

Church votes to oppose development of ANWR

The Associated Press

FAIRBANKS — In a break from its apolitical tradition, the Episcopal Diocese of Alaska has gone on record against development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The vote endorses the Gwichin people in northern Alaska who have ardently objected to proposed petroleum development in the refuge on the state's Beaufort Sea coast.

According to the church, it has close to 7,000 members in Alaska including residents of traditional Gwichin communities who are nearly all Episcopalians.

More than 90 clergy and

lay delegates, representing more than 40 Episcopal churches in the state, voted earlier this month to back the Gwichin.

A church official said the last time the diocese took a stance on secular issues was in the late 1970s involving subsistence.

Referring to petroleum exploration at ANWR, Scott Fisher, an assistant to the bishop, said, "It's a political issue, but it's really also finally a religious issue."

"Development of oil is going to mess up their way of life. There's a religious and spiritual connection between people and the land."