



Breaking Up Is Hard to Do

Some Episcopal clergy in the Diocese of Dallas are fomenting civil war over the role of gays, Scriptural literalism, and the fate of the national church itself. **Others ask who died and put them in charge?**



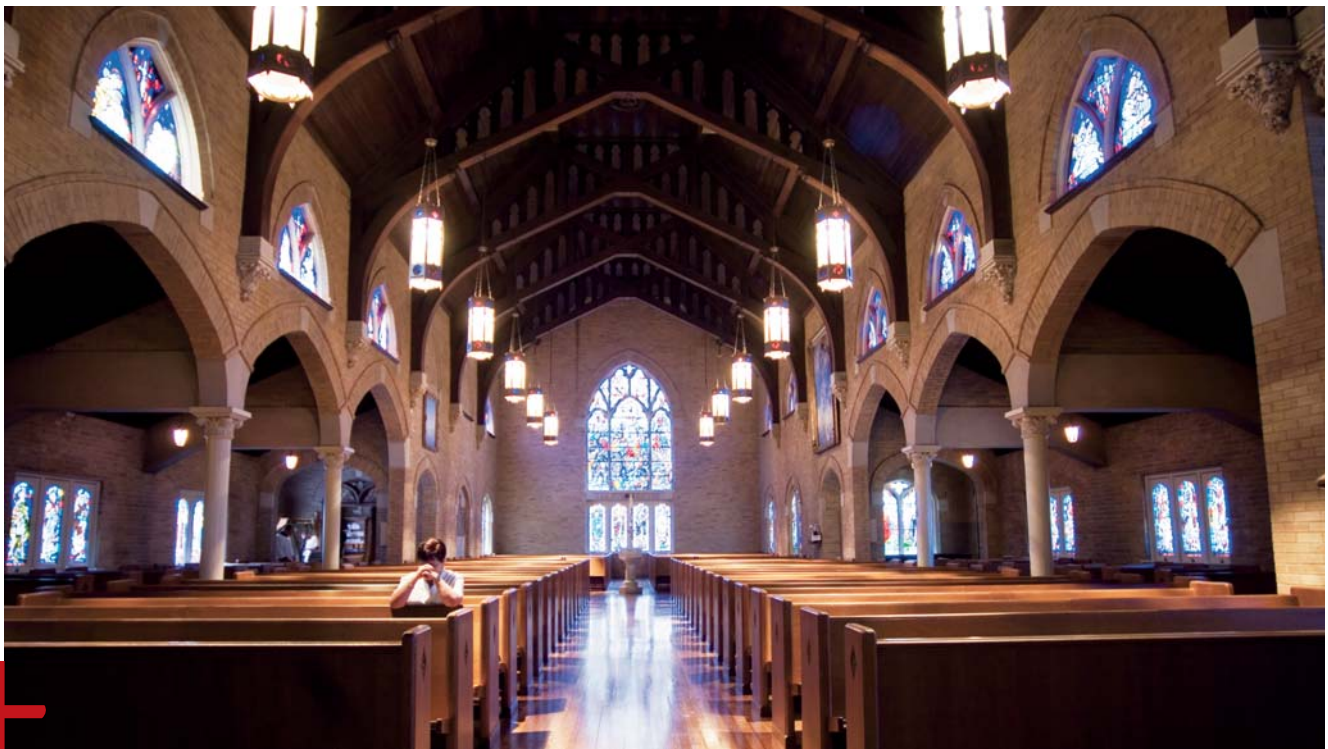
By **ROD DAVIS**

Photography by **ELIZABETH LAVIN**





SIMPLE PRAYERS: A child lights a candle at the Cathedral Church of St. Matthew.



THE HARSH MIDDAY LIGHT OF A SUN-BAKED SUNDAY is softened to pastel hues of otherworldliness by the stained-glass windows behind the altar at the Cathedral Church of Saint Matthew, an irony of time and architecture flanked by a Fiesta grocery store and a used tire shop on Ross Avenue, at the poorer edge of Old East Dallas.

