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Lesbian bishop aware but undaunted by controversy

by Daniel Burke by Religion News Service



The Rev. Mary Glasspool (RNS/Courtesy of the Los Angeles diocese)

Since becoming the first lesbian to be elected a bishop in the Episcopal church Dec. 5, the Rev. Mary Glasspool has been hailed as a gay rights pioneer and maligned as the straw that will finally break the back of the Anglican Communion.

Glasspool "wavered two or three times" before agreeing to be nominated as an assistant bishop in Los Angeles, she said in an interview Dec. 9. But friends and spiritual counselors reminded her to follow her own preaching.

"Look, you believe in the Holy Spirit," she said they told her. "You've always said the Holy Spirit is in charge. Your job is to follow where it leads."

Update: March 17, 2010

Second gay bishop OK'd for Episcopal Church

A lesbian priest has been confirmed as an assistant bishop in Los Angeles, making her the Episcopal Church's second openly gay bishop and potentially widening its breach with Anglicans overseas.

A majority of the more than 100 bishops and dioceses in the Episcopal Church ratified the December election of Bishop-elect Mary Douglas Glasspool, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori announced on Wednesday (March 17).

The global fellowship of 77 million Anglicans has been in an uproar since an openly gay bishop, V. Gene Robinson, was elected in New Hampshire in 2003; several U.S. dioceses and overseas Anglican provinces have cut ties with the Episcopal church.

The spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, has all but told Episcopalians not to vote to confirm Glasspool's election. The Episcopal church is the U.S. branch of the communion, but could lose its place over Glasspool, Williams warned.

"He clearly was saying something like that," Glasspool said. "And again, I've done what I could do to allow myself to be available to God's call, and the people of Los Angeles have spoken and voiced their trust in me and my potential leadership."

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Before Glasspool can be consecrated a bishop, a majority of the more than 100 Episcopal bishops and dioceses must confirm her election within the next several months. Robinson predicted Dec. 10 that the process will be "a little more difficult" than when he was confirmed by delegates to the church's triennial General Convention in Minneapolis.

"At the General Convention you can reach the people who are going to be doing the voting a little easier," Robinson said. "It's very difficult to get to more than a hundred-something groups scattered across the country if there's a case that needs to be made by the diocese of Los Angeles or Mary Glasspool." The man who would be Glasspool's boss in Los Angeles, Bishop Jon Bruno, has already pledged to "work my fingers to the bone, dialing telephones to talk to people" in support of Glasspool's election.

But in an interview Dec. 10, Bruno hedged a little, saying he will defend, but not campaign for, his new assistant bishop-elect. "I will do my best to serve Jesus Christ and I'm not going to strong-arm anybody," he said.

Until recently, the confirmation of bishops in the Episcopal church was little more than a formality. Now, however, the process has become politicized, as activists go online to campaign against candidates and dredge up opposition research. Two elections have been nullified in the last two years, though one of the bishops was later re-elected.

Glasspool said she will respond to questions from dioceses, but otherwise will not take an active role in the confirmation process, even to defend herself if it gets ugly. "Frankly, my time is too precious to become embroiled in following that kind of thing or trying to control it," she said.

Instead, the 55-year-old said, she will stay focused on her current job as a special advisor to the bishop in the diocese of Maryland, where she has worked since 1992. The native New Yorker, whose father was an Episcopal priest, has also worked in parishes in Philadelphia and Boston, where she met Becki Sander,

her partner of more than 20 years.

Glasspool said a "huge part of her job" is ideally suited for what Los Angeles sought in an assistant bishop: She has traveled to parishes to support clergy and congregational development, served as a substitute preacher, and sat on countless church committees.

But Robinson said he has told Glasspool that when bishops and dioceses consider whether to confirm her election, her resumé and qualifications will not be the prevailing issues.

"I told her, 'At the end of the day, this is not about you,'" Robinson said. "It's not about your experience and credentials, but about whether a gay or lesbian person is fit to be a bishop." "

In a majority of the Anglican Communion, the answer is a resounding no. Several times since Robinson's election, Anglican leaders, including Williams, have asked Episcopalians to "exercise restraint" by not consecrating any more gay bishops. Williams reiterated that request Dec. 6.

"The archbishop of Canterbury seems to me to have been pushed over the tipping point," said David Steinmetz, a professor of Christian history at Duke Divinity School in Durham, N.C. "That's very hard to say about him; he's such a gentle man. On the other hand, they really have thumbed their collective noses at him."

Glasspool, though, said the Episcopal church held a moratorium on gay bishops from 2006 to 2009, and that's long enough.

"We have waited, we have held back," Glasspool said. "And now we need to get on with the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, and proclaim who we are: an open and inclusive church."

The Lambeth Conference of the world's Anglican bishops in 1998 described homosexual practice as being "incompatible with scripture" but also condemned homophobia and "any discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation."

Bishop Nelson Onono-Onweng of the Anglican church of Uganda said Dec. 9 that the election of Glasspool "signals the finishing of the Anglican Communion. We [in the Global South] will not be able to walk with the Americans."

In a Dec. 12 interview with The Telegraph, a British newspaper, Williams said Glasspool's election "confirms the feeling" that Episcopalians are "moving further from the Anglican consensus."

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