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Review of funding faith-based projects called for

by Daniel Burke by Religion News Service

WASHINGTON -- Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori on Tuesday (Dec. 16) called on religious leaders to play a prophetic role in the public square but criticized faith groups that use government money to forward a sectarian message.

"The idea that faith-based groups should have special entree to government funding just makes me twitch," said Jefferts Schori, who leads the 2.2 million-member Episcopal Church. "It makes me twitch when groups funded with public funds will only hire their own members, or use the funds to advance sectarian views."

Speaking at the National Press Club here, Jefferts Schori also said she hopes the incoming administration of president-elect Barack Obama "is asking questions" about whether to continue President Bush's faith-based initiative.

Jefferts Schori, 54, was elected presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in 2006, and has seen her church rent by infighting over homosexuality and the Bible. Earlier this month, a group of conservatives announced plans to form a rival church in North America.

The former oceanographer acknowledged the strains on the Episcopal Church in Tuesday's address and the question-and-answer session that followed. She said schismatic groups tend to die off, that the national church will appeal an unfavorable Virginia court ruling to the state's high court, and some Anglicans are too consumed by debates about sexual morality.

"Dealing with issues of sexuality are part of the (church's) mission, not the whole of it," she said. "Some parts of the Anglican Communion have responded to it as an idol."

But Jefferts Schori's address, titled "Religion in the Public Square," largely focused on the wide range of

issues she said cry out for a response from religious leaders.

"The role of the religious voice is to advocate for the left-out, the voiceless, the marginalized, and all who do not yet have access to what we call the goods of life," she said.

"On two occasions in the last few days," she said, "leaders in my own church have said to me that the church only makes the front page if it's about schism or sex -- and in the current era, preferably both. The reality experienced by most Episcopalians, and indeed most faithful people, is of their congregations gathering for weekly worship, saying their prayers, and serving their neighbors."

Finally, Jefferts Schori said she prays "for those who consider me their enemy."

"I started quite a while ago," she said. "I think God gives us difficult people for a reason. They are difficult because something in us responds?. Praying for those people becomes a necessary part of our spiritual journey."

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