

Methodists elect first openly LGBT bishop

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) and [Kathy L. Gilbert](#)

This article appears in the [August 17, 2016](#) issue.

For years, Karen Oliveto refused to allow her name to be cast for the role of bishop in the United Methodist Church because she “didn’t want to harm the church,” she said.

Oliveto, the senior pastor of Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco, is a married lesbian woman, and her denomination bans the ordination of “self-avowed practicing” gay and lesbian people.

But that changed this May when the global denomination’s quadrennial meeting voted to delay its planned discussion of its LGBT members’ inclusion and instead opted to create a commission on the topic of sexuality.

With that decision, Oliveto said, “I realized that maybe who I am—if I possess the gifts and graces for the episcopacy—maybe who I am could be a gift to the church at this moment.”

That was confirmed, she said, the morning she met with supporters who wanted to nominate her for bishop. It was the same morning she heard news of the mass shooting in Orlando, Florida, which targeted the LGBT community.

“This is the time,” she thought.

Oliveto was consecrated as bishop of the Mountain Sky Area on July 16, a day after she was elected at the Western Jurisdictional Conference in Scottsdale, Arizona.

The Institute on Religion and Democracy and Good News, two groups that describe themselves as advocates of orthodox Christianity, have said the move pushes the denomination toward schism. And the denomination’s South Central Jurisdictional Conference has requested a declaratory decision from its Judicial Council on whether the election and consecration of an openly LGBT bishop is lawful.

At least 26 UMC clergy have faced complaints or church trials for officiating same-sex weddings or for being openly LGBT, according to the Reconciling Ministries website. That includes Oliveto. A complaint filed against her in 2004 for officiating a same-sex wedding later was resolved without a trial.

The denomination's Council of Bishops is continuing with the commission to discuss sexuality, council president Bishop Bruce Ough said in a statement after the election. "We should be open to new ways of embodying unity that move us beyond where we are in the present impasse and cycle of action and reaction around ministry and human sexuality."

Oliveto said her election doesn't undo the denomination's creation of that commission, but rather can benefit the commission.

"The church forgets that we're people in pulpits and pews in every church in the United Methodist Church," she said. "By bringing my whole self into the conversation, it changes the conversation. We have to learn how to be in relationship with one another, and we can't objectify one another and our differences."

Oliveto, a board member of the denomination's General Council on Finance and Administration, said that since her election she has received "nothing but a deluge of wonderfully loving e-mails from around the world."

Oliveto was one of 15 clergy elected as United Methodist bishops during U.S. jurisdictional conferences in July, including seven women—the most in any new group of bishops for the denomination, United Methodist News Service reported.

Grant Hagiya, Greater Northwest Episcopal Area bishop, said Oliveto's election was led by the Holy Spirit.

"We understand there may be some political implications, but in our mind this was the best person," Hagiya said. "It was not a question of [sexual] orientation, it was a question of who was the best spiritual leader. The body spoke and said 'Yes, this is the one.'" —Religion News Service; United Methodist News Service

This article was edited on August 1, 2016.