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Second gay bishop OK'd for Episcopal Church

by Daniel Burke by Religion News Service

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).

Glasspool, who was a diocesan administrator in Maryland prior to her election, will be consecrated a suffragan (assistant) bishop in Los Angeles on May 15.

"I am overjoyed and relieved, and deeply grateful," Glasspool said in an interview. "I see this as a positive response to the refreshing, renewing movement of God's holy spirit, and I hold out great hope for the church and the world." (Read a profile of Glasspool: Lesbian bishop aware but undaunted by controversy)

Glasspool, 56, has been with her partner since 1988, and will become the second openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, after Bishop V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, who was elected in 2003.

Robinson called Glasspool's confirmation "a great day for the church."

"All the credit and glory for this exciting development goes to God, on whose behalf so many of us have been working," Robinson said. "Suddenly, and gratefully, I don't feel so alone."

Still, the U.S.-based church is very much alone among sister churches in the 77 million-member Anglican Communion on the question of homosexuality and, more specifically, approving of openly gay bishops.

After Robinson's election, a number of Anglican bishops—particularly in Africa—broke ties with Episcopalians. Four U.S. dioceses and dozens of parishes have also left the Episcopal Church since then.

But, Glasspool said, "I have a hard time imagining what's going to be different tomorrow, with respect to our relations to the world, from today. I am committed to extending my hand and my heart to those who may think or believe differently than I do."

Last December, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion, said Glasspool's election "raises very serious questions not just for the Episcopal Church and its place in the Anglican Communion, but for the communion as a whole."

Williams lacks the authority of a pope to summarily excommunicate churches or members that stray from the fold, but he has proposed a two-track system that could significantly reduce the Episcopal Church's role in the Anglican Communion. A number of Anglicans are pushing Williams to expel the Episcopal Church and recognize a conservative splinter group in its place.

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At the same time, the communion's 38 national provinces are also debating a "covenant" aimed at settling disputes between liberals and conservatives. But Williams is seen as "increasingly irrelevant" for the future of the Episcopal Church, said the Rev. Jo Bailey Wells, who directs the Anglican/Episcopal House of Studies at Duke Divinity School.

"The Episcopal Church, by its actions, is demonstrating that it no longer values its place under the historic headship of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and therefore the Anglican Communion," Wells said.

The confirmation of a second openly gay bishop is even more significant than the first, Wells said, since the consequences—"widespread dissent in the communion and persecution of Anglicans in countries where homosexuality is reviled"—are clear.

But gay and lesbian Episcopalians celebrated on Wednesday, and hinted that more traditional barriers may soon fall, as gay rectors, bishops and weddings become more common.

"We are past the turning point and the forecast for full inclusion in the Episcopal Church is brighter than ever before," said the Rev. David Norgard, president of the pro-gay group Integrity.

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