To one side of the altar, a white-robed choir; on the other, a half-dozen priests of various ranks, in white robes trimmed with green vestments. A high, Gothic ceiling rises above. Out in the rows of hard wooden pews in the nave, a few parishioners kneel on pads worn from tens of thousands of supplications. Others wait for the formal start of the 10:30 AM Eucharist service. The dress is reverent but not formal—some in sport coats, some in jeans, some wearing Sunday hats and dresses, most in slacks and blouses. As they enter the sanctuary of this, the “mother church” of the diocese and headquarters to its bishop, the devout dip their fingers in the marble baptismal font, then bow or genuflect and cross themselves before proceeding up the aisles.

Stepping to the pulpit for his sermon, the Rev. Canon George Luck struggles with his thoughts, and says so. The 200 or so congregants begin to realize this will not be your ordinary weekend homily. Luck says that he resisted bringing up what is in his heart so much that he realized that is precisely what God wants him to talk about.

If so, it is no small call from the Lord. Inside this 1,500-member parish, founded in 1857, throughout the 38,000-member Diocese of Dallas, created in 1895, and among the 2.3 million members of the national Episcopal Church, created during the Revolutionary War, the creaks and moans of an impending denominational implosion reverberate like hell’s own din. Wracked by long-unresolved quarrels over the role of gays and women in its top ranks, the relatively small but culturally influential church (compared to 64 million U.S. Catholics) is on the brink of a breakaway by a small but hardcore

conservative faction with powerful links to the Dallas diocese. At issue is the claim to spiritual legitimacy. The breakaway faction says that the national church is actually the one doing the leaving, having abandoned the orthodoxy of the 77 million strong international Anglican Communion, which has been disapproving of the path taken by its American offshoot. To resolve the conflict, the conservative U.S. rebels plan to align directly with the

international Anglicans and claim title as true heirs of the Church of England on these shores. The Episcopal Church, which separated from the Anglicans so as not to be loyalty-bound to King George III, would be left as a hollowed-out shell, a pretender, to become who knows what.

That’s not the end of it. There are splits within the splits. Within potential breakaway dioceses such as Dallas are progressive parishes that have no intention of leaving the Episcopal Church, regardless of how the disengagement is framed. Beyond the theological and turf battles lie untold legal disputes over ownership of church property and bank accounts. To say this is the stuff of anxiety for a denomination already suffering a 35-year membership decline is to but glimpse the danger. “Anxiety,” as SMU’s director of Anglican studies, Dr. Fred Schmidt, puts it so succinctly, “is a church killer.”

It is Luck’s lot today to try to stop the killing.

The reading for the morning, which sets the tone for the sermon, is from one of the church’s favorites, Paul, the convert and author of numerous letters to early Christians. It is on two such epistles, to the Romans and Corinthians (plus Old Testament sections of Leviticus), that the case against homosexuals is textually based. Jesus never addressed the subject. But Paul also had other things on his mind. Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16, for example. As read by the Lector, a lay member of the church, the saint’s words call not only for judgment and division, but also unity and tolerance. And an awareness of what might be called false prophets: “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine,

by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming."

No verses could make a better setup for Luck's message. He bears down hard from the outset, making plain he wants no part of plans to pull away from the church and will have no truck with those who do.

"The political unity of the church has never equaled the unity of the Spirit," he says. "It has been that way since the time of Paul." In which day, he footnotes, people argued over other great matters of the time, such as whether uncircumcised gentiles could be admitted to the church.

Luck's passion intensifies, revealing a palpable anger at those looking to bail out. "They want to say with whom they are not in communion and with whom they are. That's ludicrous. Is it up to us to declare with whom we have communion? Not even remotely.

"It's stupid and crazy to say that kind of thing. It is absolutely arrogant. ... Our role is to accent the unity of the Spirit and live it out in the bonds of peace. The church is one because it is one body filled with one Spirit. It is simple.

"Communion with each other does not mean agreement with each other. Communion is a prerequisite to working out our theology. ... Our goal is not theological orthodoxy. Our goal is to build up the body in Christ."

Luck finishes, and the silence is thick. Not with disagreement, for it is estimated that 70 percent of this parish will stand fast with the national church. More like surprise. Episcopalians do not like to speak ill of each other. Not through the media—many interviewed for this story were adamant that the crisis is an internal matter—and not so much from the pulpit. But the pulpit, in this church, in almost every parish in the nation, has found itself politicized and polarized. Far from overstepping boundaries, Luck has joined the struggle—in the cathedral that is headquarters to the bishop of the diocese, the Rt. Rev. James M. Stanton, staunch advocate of the conservative cause.

