

Jefferts Schori woos allies among Anglicans abroad

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [September 21, 2010](#) issue

In contrast to what they say about Las Vegas, what happens in one branch of the worldwide Anglican Communion rarely stays there. And no one knows this more than the former Episcopal bishop of Sin City, Katharine Jefferts Schori, who is now presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church.

Jefferts Schori wrapped up a whirlwind tour this summer of six Anglican provinces—all of them English-speaking—where she defended her church's acceptance of gay bishops and same-sex unions, as well as its commitment to maintaining ties with other provinces.

In June and July, Jefferts Schori traveled to Canada, Scotland, England, Australia, New Zealand and Wales, addressing synods, preaching at cathedrals, sitting on panels, talking with parishioners and meeting with powerful archbishops.

At almost every stop, the presiding bishop's message was subtle but clear: her church's embrace of gays and lesbians is grounded in the gospel, and the Anglican Communion has always allowed local autonomy in its provinces.

Jefferts Schori and her staff say the visits abroad were planned well before the controversy that followed the May 15 consecration of Bishop Mary Douglas Glasspool by the Los Angeles diocese, the second openly gay bishop in the 2.1-million-member Episcopal Church, the U.S. branch of Anglicanism.

Still, her timing could not have been more fortuitous. In the weeks before a top Anglican committee decided whether to punish the Episcopal Church for ignoring warnings not to consecrate Glasspool, Jefferts Schori visited the homelands—and sometimes home churches—of five of the committee's 13 members. (Jefferts Schori herself and another U.S. bishop hold seats on the panel, the Anglican Communion Standing Committee.)

On July 24, the panel firmly rejected a proposal to separate the Episcopal Church from the rest of the communion, calling the move premature and "unhelpful."

In a recent webcast, Jefferts Schori was asked if she was trying to shore up support from other provinces before the meeting. "That was certainly not the intent," she answered. "It may have been a by-product. We have partners all across the Anglican Communion. These visits had been set up some time ago, well before the timing of the standing committee meeting was known, basically as a way of building relationships between our respective provinces."

Neva Rae Fox, a spokesperson for the Episcopal Church, said Jefferts Schori was not available for further comment on her travels.

The visits come in the wake of a war of words between Jefferts Schori and Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury and spiritual leader of the communion, about whether inter-Anglican conflicts over homosexuality should be settled by centralizing authority in the hands of a few powerful bishops and committees.

Jim Naughton, a progressive blogger at Episcopal Cafe, said Jefferts Schori's international diplomacy is necessary to counter conservatives who have labeled Episcopalians as heretics and want them ousted from the communion. "Something like this was long overdue," he said. "One thing people underestimate is the effect of a constant drumbeat of vilification on the morale of the church. The Episcopal Church has an organized opposition that would be very happy to replace it or destroy it. They put an image of the presiding bishop and the Episcopal Church out there, and if we do not engage with that, that's the image that takes hold."

But Kendall Harmon, a conservative theologian from South Carolina, criticized what he called a "charm offensive" by Jefferts Schori. "The clear implication of her message is that the American church is way out ahead, but fortunately it will wait for the rest of the communion to catch up," Harmon said.

While Jefferts Schori said she was "received very well," there were some diplomatic snafus. Archbishop Williams's office asked her not to wear her miter, a pointy hat that symbolizes her rank as a bishop, while preaching at London's Southwark Cathedral. The presiding bishop called the request "beyond bizarre." Also, at a panel in England, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba of Cape Town, South Africa, chided Episcopalians for acting "in ways that communicated a lack of care about the consequences of their actions."

In Sydney, the Anglican Church League, an evangelical group, said Jefferts Schori bears "a great deal of responsibility" for the "division and anguish" in the communion. "It is entirely inappropriate that she should be welcomed into any diocese in the Anglican Church of Australia," Mark Thompson, the league's president, said in a statement.

Anglicans in New Zealand kept her visit "low key," according to a local media report, and did not allow her to appear at a prominent cathedral. "Nobody makes any bones about the fact that she does represent tension," Lloyd Ashton, a spokesperson for the Anglican Church in New Zealand, told *The Press*, a local newspaper. "There is not going to be an endorsement of where the Episcopalian [sic] Church is going," Ashton said. —Daniel Burke, RNS