

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Episcopal Diocese of Northern California files lawsuit
to regain historic church property in Petaluma**

The Episcopal Church Diocese of Northern California today filed a lawsuit in Sonoma County Superior Court seeking the return of historic church buildings that have been a part of the Episcopal Church for more than 150 years.

“We are not seeking to be punitive against any individuals in any way,” said the Rt. Rev. Barry Beisner, bishop of the Diocese. “We are simply seeking the return of property which, for a century and a half, has been held in trust for the mission of the Episcopal Church. Good stewardship and faithfulness to our mission necessitate this action.”

The Diocese of Northern California, with 70 missions and parishes, includes the territory from Sacramento north to the Oregon state line, east to Nevada, and west to the Pacific Ocean. The diocese does not include the San Francisco Bay Area.

The lawsuit was brought reluctantly after negotiations failed with a group calling itself “St. John’s Anglican,” which has been occupying the parish buildings since December 2006. The St. John’s Anglican group at that time filed documents with the California Secretary of State and Sonoma County asserting its ownership.

“We are challenging these actions in the only venue available to us, the legitimate civil courts, which are founded and guided by principles of equal justice in our democracy,” said Beisner.

The Most. Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, based in New York, supports the lawsuit. Attorneys for the national church are expected to file court documents in support at a later date.

Bishop Beisner and other diocesan church leaders have met with the leaders of the Petaluma breakaway congregation and offered to settle without a lawsuit, but those offers have been rejected.

“Please let me underline that the former leaders of the parish took the first steps in bringing this into the legal system by filing to change the name and status of the parish with the State of California. We are calling upon legitimate civil authority to assist us in undoing the effect of a legal action already taken by fellow Christians, and taken in disregard for this Church’s willingness to seek reconciliation, with the help of God.”

Copies of the legal complaint and supporting documents accompany this release.

Bishop Beisner is available for telephone interviews this afternoon by contacting **the Rev. Richardson (916) 747-6960**. Also available for interviews is **the Rev. Canon Britt Olson**, the canon to the bishop, who also can be reached through the Rev. Richardson. Attorneys for the diocese will also be available on background to answer legal questions.

Legal documents available online at <http://www.dncweb.org>