

# Local Clergy To Protest Gay Bishop

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A group of Hartford ministers is organizing an unusual march on the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut, to protest the recent election of the first openly gay bishop in the U.S. Episcopal Church.

Participants, a loose coalition of black church leaders that includes the chairman of the Hartford Board of Education, say their intent in marching next Tuesday in Hartford is to protest the acceptance of homosexuality and gay marriage.

"The march is to send a message to the diocese, in the hope that they will come back to moral principles, to not condone what is truly and clearly an abomination," said one organizer, Nora Wyatt, an elder from Mount Olive Church Ministries in Hartford.

The march exemplifies the traditional attitude of many predominantly black churches toward homosexuality. But some black ministers called the event divisive, a departure from the traditional ecumenical approach toward issues of disagreement.

The Rev. Alvan Johnson, pastor of Bethel AME Church in Bloomfield, criticized the march and said he hoped it would not take place.

"I would categorically refuse to be part of a march on another church or denomination," Johnson said. "It's an internal matter, inside their own faith group. No one needs to be marching on anyone."

The march will begin at 5 p.m. Tuesday at Battles and Main streets and end at the Episcopal diocese office at 1335 Asylum Ave.

The participants include some of the most prominent ministers in and around the city, including the Rev. Leroy Bailey of First Cathedral in Bloomfield and perhaps most notably, the Rev. Wayne Carter, the city school board chairman.

Activists raised questions Wednesday about Carter's participation, saying it could send a harmful message to gay students. Carter, of Mount Moriah Baptist Church in Hartford, said parents and the public should be able to separate his public role from his church position.

The Episcopal Church's election as bishop of V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, an openly gay clergyman, last week, affects all Christians, Wyatt said.

"There are many denominations, but there is only one church, one Lord, one faith. It has set the moral standing of the church back 2000 years," Wyatt said of the election. "We want those who are not in agreement, as publicly and clearly as possible, to say that they are not in accord with what was sent down."

Organizers had considered marching in New Hampshire but decided to do so in their own city instead, he said.

Bishop Andrew Smith, who leads the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut, and who voted in favor of the election of Robinson, was not available for comment Wednesday.

Bishop J.L. Fenner of Mount Olive Ministries in Hartford, the Rev. James Walker of Phillips Metropolitan CME Church and city council candidates Rosezina Joyce Winch and Michelle Brown are listed as supporters of the march.

Johnson, chairman of the Greater Hartford Interfaith Coalition for Equity and Justice, said that whatever happens inside the Episcopal Church, other denominations will work with them on issues of importance to the community.

"Homosexuality is nothing new - it's present in every denomination," he said. "We range from open and affirming to as fundamentalist as can be. But none of that matters because we want tax reform, we want better education for our children."

Carter, the school board chairman, said if he is able to attend, he will speak at the march. Carter said his opposition to homosexuality does not affect his ability to serve gay students.

"I know how to differentiate," he said. "I can stand up in front of a gay student and say, 'Listen, I don't agree with your lifestyle, I don't believe you're right. But you will never see hatred from me. You will always see love.'"

He added that if he ever has to choose between speaking out as a Christian minister and serving as board of education chairman, the decision would be easy.

"I am a Christian first, a Christian minister second," he said, adding that "everything else" came after.

Carter's participation in the march would send a harmful message to gay students, said Cindy Dubuque, a hate crimes specialist who works for the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund

"We want kids to feel safe to report hate crimes," she said. "This sends a message that it's not."

Regina Dyton, executive director for the Project 100 Community Center in Hartford, compared Carter's position to a white supremacist board of education member saying he could separate his beliefs from the job.

"I wonder where his separation of church and state is when he's marching at an anti-gay march against a religious appointment when he is chairperson of the Hartford Board of Education, having promised publicly that he's going to protect GLBT kids," she said referring to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students.

"How are they going to feel when he's basically saying I think you're an abomination, but I'll make sure nobody beats you up because God says we shouldn't be violent?" she said.

Hartford School Superintendent Robert Henry said Carter would not be at the march as a representative of the school system.

"Rev. Carter is obviously a pastor and has another guiding light in his life," Henry said. "I believe that he's doing it and not representing the school system, but as an individual and responding to that other guiding light."

In June, a group of Hartford high school students who say they have been harassed and beaten up for being gay or befriending gay or lesbian students asked the school board for more protection.

Henry said Carter's remarks at that meeting showed his commitment to make all students feel comfortable. Carter said at the time, "I happen to be a cleric who believes God's word supports a heterosexual lifestyle. I

also believe the Christian message is a message of love. It condemns acts of bigotry, hatred and persecution."

Pastor Marichal Monts, who leads Citadel of Love, a youth ministry, said it would be hard to find an African American minister who supported gay marriage.

Homosexuality "is very frowned on in our community," Monts said. "But the truth of the matter is, homosexuality is not going away. In secular society, people are rethinking their position on homosexuality for many reasons.

"But the church doesn't have the liberty to make up new rules. The Bible is not democracy, it's theocracy."

At the same time, Monts said, there has been too much focus on homosexuality as a sin, and not enough on other behaviors which the Bible also says are sinful.

"All unrighteousness is sin - we can't make one sin bigger or smaller than others," he said.  
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