



NEWS EXTRA - Tensions rise in Down & Dromore's linked Diocese of Albany over bishop's rejection of same-sex marriage compromise

Albany Bishop William Love's [refusal to accept a General Convention compromise on same-sex marriage](#) has sent shockwaves through his New York diocese, with both his supporters and those who oppose his decision expressing uncertainty about what will happen next, David Paulsen of the Episcopal News Service writes.

“We were not prepared for the level of condemnation and venom in his letter,” said Nadya Lawson, a vestry member at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church. The Albany congregation is known for supporting the LGBTQ community and has advocated for use of same-sex marriage rites.



Bishop William Love has led the diocese for twelve years

Love called homosexuality “sinful and forbidden” [in a pastoral letter that outlined his decision](#) to block the use of those rites in the diocese. The decision makes him the only Episcopal bishop to reject the compromise that is scheduled to take effect Dec. 2, the first Sunday of Advent, [under General Convention’s Resolution B012](#).

After meeting with diocesan clergy on Nov. 10, Love asked them to read the letter to their congregations the next day, after Sunday worship services. At St. Andrew’s, that task fell to the Rev. Mary White, rector, and afterward, “there were people in tears,” Lawson said.

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White did not respond to a request for an interview but said in an email that her congregation “felt anger and frustration” at the letter. “The contents of Bishop Love’s pastoral directive were not unexpected, although we had been hopeful he would find a way, as did the other conservative bishops, to implement B012 in the Diocese of Albany,” White said.

Other congregations were pleased by Love’s decision. Church of the Good Shepherd in Canajoharie was one.

“I thought the letter was bathed in love and God’s holy word,” said the Rev. Virginia Ogden, who has been rector at Good Shepherd for seven years. “It was very compassionate, and it was very factual as to what almighty God says in his Bible.”

Even so, Ogden said, the diocese faces “a thousand scenarios” for what will happen now that its bishop is openly defying a General Convention mandate. She chose not to speculate on the future.

“It’s in God’s hands,” she said. “Sometimes the lord gives us just enough light on the path to see the back of his sandals.”

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry didn’t speculate either [in a statement released Nov. 12](#), though he affirmed General Convention’s authority and said he and other church leaders are “assessing the implications of the statement and will make determinations about appropriate actions soon.”

A challenge to Love’s directive could lead to disciplinary action under Title IV of the church’s canons, and at least one priest, the Rev. Glen Michaels, has suggested he would fight Love on the issue.

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“For better or worse, I see myself as a good person to challenge this,” [Michaels told the Living Church](#). He serves as priest-in-charge at a summer chapel in the Adirondacks but works as a New York assistant attorney general, so challenging Love would not threaten his livelihood. He described Love’s directive as “not enforceable.”

If Love is forced to allow same-sex marriage ceremonies, the bishop warned in his letter that many Episcopalians in his diocese will leave the church, mirroring the “blood bath and opening of the flood gates that have ravaged other dioceses.”

Love, 61, gave no indication that he would try to split the diocese from the Episcopal Church, as some bishops have in past theological disputes over issues of sexuality, but he clearly is aligning himself with the more conservative provinces and dioceses of the Anglican Communion, said Louis Bannister, a lay leader at [Cathedral of All Saints](#) in Albany.

“I’m surprised that he’s the one holdout of the dissenting bishops,” Bannister, 42, told ENS. “It does surprise me, except that I also know him well enough that he wants to be a martyr for his cause.”

Bannister, who is gay and a lifelong Episcopalian, said he is proud of the Episcopal Church’s efforts in recent years to include LGBTQ members more fully in the life of the church. The church has “come out on the correct side,” he said, and he sees Love as a troubling exception.

“His assertion that God has removed his blessing from the Episcopal Church because of the church’s stance on this

issue, I find that assertion to be repugnant and honestly not at all of God,” Bannister said.

A decade of rapid progress toward marriage equality

The church’s rapid progress in embracing marriage equality in recent years was far from guaranteed when Love took the reins of the Diocese of Albany in February 2007. Less than four years earlier, the 2003 ordination of New Hampshire Bishop Gene Robinson as the church’s first openly gay bishop sparked upheaval in some dioceses and congregations.