Luck takes his place on a bench to the side of the altar as the celebrant leads the still-dazed congregation through the Nicene Creed and the other parts of the famously structured liturgy. After Eucharist, or communion—only real wine at Episcopal services—and closing ceremonies, it is back to the harsher world outside.

At the vestibule, one of the ushers, although careful not to give away his feelings, says, "Everyone wants to be an Episcopalian. Everyone wants to stay in the church. So what's all this about?"

The Revolt Within

The Dallas diocese stretches to Texarkana and now includes 77 churches. Unlike the national church, whose membership has declined about 40 percent in the past decade, the diocese has been growing, almost 10 percent in worshippers since 1996, including a 22.3 percent rise in attendance (more members actually showing up for services). There are plans for 10 new congregations. The largest diocesan church, St. Michael and All Angels, with 7,128 members, is also one of the country's wealthiest. Christ Church in



Plano boasts the highest average Sunday attendance of any Episcopal church in America—a megachurch-level average of 2,100.

The decision to stay the course (George H.W. Bush, like 10 other U.S. presidents, is an Episcopalian) or forge unprecedented alliances with Anglicans from England to Africa comes October 20 and 21 at the so-called "showdown at Southfork," the 11th annual convention of the diocese at the famed ranch in Parker. No one really knows how it will go. And it's not clear exactly where it started. Some say the latest war in the Episcopal Church began in 1976, when women were allowed ordination; others trace the jagged seam to the 2003 selection of the Rev. Gene Robinson, who is gay, to be bishop of New Hampshire. Some say there is a fault line at the very core of the church's bloody creation by Henry VIII, effectively resolved by his daughter Elizabeth I, under whose reign the Book of Common



HEADQUARTERS: Gothic-style St. Matthew's (opposite) is the mother church of the Dallas diocese. The Rt. Rev. James Stanton (above), bishop of the Dallas diocese, at a recent ceremony at St. Andrew's in McKinney.

Prayer was put into wide use to help seal the rift between Catholics and Protestants.

Whatever the origin, the fight has all but split the denomination both internally and from its worldwide kin in the Anglican Communion. Things hit the breaking point in June at the Episcopal Church's general convention in Columbus, Ohio. Not only did the Americans effectively refuse to apologize to the global Anglicans for having voted in a gay bishop, nor promise never to do it again, but they elected a woman priest, Katharine Jefferts Schori of Nevada, as presiding bishop of the national body.

At most recent count, at least seven of the country's 111 Episcopal dioceses and about 150 of the 7,000 congregations want "disassociation" or "alternative primate oversight"—the debate is replete with esoteric canon law jargon—in one form or another. Some, like the Dallas diocese, are exploring alignment directly with Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury. Others, perhaps not convinced that Canterbury is conservative enough, may seek out Peter Akinola, archbishop of Nigeria, where there are definitely no gay bishops, but there are perhaps 20 million Anglicans. Even the irony of mostly white, conservative American suburban congregations looking to pastoral supervision from African bishops doesn't stand in the way. Bishop J. Jon Bruno of the progressive Los Angeles diocese, fighting its own separatist congregations in and out of court, says it's important not to overstate the revolt. Indeed, 150 rump congregations out of 7,000 seems a small bite. But the bark is loud.

Dallas has some of the biggest dogs. Bishop Stanton and the diocese's standing committee have long been part of the Anglican Communion Network, the ad hoc group of parishes, dioceses, and clergy that is the driving force in the American sectarian rebellion. Even more outspoken is the Rev. Canon David Roseberry, rector of Christ Church, who says the "the Episcopal Church has not only broken the faith and apostolic witness but appears determined to continue in that path." The Christ Church vestry, its governing board, has voted to "disassociate from the ECUSA as soon as possible." Other congregations, such as Faith Church in Allen, are ready to leave also. The Fort Worth diocese, whose bishop, the Rt. Rev. Jack Leo Iker, doesn't



