

Lesbian bishop-elect faces Episcopal review: Confirmation process ahead

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Since becoming the first lesbian to be elected a bishop in the Episcopal Church, 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 December 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.”

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. wing of the communion, but it 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.”

Before Glasspool, 55, 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 on December 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 December 9, 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,” said the former football player.

Until recently, the confirmation of bishops in the Episcopal Church was little more than a formality. Now, however, the process has become politicized. 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 reelected.

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, she 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 resume 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.” -*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*