But the march toward equality accelerated. In 2009, General Convention passed several resolutions seeking to make the church more welcoming to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, including by affirming that those Episcopalians [may serve as ordained ministers of the church](#). A separate resolution was approved to begin developing liturgies for [blessing same-sex unions](#).

Those liturgies [were approved for use](#) by General Convention in 2012, and a follow-up resolution was passed that year to [create a Task Force on the Study of Marriage](#), which studied the pastoral needs of priests interested in officiating at weddings of same-sex couples in states where such unions were authorized.

Then in June 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that same-sex civil marriage was legal in all 50 states. General Convention had just begun in Salt Lake City, Utah, and the bishops and deputies proceeded to [approve the trial use of rites for same-sex marriage ceremonies](#) that had been drafted by the Task Force on the Study of Marriage.



Members of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Albany, New York, pose for a Facebook photo promoting it as a congregation that "welcomes ALL for worship, fellowship and service."

Those rites, however, were not universally welcomed. Three years later, as Episcopalians prepared to gather in Austin, Texas, for the 79th General Convention, the conservative bishops of eight domestic dioceses – Albany, Central Florida, Dallas, Florida, North Dakota, Springfield, Tennessee and the Virgin Islands – continued to block same-sex couples from marrying in their churches.

Resolution B012 was a compromise intended to settle the matter for good. It didn't advance as far as advocates preferred toward including the rites in the Book of Common Prayer, but it established that the rites should be available to all couples and emphasizing that clergy have the authority to use them.

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Seven of the eight holdout bishops said they would implement the resolution, with some of them interpreting provisions of the resolution as allowing them to delegate pastoral oversight for same-sex marriages to fellow bishops. Such arrangements may resemble the model in the church known as Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight, or DEPO, though a reference to that model was specifically excluded from the language of the approved version of B012.

After its approval, Love initially said little.

In September, Love held a meeting with diocesan clergy members to discuss B012. The Diocese of Albany is based in New York's capital city and includes more than 100 congregations, most of them are based in less-populated communities from the Canadian border to the northern Catskill Mountains. It is known as a more conservative diocese than the Episcopal Church as a whole, and many of its priests and deacons are supportive of Love's stance on same-sex marriage.

"I'm sympathetic to the bishop," the Rev. Matthew Stromberg told ENS, but at the meeting with clergy, he advised Love to accept B012 and move on. "My own feeling was that he should follow the example of the other conservative bishops who've decided to try to live with this, if only because I think so many of us are just tired of thinking about it. And I'm afraid of what the consequences are going to be for our diocese."

Stromberg, 36, serves as rector at [St. George's Episcopal Church](#) in Schenectady, with an average Sunday attendance of about 65. He believes Love is doing what he

thinks is right, not out of hatred for the gay community, but “I know it’s hurtful to a lot of folks within our parish and around the diocese.”

Tensions between Love and some of the diocese’s more progressive parishes date back years. At least three parishes requested and received DEPO relationships with neighboring dioceses, all in 2012: St. Andrew’s continues to receive pastoral oversight from the Diocese of Central New York, and the Diocese of Vermont provides pastoral oversight for [St. John’s Episcopal Church](#) in Essex and [Church of St. Luke, the Beloved Physician](#), in Saranac Lake. Although granted DEPO, those three churches remain part of the Diocese of Albany under Love’s authority.

Lawson, 51, joined St. Andrew’s shortly after the parish requested DEPO. As a lesbian and single mother to her son, Jason, she appreciates her congregation’s advocacy for LGBTQ inclusion and marriage equality.

“I was looking for a place where our family in its uniqueness would feel affirmed, and it was,” Lawson told ENS.

She was serving as senior warden in 2015 when the congregation approved and sent a letter to Love asking him to allow same-sex couples to marry at St. Andrew’s using General Convention’s newly approved trial-use rites. The parish’s letter, foreshadowing General Convention’s B012 compromise three years later, argued that DEPO would allow Bishop Skip Adams, who was head of the Diocese of Central New York at the time, to handle pastoral oversight of those marriages instead of Love.

