

Female head bishop faces critical time: Anglicans express hope and concerns

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Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams reached electronically across the Atlantic to express to Katharine Jefferts Schori, the first woman to be elected as presiding bishop of the U.S. Episcopal Church, his “good wishes as she takes up a deeply demanding position at a critical time.”

Jefferts Schori, 52, the bishop of Nevada, was elected June 18 at the triennial General Convention of the Episcopal Church from a slate of seven candidates for the nine-year position. She was the only woman candidate.

A small-plane pilot and a former oceanographer, Jefferts Schori was complimented by Williams for her “many intellectual and pastoral gifts.” But Williams, the spiritual leader of the world’s 77 million Anglicans, also noted that “her election will undoubtedly have an impact on the collegial life” of top Anglican bishops and “also brings into focus some continuing issues in several of our ecumenical dialogues.”

(Earlier in June, the Vatican’s top official for promoting Christian unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper, warned the Church of England against introducing women bishops. “It would be a decision against the common goal we have until now pursued in our dialogue: full ecclesial communion, which cannot exist without full communion in the episcopal office,” he told a meeting of the church’s bishops.)

Jefferts Schori is the first woman to hold the chief post in any of the world’s Anglican churches, some of which do not recognize the ordination of women as priests. She became presiding bishop-elect 30 years after the Episcopal Church in the U.S. voted to ordain women as priests.

Her election, she said in a statement, “is the fruit of the witness and ministry of women bishops, priests and deacons in the life of our church.” Jefferts Schori speaks

both English and Spanish.

"Women and Latino bishops helped carry her election," Sergio Carranza of Los Angeles told Episcopal News Service.

Jefferts Schori will succeed Frank Griswold on November 1 in rites at Washington's National Cathedral. "I pray his health remains good until November," she quipped to reporters and well-wishers.

She reflects the liberal, majority wing of the church that has been evident in recent Episcopal conventions. In 2003 she gave her support to the consecration of openly gay V. Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire, a matter of contention that has threatened to split the Anglican Communion.

Following Jefferts Schori's election, the diocese of Fort Worth, Texas, which does not accept women priests, appealed to Williams to be placed under a jurisdiction outside the Episcopal Church.

Bishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh also objected to the election. "This is not about having a woman presiding bishop," he said. "This is about a particular woman who teaches particular things. Her words have made it clear that she stands with those in the Episcopal Church who want to go in a different direction. If she's true to her convictions as stated, the Episcopal Church will have to walk apart from the world under her leadership."

Retired rector David Anderson, president of the conservative American Anglican Council, said he opposed Jefferts Schori's election but found other candidates lacking as well. Anderson later told journalists, "Yes, we will have to work with her; we wish to work with her. However, this is a two-way street."

Archbishop Andrew Hutchinson of Canada, addressing the House of Bishops June 19, said he sympathized with those "for whom this is a difficult moment." But he said he had "enormous respect for [Jefferts Schori] and her competence." Hutchinson said Canada faces the possibility of electing a woman next year for its top post. "I hope that we can reach across the border and support one another in years to come," he said.