Schofield has assured priests who disagree with his leadership that he will "do all in his power to assist them in finding other episcopal oversight."

"We're trying to demonstrate the graciousness that all churches should show," he said, characterizing the leadership's stance "as opposed to what we have seen coming from the leadership of the Episcopal Church."

During an exchange of letters prior to convention, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori advised Schofield that approval of constitutional changes to remove all references to the Episcopal Church would "implicitly reject the Church's property and other canons."

Regarding the diocese's intention to affiliate with the Southern Cone, she said: "If you continue along this path ... it will be necessary to ascertain whether you have in fact abandoned the communion of this church, and violated your own vows to uphold the doctrine, discipline, and worship of this Church."

If Schofield is judged to have abandoned the communion of the church, he will have two months to recant his position. If he does not recant, the matter will be referred to the full House of Bishops. If the House concurs, the Presiding Bishop will depose him.

It is expected that lawsuits will be filed against the departed leadership and a representative sample of departing congregations if they attempt to retain Episcopal Church property.

Clergy and lay delegates were pressured to reveal their stance on the issues during the convention at St. James Cathedral in Fresno. Certificates from the Province of the Southern Cone awaited each priest at the conclusion of the convention, declaring them to be clergy in good standing in that province. Schofield told the convention that failure to take possession of a certificate meant a priest would be "deemed to be in a period of discernment as to whether or not you would be staying in the diocese," Glass said.