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Priest leads other Episcopalians to join Orthodox Church

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About 40 members of an Episcopal church in east Wichita have established a new congregation within the Orthodox Church, citing their disapproval of the "decidedly liberal drift" of the Episcopal Church in recent years.

The Rev. John Flora, 57, retired rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, will lead the new congregation, which will begin worshipping at St. George's Orthodox Christian Cathedral in Wichita at 10 a.m. on Sunday.

Flora said he and the group of former St. Stephen's parishioners have grown frustrated with the Episcopal Church, including its approval of its first openly gay bishop in August.

"When I found the Episcopal Church in college, I really believed I had found something that was connected to the ancient church and was going to remain steadfast," Flora said.

"But my experience in the past 31 years as a priest is, there's been a slippery slide into theological relativism, and that's not where I'm at."

Officials with the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas, including Bishop Dean Wolfe, were out of town for the holidays and could not be reached for comment.

Melodie Woerman, spokeswoman for the diocese, said that news of Flora's new church mission was "a surprise," and that church officials would be unlikely to make

a comment until they learned more about the situation.

The new church, St. Michael the Archangel Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church, will be the first Western Rite Orthodox parish in Kansas. It will join a growing number of Orthodox congregations that use a Western form for their liturgy, rather than the more characteristic Byzantine Rite.

The liturgy of the new church will be similar to that of the traditional Anglican Book of Common Prayer, Flora said, with some additions to make it conform to Orthodox theology.

Becoming an Orthodox priest, which he plans to do on Easter, will complete a personal and theological evolution for Flora.

During seminary, he participated in a dialogue group between Anglican and Orthodox churches, and he has been interested in Palestinian issues and Orthodoxy ever since.

For now, the new St. Michael parish will hold worship services in the chapel at St. George's Cathedral, 7515 E. 13th St. But Flora hopes the congregation will grow and eventually have its own facility.

Leaving the 2.4 million-member Episcopal Church was "a real hard decision," Flora said, "but one I felt I had to make."

Other parishioners planning to join Flora agreed.

"This has nothing to do with St. Stephen's itself. It has everything to do with the Episcopal Church USA," said Bill Anderson, head of the St. Michael parish council.

"My belief is that we have not left the Episcopal Church; it has left us," he said. "This is not a decision we took lightly, nor is it something that just happened."

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