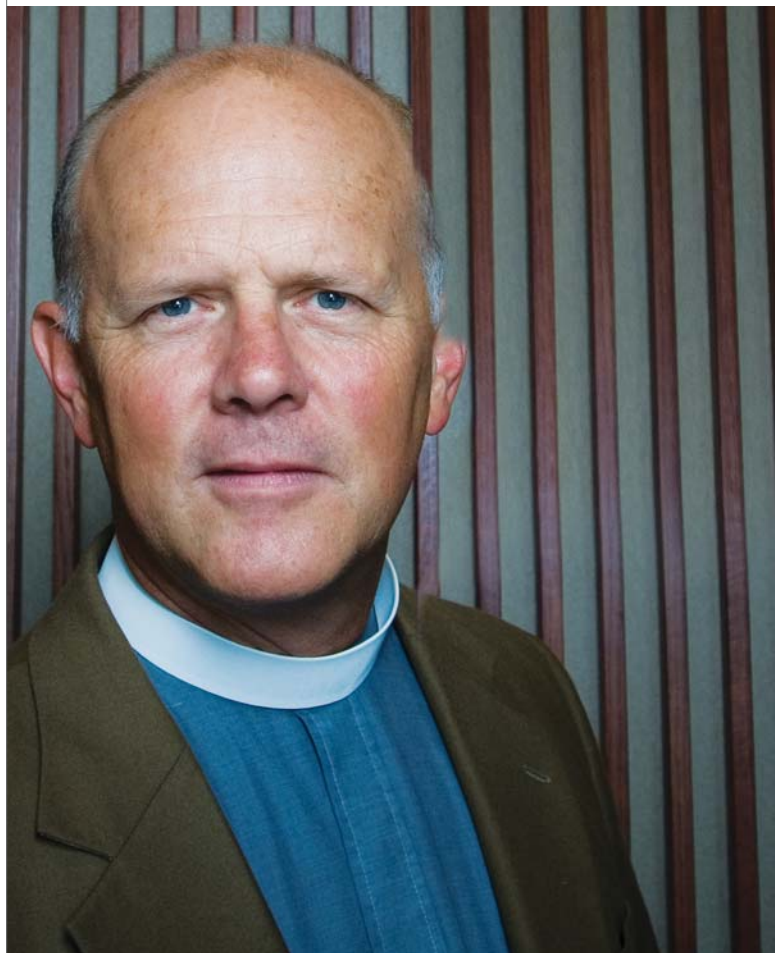
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even allow female priests, has been out there even longer. Its leaders describe a state of "broken communion" with the American church, and Iker has petitioned for the somewhat more dramatic "immediate alternative primate oversight and pastoral care," most likely with Canterbury.

But the loudest voices are not the only ones. The Very Rev. Kevin Martin, Dean of St. Matthew's Cathedral, and veteran of Episcopal Church study groups looking at long-term issues, sees the fight as more affecting the leadership of the church than its parishioners. "I'm not much interested in making it an issue for our church," says Martin, who served at Christ Church before moving south to the Cathedral. "I think that the projections of some sort of Anglican realignment are at this point in our life a bit overstated, and I don't think that's actually going to happen."

Heaven's Suburban Gate

If you're coming for the 11 AM service, one of several throughout the day at Christ Church Episcopal, you should arrive early. The parking lot on Legacy Drive, a few miles east of the trendy Shops at Legacy, is big, but it fills fast. "Planted" in 1985 in a shrewd diocesan strategy to link up to a community with both financial resources and, mostly likely, a spiritual thirst, Christ Church held its first meet-



SEPARATE WAYS: Christ Church in Plano has the largest average Episcopalian Sunday attendance in the country. The Rev. Canon David Roseberry leads it.



WHAT ABOUT HIM? Rev. Stephen Waller of St. Thomas the Apostle is gay and leads a church with a large gay and lesbian membership.

Roseberry, in traditional priestly robes—though he tends to work in civilian clothes most of the week—presides at the front of the altar with authority. His bald, clean-cut looks are a perfect match for a cheerful, middle-class enthusiasm that seems a mark of the congregation, which is more casually attired than expected. Men in short-sleeve shirts, women in summer shifts, dozens of younger folk in jeans, and at least three middle-aged men in camp shirts and—shorts! At an Episcopal service! Or maybe it's just the way of life in the burbs.

