

How Bishop John Howard Kept the Diocese of Florida in The Episcopal Church

In the early years of this century, the Diocese of Florida was considered among the dioceses most likely to leave the Episcopal Church over issues of human sexuality. To understand why it did not and will not leave, it helps to understand the situation Bishop John Howard inherited in 2003 and how he responded to it.

Howard was elected in May 2003 and received his consents that August at the same General Convention as another newly elected bishop, Gene Robinson of New Hampshire. The two men were ordained and consecrated one day apart that November. In the two decades since, Robinson, the first openly gay partnered bishop in the Anglican Communion, and Howard, who does not support or perform same-sex marriages, have come to represent opposite poles in the Episcopal Church's long debate over the place of LGBTQ people in the church. But this shorthand obscures the pivotal role Howard played, at significant personal cost, in steering the diocese resolutely away from schism in the first years of his episcopacy.

Though Howard's consent process was unremarkable—he received 103 of 106 votes in the House of Bishops—his election deepened a rift in the Diocese of Florida that had grown during the decade-long episcopacy of Bishop Steven Jecko, his predecessor. “There was a big right-wing facet that wanted to take the diocese out of the Episcopal Church,” says the Rev. Canon Eddie Jones, a longtime priest of the diocese who now leads St. Gabriel's, Jacksonville, one of the diocese's historically Black congregations.

And the slate from which Jecko's successor was elected included a petition candidate, the Rev. Ellis Brust, who was closely associated with schismatic organizations. “They had their candidate whom they thought was going to be elected who would do that,” Jones says.

Howard, who was vicar of Trinity Church, Wall Street in New York when he was elected bishop, spent several weeks after his consents were received not knowing if he would be permitted to take up his new job. Jecko had preferred Brust, his canon to the ordinary, and when the more moderate Howard was elected, Jecko began to consider leading the diocese out of the Episcopal Church before his time in office ended.

Chancellor Fred Isaac, who has served the diocese for more than 30 years, remembers accompanying Jecko to a pivotal American Anglican Council meeting in Plano, Texas, in September 2003. Although Howard had been elected and received consents, Jecko was refusing to schedule his consecration. In Plano, Jecko read aloud to those assembled a fiery letter he was sending to Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, telling the crowd that it was the third time he had told Bishop Griswold not to attend Howard's consecration. “Your self-perception as a reconciler to the entire Episcopal Church is compromised and no longer tenable,” Jecko read from his letter to Griswold.¹

Virginia Barrett Barker, who had been hired to edit the diocesan newspaper by Bishop Frank Cerveney, Jecko's predecessor, also remembers the meeting in Plano. “Steve went off

to the first meeting with the people who were getting ready to be the Anglicans who left, and they surrounded him like it was fraternity rush," she says.

Flying home from the meeting, Jecko said to Isaac that he thought it was time for the Diocese of Florida to leave the Episcopal Church. "I told the bishop that I didn't think we were going to do that," Isaac recalls, "and I told him that the diocese had elected Howard as coadjutor and that he should become the bishop."

Jecko relented, scheduling Howard's ordination only after Griswold promised publicly not to attend. He retired just three months later to become assistant bishop in the Diocese of Dallas. And then, Jones recalls, "it really went downhill."

Some clergy who intended to leave the Episcopal Church first plunged their congregations deep in debt with large building programs, saddling the congregations with huge mortgages just before taking core parish leaders and pledgers to form a new schismatic congregation. "It happened on more than one occasion," Jones says, leaving the diocese with hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt that Howard had to raise the money to pay.

Jones recalls one weekend when the rector of St. John's, Tallahassee, one of the diocese's largest parishes, announced at the end of Sunday services that he was resigning and taking the people who wanted to go to form an Anglican church. Bishop Howard learned about the exodus on Sunday afternoon when he received a phone call from a loyal Episcopalian who had been present.

"There were advertisements in the local papers," Jones says. "They said, 'The Diocese of Florida is going in the wrong direction. Come join us!'"