Love refused, Lawson said.

“St. Andrew’s has been trying to find ways to be in unity with the diocese for a long time,” Lawson said.

The congregation’s DEPO relationship with the Diocese of Central New York has continued under Bishop DeDe Duncan-Probe, who [issued her own statement Nov. 12](#) in response to the impasse in Albany.

“I recognize this is a challenging time and that some may have found the recent statement of Bishop Love of the Episcopal Diocese of Albany to be injurious. I want to be clear that God loves you and has created you as a blessing in our world,” Duncan-Probe said. “Each of us is called to be our authentic self, for only then can we truly be the beloved community God intends. I affirm marriage equality and stand as an ally for social justice for all persons.”

Love’s obstruction has dismayed several same-sex couples who would have gotten married at St. Andrew’s, Lawson said. Some have gotten civil marriages outside the church. Others have left the church in frustration. She knows at least one gay couple at St. Andrew’s who still want to get married in the church.

“Being able to have their marriage blessed by a priest is important to them, and it can’t happen here,” she said.

‘Deck is stacked’ against same-sex marriage in Albany

Bannister moved to Albany about 10 years ago from Vermont and was shocked by how conservative his new diocese was by comparison.

When he was searching for a congregation, a helpful woman at one church warned him that his homosexuality might not be fully welcomed at some congregations, so she

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guided him to others that would be a better fit. He ended up at Cathedral of All Saints.

“The cathedral congregation is absolutely wonderful,” he said. “It would not have it become my spiritual home were it not a wonderful congregation.”

After General Convention passed the trial-use liturgies in 2015, Bannister formed a closed Facebook group called Voices in the Diocese of Albany to “harness the energy” on the issue. The group organized a strategy session, which the bishop caught wind of and attended, unannounced, with members of his staff.

The bishop spoke with the group for three hours, Bannister said, and both sides expressed the feeling that it had been a positive and honest conversation. Then a week later, Love issued a letter saying he would not allow the trial-use rites for same-sex marriages in the Diocese of Albany.

“We were all sort of blindsided,” Bannister said, “because we thought we were all just paid lip service.”

This year, after Love met in September with diocesan clergy to get their views on B012, the topic came up at a meeting of the cathedral chapter, of which Bannister is a member. Bannister recalls the Very Rev. Leander Harding, the cathedral’s dean, telling the chapter that Love’s position on same-sex marriage was backed by a majority of priests and deacons.

“That may be true,” Bannister told Harding. “The clergy deck is stacked in this diocese, and [Love] has never asked the laity how they feel.”

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Love first revealed his final decision on B012 at another meeting of diocesan clergy, a retreat last week at the [Christ the King Spiritual Life Center](#) in Greenwich, New York. The retreat ran Nov. 7-10, and on the final morning, Saturday, he gathered everyone together for his announcement.

“I got to tell you, he got a standing ovation from his clergy, probably over 100 people in the room,” Ogden, 69, told ENS. Some of the more progressive clergy members simply didn’t come to hear Love speak, she said, and others walked out in protest when he announced his decision.

At her church, services are typically small, about 20 people. Good Shepherd is an aging congregation – “I tease that my youth group starts at age 45” – and same-sex marriage isn’t a big issue for parishioners there. Love’s decision, though, was received warmly when she read his letter to them.

“I don’t think they were surprised at all. We know him, and we stand with him,” she said. “We stand with Jesus.”

Stromberg was ordained by Love and personally thinks highly of the bishop and of his faith. He described his congregation at St. George’s as traditional and Anglo-Catholic. Services almost exclusively follow Rite I. A Rite II service was offered once, and few people attended.

Though liturgically traditional, Stromberg’s parishioners are more socially progressive.

“I’d say nearly everyone here at St. George’s was pretty disappointed by the bishop’s decision to not comply with the resolution,” he said. “I was hoping there would be some way of moving on, but I don’t think that’s going to happen anytime soon.”

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