Given its size, conservative demographics and evangelical bent, it's perhaps no surprise that this church should find itself at odds with its increasingly progressive—or “liberal,” to use the pejorative term—parent. Clearly, the people who worship here have mistaken their denominations. If not Southern Baptists by another name, surely they belong more to Joel Osteen or T.D. Jakes. This is a social church, where people come not only to worship, but also to find friends, to join groups, and to align with “values.” Where the rector's patriarchal bent is evident in male-bonding groups such as the men's ministry retreat “Mountains Beyond Mountains,” his adversarial nature can be found in the Bible study program “The New Warrior,” and what seems a '50s gen-

ings in local schools and parishioners' homes. Under Rev. Roseberry, its only chief pastor, the congregation has grown to 5,819 members, second only in the diocese to St. Michael. Christ Church's 1,400-capacity, contemporary-styled “neo-Gothic” sanctuary, opened in 2001, is but part of a complex that includes a 205-seat chapel that itself would be home to many smaller churches. Its brand-new St. Timothy Academy welcomed 60 students in its first year.

der tone in women's Bible programs such as “Romans: An Extreme Makeover for the Soul.” Between services, the congregation gathers in a large conference room for cookies and coffee and sign-up tables for the activity of the week. It's a spiritual country club, but not for elitists.

Unlike many clergy and lay people in the diocese who eschew media contact, Roseberry courts it. Publicity is essential to the argument

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he has been making since 2003, when he joined the group led by Bishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh that became the oppositional Anglican Network. Christ Church has its own media center, and Roseberry has been featured in numerous articles. He alludes to that attention, and to his own “accomplishments,” in the course of today’s sermon devoted to another passage from Ephesians, this one 4:1-2, on humility. He also suggests that the church “has supplanted the fragmented family” in modern life and takes an indirect swipe at the national church in relaying a news account of the increase in climbers on Mt. Everest. They are said to be causing confusion and erosion of mountaineering principles, “including abandoning other climbers.” Pause. “Sound familiar?”

Roseberry didn’t intend to grow his church on the hot-button issues of gay clergy and same-sex marriages and doesn’t even think that’s what has led him to seek realignment. Like most of the other Episcopal priests and bishops who oppose the Robinson appointment, Roseberry distinguishes between the homosexual and the homosexual act. The former is welcome in the church and to God—but only if the practice, which Roseberry insists is a sin, is foresworn. “We’re made in his image,” the rector says on a weekday morning in his office, dressed in a casual short-sleeve shirt and slacks. “And God’s very specific about what he believes, what he has made us for, what his best for us is. And the church, in my view, could be about no other business than speaking to and blessing what is God’s best for people. And once you have that as your cornerstone, then the world opens up, so you can speak about social injustice, you can speak about rights for people, et cetera, but you can’t speak about rights granted to an arrangement of, let’s say, two men living together as a married couple because that’s not God’s best.”

Like Bishop Stanton and others in the dissident group, Roseberry says that what the Episcopal Church has done is only partly about violating Scripture regarding gays. In general, he charges, the church has abandoned, or tried to massage, the Written Word to appease contemporary culture. Further, it is transgressing one of the pillars of the Episcopal Church, the apostolic succession,

which he and other literalists say precludes homosexuals specifically as bishops, because all bishops theoretically come from the original apostles. And he says homosexual behavior also fails against the standard of the church’s third major pillar, reason. “Is this what God means for his creation? Okay? That’s a reasonable approach—does the plumbing match up?”

Bloggling from the general convention in June, where priests and bishops took to bloggling as though electrons had turned into wine, Roseberry, never an unreasonable man, seemed to be at wit’s end. On June 21, he and wife Fran heard the new Presiding Bishop Jefferts Schori speak:

“I hear a lot about how we must lose our theological frameworks and let go of fear and give ourselves to each other in love. It is soft, feminine, and, frankly, really predictable. She is not an orthodox believer in Jesus Christ. Sadly, we are used to that in ECUSA. But then I hear something that I hadn’t heard before and still can’t believe: that Jesus is our Mother. What? I lean over to Fran and ask, ‘Did she just say what I thought she said?’ Fran nods and grimaces. I listen as she quotes a verse from Colossians and interprets the work of Jesus as bloody and sweaty on the cross. I realize that she is trying to see Jesus as a feminine icon giving birth. It turns me off.

