

Western Oregon's Episcopal bishop encounters honesty and tolerance as he travels the state

Published: Friday, July 08, 2011, 6:00 AM Updated: Friday, July 08, 2011, 11:21 AM



By **Nancy Haught, The Oregonian**



[View full size](#)

Ross William Hamilton, The Oregonian

The Rt. Rev. Michael J. Hanley, western Oregon's 10th Episcopal bishop, has found Oregonians in general to be "willing to step out and own who they want to be."

The **Rt. Rev. Michael J. Hanley** had been elected leader of western Oregon's 19,000 Episcopalians but not formally installed when he faced his first ecclesiastical crisis. In March of last year, **the pastor and a majority of members of St. Matthew Episcopal Church in Northeast Portland voted to leave and establish an Anglican parish.** At issue was biblical authority and the national church's decision to allow gay ordinations and consider blessing same-sex unions.

Hanley met with the group that wanted to leave. When he couldn't change their minds, he changed the locks on St. Matthew's church doors and focused on the people

who remained Episcopalians. He sent the retired bishop of Oregon, the Rt. Rev. Robert Ladehoff, to comfort them.

After such a dramatic start, Hanley, 56, has settled into his role as the **Diocese of Oregon's** 10th bishop. Formerly rector to a congregation in Roseville, Minn., the married father of two adult daughters sat down to talk about what he's learned about Oregonians and why the Episcopal Church will continue to speak out in conversations about Oregon's future. His answers have been edited for length and clarity.

What have you learned about Oregonians in the past year?

Oregonians are very honest. They're not pushy about their beliefs. They just hold them. And, by and large, they let you hold yours.

There's a new study about church attendance that's found the number of people in the South and the East

who attend church is really no different than the number who attend in the Pacific Northwest. What this study suggests is that when someone calls you on the phone and asks you about attending church, Oregonians might be more likely to tell the truth. Oregonians are willing to step out and own who they want to be.

What do you make of the religious vs. spiritual argument that thrives in Oregon?

We think that religious people go to church and spiritual people see God's presence in the world, and never the twain should meet. But I think it might be possible to be both. We believe God can be found in beauty, which is why our churches are beautiful. My brother-in-law sees God in the wilderness and when he goes hiking. When we are at our best, we go to church and pay attention to God because, when we do, we are more likely to be present to the Holy.

What's at the bottom of the anger often directed at religious people by nonreligious people or other believers?

I think it's fear. You see it in Scripture: "Do not be afraid." It's what the angel says to Mary; it's what Jesus says to the disciples after the resurrection. Fear is simply an emotion. We need to think about why we are afraid. One of the biggest reasons is loss. So much of life is slipping away from us, it's hard to hold on. Change is so prevalent in our lives. What we so often encounter is loss.

Can the church help with that?

Episcopalians have something to offer. We can hold two diverse positions at the same time and say (as he looks at his right hand), "Yes, this is true, and (looking at his left hand) so is this. Isn't that interesting?" The two things can be antithetical to one another. We hold truth, but with some lightness. We can always be wrong, but we still must act on what we believe.

People sometimes ask why the Episcopal Church is so often in the headlines when there aren't that many Episcopalians in Oregon. Why do you think that is?

The Episcopal Church has always had its share of movers and shakers, people with money, people who've played a big part in the corporate world and government. So we've always had a place at the table where the larger question of what it means to be in a society together is discussed. We do not tell people what to think. We always say, "Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling before the Lord -- with the help of the church."

The church -- all churches -- do a huge amount of good in the world that's rarely seen. When the tsunami damaged the harbor in Brookings, the national church sent money to our priest (the Rev. Bernie Lindley, vicar of St. Timothy's Episcopal Church). He works half-time for the church, owns a boat and is a fisherman half-time. He was able to put people whose homes were destroyed up in motels. When people called the Port and asked where to send money so it would do the most good, they were told to send it to the

Episcopal Church, to Bernie. Society would be much poorer without the quiet ministry of caring that the church does.

Western Oregon's last Episcopal leader, Bishop Johncy Itty, resigned in 2007 after four years, amid rumors that he and the diocese were not a good fit. Are you a good fit?

I am one of many leaders within a community. I don't need to control what the community does and how it does it. I have a voice to use in a conversation and I am a good listener. I know how to say I'm sorry and incorporate other people's visions into a larger one. And I have a good sense of humor. I don't take myself too seriously. I have a strong prayer life. Oregonians love the outdoors and so do I. More than anything, there's my ability to bring diverse people together. Out of many conversations, many voices, comes one direction.

-- **Nancy Haught**

© 2011 OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.