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Massachusetts Episcopal Diocese to Give Up on Marriages?

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Here is an interesting take on the crisis in the Episcopal Church — the church's Massachusetts diocese may just quit marriage altogether.

As *The Boston Globe* reported Sunday:

In a novel approach to the tensions that have accompanied the same-sex marriage debate in many religious denominations, the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts this month will consider getting out of the marriage business.

A group of local Episcopal priests, saying that the gay marriage debate has intensified their longtime concern about acting as agents of the state by officiating at marriages, is proposing that the Episcopal Church adopt a new approach. Any couples qualified to get married under state law could be married by a justice of the peace, and then, if they want a religious imprimatur for their marriage, they could come to the Episcopal Church seeking a blessing from a priest.

The approach, radical for the United States, is commonly practiced in Europe. The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, which covers the eastern part of the state, has scheduled a vote in three weeks, at its 221st annual convention. A similar proposal was tabled at the Episcopal Church's general convention this summer; in Massachusetts, it is thought to have a better chance of passage because the clergy is more liberal.

Episcopal priests in Massachusetts have been particularly engaged in the issue of gay marriage, because the diocese here has been strongly supportive of gay rights, but the national church's regulations define marriage as a heterosexual institution. The local bishop, M. Thomas Shaw, a supporter of same-sex marriage, has decreed that local Episcopal priests cannot sign the marriage licenses of same-sex couples, but can bless those couples after they are legally married by clergy of another denomination or by a civil official.

"I feel this is a way to equalize an inequity in what Episcopal clergy can do for gay folks and straight folks," said the Rev. Margaret (Mally) E. Lloyd, rector of Christ Church in Plymouth. Lloyd is one of five Episcopal priests sponsoring the resolution.

The most interesting twist in all this is the fact that those pushing for this division of marriage and church blessing are not opposed to the state's definition of marriage. To the contrary, *they are opposed to their own church's definition of marriage.* They want to hand marriage to the state alone in order to rescue marriage from their own church. Then, given the permissive policy of their bishop, they can "bless" the marriages their own church does not allow to be performed.

A split between the secular and ecclesiastical dimensions of marriage is conceivable on many grounds and is an interesting question for both sides in the same-sex marriage debate. But who would have guessed that the first move on this front would come from church leaders who prefer the state's definition of marriage to that of their own church?

PHOTO: St. Paul's Cathedral Church, Boston.

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