“A prominent bishop of the church comes up to me on the side and I lean to him and say under my breath, ‘We are in deep trouble.’ He says, ‘I agree. She really does think these things.’ Then he invites Fran and me to go for a cup of coffee. After the prayers of the people we leave. I can’t stand it any longer.”

Stay, A Little Bit Longer

OF ALL THE CHURCHES IN THE DIOCESE, AND OF all the clergy, none gets the guts of the fight more than the Rev. Stephen Waller, rector of St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church on Inwood Road near Mockingbird Lane. He’s gay, and his parish of about 600, which began an outreach ministry to HIV patients in the 1980s, has a substantial gay and lesbian population. It’s difficult not to take the breakaway agitation personally. But he doesn’t.

“Our church has been dealing with human sexuality upfront and personal since 1976,” says Waller, whose friendly manner is far less formal than Roseberry’s. He’s temporarily working from a small white construction trailer in back of the church, which

is undergoing extensive renovation, although the modest sanctuary remains in operation. “Until then, the altar was male only. In 1976, the altar was made male and female, so human sexuality for the first time came to the altar.

“And of course with the presence of human sexuality at the altar you get the fullness of sexuality there, being that there are other variations on that theme. I mean, to think that we have a gay bishop and this is ‘novel,’ to think that we have a gay bishop who has a lover and this is novel—that’s insanity. What’s wrong with being clear about something? What’s wrong with being honest about something? Well, what’s wrong with it is that a part of the Episcopal Church believes that you cannot be gay and partnered and a leader of God’s people.”

For Waller, it’s better to follow Jesus’ teaching that God’s truth “is still unfolding.” Just as many proscriptions or bans in the Bible have been reconsidered over time, so, too, should history-trapped discussions of sexuality. “The sexual behavior of people in scripture that is denigrated because it’s homosexual is not because the people love each other. It’s because they did not want that act to happen. They didn’t have any concept that people were built in that way, if you will. And that’s what people on the opposite side say—that you can’t be built that way. That if you are built that way, you’re wrong, and we can fix you.”

In 2004, the vestry of St. Thomas voted to affirm its standing in the Episcopal Church and, further, to alert the Diocese of Dallas that “no contribution ... financial or otherwise” should be used on behalf of the breakaway Anglican Network. But Waller wants the split to be healed. “I can’t stop someone in the parish who wants to leave, and I’m very sad about that, because I don’t want anybody to leave. We’ve always had a huge difference of opinion about lots of issues. This is just the most recent.”

Although the congregations could scarcely be more unlike, the notion that the church can tolerate differences of opinions also frames the crisis within the prosperous, tree-covered grounds of St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church, serenely positioned on Douglas Avenue, six blocks south of Northwest Highway between the old money of the Park Cities and the newer of Preston Hollow. It seems the landscape of spiritual patricians, but earthy looks can be deceiving. Inside the modernist brick and

glass All Angels sanctuary, the name reflected in the stylized flight of angels above its altar, an average of 1,760 worshippers each Sunday fall somewhere between the heavily Anglo audience at Plano's Christ Church and the mixed demographic of St. Matthew's in Hispanic East Dallas. Like services at the Cathedral, this one is markedly ritualistic, drawing on its Catholic roots. Everything speaks to continuity and commonality. It is the essence of the Episcopal faith.

In such a church, talk of separation is intensely agonizing. It was in this parish that the Rev. Mark Anschutz retired earlier this year—some say because of criticism of his vote in favor of the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson. Others say that's "urban legend," that Father Mark just wanted to leave. Whatever the reason, the departure mirrors the crisis.

Sharon Alexander, a corporate lawyer and also the junior warden of the vestry, which is looking for a replacement rector, says that the congregation is getting through it. "The fear of the unknown," she says, has been the source of the undeniable "anxiety." So they've been talking about it. A lot. "At St. Michael, that's one of our fundamental tenants, that we encourage a wide variety of opinions. As I've often said, we're not going to kick people out for what they believe. We're a big tent at St. Michael. ... We are not going to take any radical action one way or another. Our bottom line is that we are not separatists."

