Woman bishop takes the Episcopal helm: Preaches peace to a divided denomination

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Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori knocked three times on the door of Washington's National Cathedral early this month, and the Episcopal Church welcomed her as its new presiding bishop—the first woman to lead a national church in the history of Anglicanism.

In a majestic three-hour ceremony, Jefferts Schori, 52, was formally handed the primatial staff, symbolizing her role as chief pastor of the nation's 2.2 million Episcopalians and their representative in the worldwide Anglican Communion.

Beneath the cathedral's soaring arches, the 3,200 assembled bishops, foreign prelates, priests and lay Episcopalians sang, danced and celebrated the liturgical rite of Holy Communion.

Native American drummers and sacred healers accompanied a red-robed train of bishops processing through the cathedral as young dancers twirled streamers in the aisle and nave. The audience interrupted the ceremony several times with bursts of joyous applause for their beaming new leader.

Jefferts Schori's rise to presiding bishop—a role that calls her to lead the church for the next nine years— surprised many Episcopalians, including herself. A former oceanographer and a trained pilot, Jefferts Schori had been an ordained priest for only 12 years and bishop of Nevada for five before she was elected by a conclave of fellow bishops in June. She and her husband, Richard Schori, have one daughter, Katharine Johanna, 25, a pilot in the U.S. Air Force.

Taking the pulpit for her first sermon as presiding bishop, Jefferts Schori preached peace and reconciliation to her fractured church, which has been divided over issues of sexuality and the interpretation of scripture.

Referring obliquely to Episcopal controversies about the ordination of gay bishops and the blessing of same-sex unions, Jefferts Schori said that "we cannot love God if we fail to love our neighbors into a more whole and holy state of life." She went on to say that "if some in this church feel wounded by recent decisions, then our salvation or health as a body is at some hazard, and it becomes the duty of all of us to seek healing and wholeness."

Both liberal and conservative Episcopalians have expressed dismay at the direction of their church—liberals because the church put a halt to ordaining gay bishops, conservatives because they see their church as tearing down traditional bans on homosexuality.

Speaking of the Gospel text— Luke 4:21—read at the installation ceremony, Jefferts Schori asked, "How shall that scripture be fulfilled in our hearing?" Her answer to her own question: "In the will to make peace with one who disdains our theological position—for his has merit, too, as the fruit of faithfulness."

Peace may not come easily among Episcopalians, however. Even as Jefferts Schori was being installed on November 4, the Diocese of Pittsburgh was taking steps to escape her leadership—including asking the archbishop of Canterbury to let a foreign primate oversee the diocese.

Since Jefferts Schori was elected, at least six other dioceses have made similar requests to Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the spiritual head of the global Anglican Communion. Three of those dioceses asked for "alternative primatial oversight" because they do not ordain women; others opposed Jefferts Schori's support of gay rights in the church. To date, no such requests have been granted. The Episcopal Church has 110 dioceses.

Kendall Harmon, an influential theologian from South Carolina, said there was no concerted effort among the bishops of the 10 most conservative dioceses to boycott the Washington ceremony. Still, several bishops —including Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh, Mark Lawrence of South Carolina and Jeffrey Steenson of Rio Grande—did not attend the installation.

"I think it's fair to say that there's some alienation and deep anguish in some parts of the church, and this represents that to some extent," said Harmon, who did not attend the service. *–Daniel Burke*, *Religion News Service*