News



Protesters gather outside St. Joseph the Worker Church on March 17, 2024, in Beal City, Mich., in response to a priest's criticism of a gay author who read a book at a parish school. The Rev. Thomas Held resigned as pastor on April 16, 2024. (Sue Knickerbocker Field/The Morning Sun via AP)

by The Associated Press

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Beal City, Mich. — April 22, 2024

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A Catholic priest has resigned as pastor of a church in a small central Michigan community, the result of weeks of controversy following his publicly expressed regret that a gay author had read a book to preschool children.

Gay rights activists and others have held regular protests outside St. Joseph the Worker Church in Beal City, 85 miles (136.7 kilometers) north of Lansing, the state capital.

The Rev. Thomas Held's departure as pastor was announced this week by the bishop of the Saginaw Catholic Diocese, The Morning Sun reported.

Held "has come to the decision that it would be impossible for him to bring unity to the parish," said Bishop Robert Gruss, who called it an "unfortunate situation."

There has been tension since Held went on Facebook on March 13 to respond to a parish preschool visit days earlier by local author Dominic Thrasher, who read from his book, "The Adventures of Cece and the Sheriff." The main characters are puppies.

Held did not mention Thrasher by name, but he said a "guest who does not represent the values of our Catholic faith" had read a book to children.

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He said a teacher was in the room at all times and that a "new vetting system" would be put in place.

"I came into a classroom to share the love and joy I have for what I created. Why my sexuality has anything to do with that — anything — it makes me mad," Thrasher told WXMI-TV.

The Saginaw Diocese said Held got involved because some St. Joseph parish members were upset over Thrasher's "civil union" with another man, "which is contrary to the Catholic Church's teaching on human sexuality and marriage."

The Diocese had supported Held, even as hundreds of people held Sunday protests against the priest's remarks and leadership style. They made signs that said, "There's nothing righteous about bigotry disguised as religion," and "Love thy

neighbor NO exceptions."

Held's critics welcomed his resignation.

"We can finally begin the process of healing and restoring the sense of unity that defines our community," said Kate Beltinck, who has children in the parish school.