

# DIOCESE OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

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Dear Friends in Christ:

Grace and peace to you, in this season of our Lord's Epiphany. I am writing to the clergy and lay leaders of all of our parishes and missions to provide information regarding the church in Petaluma. I hope you will communicate the following with your members and that this will answer many of your questions, but please understand that there are some legal issues I cannot address at this time.

Thirteen months ago, the clergy and lay leaders of St. John's Episcopal Church, Petaluma departed the Episcopal Church and this Diocese. They then took legal action against this Church by filing documents intended to change the parish corporation's Articles of Incorporation and create an entity outside the Church. They called this entity "St. John's Anglican Church." They then took legal action aimed at removing church property from the ownership of St. John's Episcopal Church and from the control of this Diocese. They did this secretly, suddenly, and without any attempt at discussing with us how their desire to leave us might otherwise be addressed.

Bishop Lamb acted immediately, under Church Canons, to remove that Rector and Vestry, and to require the return of all church property. This they ignored. In subsequent months, the Diocese of Northern California and the re-constituted Vestry of St. John's have sought resolution with those who left us; we have tried informal conversation, requested formal mediation, and offered a negotiated settlement. All our efforts have been rejected. Given that reality, after the passage of so much time and without better options available, this Diocese will now file suit to nullify the legal actions that have been taken against us.

We are not seeking to be punitive against any individuals in any way; 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.

We are certainly mindful of the apostolic admonition to all Christians to keep their grievances against each other out of secular courts. From the time we were made aware of these actions this has been our desire and it has informed our response. In many ways, having to take this step does indeed feel like a defeat for the Church. Still, it is a distortion of St. Paul's message to equate the situation he addresses in the 1<sup>st</sup>-century Corinthian Church with ours in a simplistic way. 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.

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.

Sadly, this is where it stands. May God help us to seek only such justice as is pleasing to Him. May God help us all to find true reconciliation. May these sad distractions from Christ's mission cease. May we grow in Christ so as to handle our conflicts in a manner worthy of Him, as His faithful disciples.

Yours in the reconciling love of Christ,

+ Barry

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