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The Episcopal church: a canary in the ecclesial coal mine

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Last week was historic for the Episcopal church, not only approving the ordination of openly gay and lesbian bishops and clergy, but also agreeing to begin the process of developing liturgies for the blessing of same sex unions.

Bishop Gene Robinson, the openly gay Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire, described to *The New York Times* the atmosphere in the hall after the vote on same-sex blessings: "It was amazing. We took the vote, there were closing prayers, and usually somebody says amen and we're up and out of there. But last night not a person moved, for 10 minutes. There was absolute silence. I think we realized the momentousness of what we'd done. People just sat their quietly praying. It was amazing. It was almost as if we didn't want to leave each other."

It was momentous, and all of mainstream Protestantism will be watching to see how the Episcopal church handles its new policies. They will be the "test case," if you will, the proverbial "canary in the coal mine."

We Catholics might also watch closely. Bishop Gene Robinson said something else to *The New York Times* when Laurie Goodstein asked him if numbers were declining in his diocese since his consecration. He said very few had gone, and he added, "We have received so many Roman Catholics and young families, particularly families who are saying, 'We don't want to raise our daughters in a church that doesn't value young people in our church.'"

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