The Rev. Canon Donald Woodrum, who has served in the diocese since 1980, recalls that a frequent tactic of the schismatic parishes was inviting Bishop Howard to meet with their vestry and then interrogating him about certain passages of scripture. "If he couldn't articulate their point of view, they would label him a heretic, and say that he wasn't an authentic conservative. To his credit, he let them do that, and he flunked, and they left the Episcopal Church."

"I tried to be intermediary between him and those conservative clergy, without success," Woodrum says. "About 20% of clergy left with their churches and denounced John Howard as an outrageous liberal. It was pretty devastating financially and in other ways. I could not believe they had intentionally done these things, but they did."

On one day in March 2008, Howard deposed 22 clergy who announced that they would no longer receive communion from him and that they were seeking affiliation with other Anglican provinces or movements. Jones remembers being pressed into service that day as a witness on the deposition document. "I was heartbroken to have to sign it," he says. "But they had their own agenda and they were really going hard out after it. They hurt the church."

“Bishop Howard took a good beating after that,” Woodrum says. “He did a thankless job. The church was divided in every kind of way and he was able to put it back together. I don't know if other bishops in other provinces had any idea what it was like down here during that time. This diocese easily could have slipped away into the Anglican church.”

Once the early years of schismatic defections were over, Howard faced an urgent need to rebuild the clericus, focusing on priests with the gift of evangelism and skills in leadership and church growth. His predecessors had rejected clergy who were rumored to be gay or who were moderate on issues of human sexuality, but Howard did not.

“When John Howard was elected, he did not bring the same sort of screening tool,” Woodrum says. “John has never used theological positions as a touchstone for who could come into the diocese, and as a result, all of the cardinal rectors in the diocese are far more liberal than the bishop.”

Although Howard is clear about his own opposition to marriage equality, longtime clergy emphasize that he has always been committed to following the church's canons, and that after the passage of Resolution B012 at the 2018 General Convention, his position changed to conform to the new policy. In his 2019 convention address, Howard cited B012, saying, “The decision to perform same-sex marriage now rests entirely with rectors and priests-in-charge of our diocese.”

“Some bishops who are unable to accept same-sex marriage are delegating all episcopal oversight to another bishop...I could never do that. I won't do that,” he said, emphasizing that he would use delegated pastoral oversight only in matters of marriage. “I love my relationship with you, with the churches you represent and with your clergy, too much to ever do that. I assure you that I will cling to you and love you and serve you in every way I can, which principle will permit.”ⁱⁱ

In that address, Howard spoke of his warm and cordial meeting with the rector and lay leaders of the first congregation to perform same-sex marriages. In 2021, the Rev. Louanne Loch, rector of St. Paul's by the Sea in Jacksonville Beach, echoed his sentiments, telling the Living Church, “I didn't have a bad experience with the bishop. He just wanted to hear from the wardens.” She said of Bishop Howard, “he and I disagree on this one thing, but we have a good relationship.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The Rev. Jim Cooper, who was rector of Christ Church, Ponte Vedra Beach, before serving for twelve years as rector of Trinity Church Wall Street, has returned to the diocese in retirement. As a staunch supporter of marriage equality, Cooper says that Howard's willingness to allow more progressive clergy into the diocese has, paradoxically, resulted in the current controversy over the election of the Rev. Charlie Holt as Howard's successor. Other bishops who oppose same-sex marriage are less welcoming to clergy who take a different view, and thus there are not enough of such clergy to form a significant voting bloc in their dioceses. But in Florida, just over half of the diocese's clergy voted for Holt, who describes himself as a principled conservative on issues of human sexuality, in his

first-ballot election in November, while he won a significant majority of lay delegates in both elections the diocese held in 2022.

“I wish we had moved along, that we would get to the point of celebrating it [same sex marriage],” Cooper says. “But the goal is to help people move along and celebrate this, not drive them out of the church. We need to stay in dialogue with each other and, godspeed, I hope we can move ahead.”

ⁱ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/octoberweb-only/10-6-52.0.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://youtu.be/lcmeE54KDts?t=2301>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://livingchurch.org/2021/10/06/the-b012-compromise-three-years-on/>