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Anglican Church in crisis

Fired for being gay, ex-priest pushes for blessings of same-sex unions

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Jim Ferry, bullied as a boy and forced from the pulpit of his Unionville church because he is gay, says it's time for the Anglican Church to bring gays and lesbians into the fold – even if it means splitting the church apart.

After all, he says, Christians have long embraced different interpretations of the scriptures, leading to historic splits within the faith.

"Let's take a look at church history for 2,000 years. There have always been breakdowns in relationships and people going off in their own directions," Ferry, whose firing as a priest 15 years ago made headlines around the world, said in an exclusive interview with the *Star*.

"Sometimes it's a necessary thing in order for people to honour their particular vision of the gospel," he said.

This may be such a time for the Anglican Church, said Ferry, speaking out now as his church faces perhaps its greatest challenge since breaking away from the Catholic Church in 1534.

Deep divisions between conservative branches of the church, mostly in Africa, and liberals in the United Kingdom, Canada and the U.S. over the ordination of gay ministers and the blessing of same-sex marriages has pushed the church to the brink of schism.

At a meeting last month in Tanzania, the church's international communion gave the U.S. church until the end of September to renounce past measures allowing for same-sex blessings, or face expulsion.

The Canadian church risks similar sanctions in June when it votes on the same issues. Ferry urged church leaders to put aside worries about the future of the church and vote to allow local parishes to decide whether to perform same-sex blessings.

"It's time to include gays and lesbians," he said.

At such a pivotal moment in the history of the church he still loves, Ferry said he felt he had to make his voice heard, after years of avoiding the media spotlight. He knows he is still a controversial figure in the church, and never wanted the worldwide attention his firing brought.

But a week from Monday, he will once again become the focus of debate with an appearance on Vision TV's show *360 Vision* in an interview taped at the Church of the Holy Trinity in downtown Toronto, where he has been allowed limited duties by the Toronto diocese.

The wounds of his 1992 firing, after being publicly ousted by his bishop in a letter to his congregation and a press release, are still raw for Ferry. He lost his job, and now works for the

Ministry of Health, and his relationship at the time fell apart under the pressure.

But he still hopes to regain his licence to preach. He worries, however, that the church doesn't want to enflame the ongoing international fight over homosexual rights by taking an action that would no doubt attract a lot of attention.

"With the warfare going on in the Anglican Communion right now, I can understand why the new bishop wants to be cautious," he says.

The Toronto archdiocese did not return calls.

The bishop who fired him, the now-retired Terrence Finlay, made headlines of his own last fall when it was revealed he had officiated at the wedding of two lesbians. His licence to perform weddings was suspended.

Ferry lays much of the blame for the current crisis at the feet of Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury and the head of the church worldwide, saying he has failed to show enough leadership or stand up to conservative bishops, such as Nigeria's Peter Akinola. "The Archbishop of Canterbury has failed us terribly by not simply saying to the global south, the religious right and the Anglican Church, we are a family. Everyone is welcome at this table," he says.

"We don't have to all like each other. We don't have to agree with each other, but we are all family."

Beyond homosexual rights, Ferry says ultimatums such as the one made to the U.S. church go against what it means to be an Anglican. The church split from Rome because it did not believe in a central authority, he says, so it shouldn't try to impose a doctrine now. "If we bow to that seizing of authority, then we are going to change the face of the Anglican Church around the world," he said.

He expects that the church, rather than splitting up, will realign along theological lines rather than the current geographic distinctions.

As such, conservative parishes would increasingly affiliate themselves with like-minded bishops from other countries, while developing-world congregations could partner with liberal bishops from industrial countries if uncomfortable with their national churches.