In the patchwork politics of its parishes, it is possible to see the agony within the diocese as either a retreat to intolerance or—this may be the deeper current—encouraging proof that the Episcopal Church is strong enough to face bedrock issues and accommodate variations in human interpretation of the Bible. The theological arguments and hermeneutics are, to most people, tedious. There is too much reading of the fine print and too little awareness of the big picture. And there is history: of such purifying efforts have come witch hunts, inquisitions, wars, generations-deep hatreds. Consider Iraq.

Better, consider Elizabeth. Refusing to allow the kingdom-threatening Catholic-Protestant struggle to tempt her to "make windows into men's souls," the monarch many consider England's best laid out the bottom line of unity: "There is only one Jesus Christ, and all the rest is a dispute over trifles."

Collateral Damage

THE WORD MOST OFTEN USED BY DIOCESAN clergy and lay church members in describing the Episcopalian crisis is "painful." It is accurate. "I think one of the downsides of the human sexuality debate is that we are inwardly focused as a church," says the Cathedral's Rev. Martin. "And by being inwardly focused as to who we ordain and don't ordain, it's created this intensity, this greenhouse effect that makes all these issues stand out. So it feels bad to everybody."

It feels bad to his boss, Bishop Stanton, too. "I guess the thing that strikes me is the depth of the feeling at a theological level—what does this all mean? And the depth of the alienation that many people are feeling," says Stanton, a solid chunk of orthodoxy in black shirt and white clerical collar behind

"It's a very painful thing. It's come down to not only dividing parishes, and parishes from dioceses, but it's come down to dividing parishes themselves and families."

—BISHOP STANTON

an equally solid wooden desk in his office at the diocesan headquarters. It has been said that Stanton looks like he came from Central Casting, and, indeed, if one needed to order an Episcopal bishop prototype, this would do: a large, handsome man with thinning, silver hair and a deep, authoritative voice. Fearsome at times, say some, who preferred not to talk on the record for fear of incurring his displeasure. But for now, this bishop is troubled.

"I'm going out every day, sometimes two times a day on Saturday, sometimes four different congregations," he says. "I talk with them about how they perceive things, where they are. This has had a big effect on this diocese and, not surprisingly, not everyone is in the same place. So how that turns out is anybody's guess at this point."

"It's terribly sad. This is not what I went into the ministry for. It's not the way I thought the church would live out its calling. It's not the thing a bishop"—he searches

for the right way to say it—"which is to guard the unity of the church. It's very difficult to do that when you have people at such a divide."

He looks at his watch. Although he writes an occasional column for the paper, he is not comfortable with reporters. "It's a very painful thing. It's come down to not only dividing parishes, and parishes from dioceses, but it's come down to dividing parishes themselves and families. More than once, many times have I heard people say, 'My husband and I can't agree on this thing.'"

And although it's his diocese, he has no more idea of how a realignment might be structured than anyone else. "Nobody's been there before. We don't know. This is all uncharted waters. Nobody ever assumed that the church would get to the place where it divides. So a parish can unite with a diocese, and a diocese can become part of the Episcopal Church, so some people would say that if you can become a part of something, you can withdraw from it. But I'm not giving a judgment."

If the center does not hold, there's also the question of property. Essentially, legal precedent has held that property belongs to the Episcopal Church, usually through the diocese's legal corporation. Congregations that have split off in the past have generally lost ownership battles with the diocese. But there is no legal map for a diocese leaving and doing battle with the national body.

SMU's Fred Schmidt thinks the denomination would prevail in a fight with its dioceses. "Obviously canon law doesn't contemplate a bishop taking a diocese out of the church or a diocese convention taking a diocese out of the church," he says. "The bishop is an Episcopal bishop and it is the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas."

Stanton says he wants to avoid lawsuits no matter what happens. "I don't think you can compel anyone to go against their will, and that's true on either side of this issue. The churches that either stay or want to leave, we have to deal with that pastorally. We can't compel people to get in line."

That doesn't mean the churches are "free to set their own agenda," he says. But, "I'm prepared to work with the leadership of that congregation for determining the direction they need to go. And I don't want to get into battles over property. I don't want to squander anybody's money. Nobody is served by that, except maybe the lawyers."

Speak of the devil. **D**