

Woman bishop ready for top Episcopal post: Reconciliation and youth engagement are key goals

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At a ceremony filled with pomp and tradition, Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori will become the first woman in Anglicanism's nearly 520-year history to lead a national church when she is installed as presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church on November 4.

Seated on the bishop chair's in Washington's National Cathedral before what is expected to be an overflow crowd, Jefferts Schori, 52, will be handed a staff that symbolizes her guidance over the nation's 2.2 million Episcopalians.

Soon after her election last summer, Jefferts Schori faced a mini-rebellion from conservatives who said she is too liberal to lead the badly fractured U.S. church, and some who said her gender disqualified her from leadership.

As presiding bishop for a nine-year term, Jefferts Schori will be the Episcopal Church's chief pastor and administrator, as well as the U.S. representative in the global Anglican Communion. The Episcopal Church is one of 38 geographic provinces in the 77-million member Anglican Communion.

She also will be charged with mediating between liberal and conservative factions -- both in her church and in Anglicanism at large -- at odds over homosexuality and the authority of scripture.

It's a big job, especially for a "second-career" prelate with just under six years under her belt as bishop of Nevada. But the private pilot and former oceanographer said she thrills to new endeavors.

"I know the learning curve is going to be steep but life is a challenge," she said in an interview. "We are all called out of ourselves to do new things."

Among her priorities are fostering reconciliation among Episcopalians and other Anglicans, promoting the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals and working to engage young people with the gospel, she said.

Lower down on the list is asking the church's executive council to study whether to move Episcopal headquarters from New York to a more geographically central site in the U.S. Jefferts Schori said she will divide her time between New York and Nevada, where her husband, Richard Schori, will continue to live.

However, with feuds over gay clergy and same-sex marriage sparking battles between Episcopalians, it won't be easy to get everyone following the same path. "It's more like steering a raft of horses in the same direction," Jefferts Schori said.

Indeed, leading the Episcopal Church will call on all of her resources -- the fortitude she mustered working in the male-dominated field of oceanography, the eye for detail she learned as a scientist and the appreciation of diversity she nurtured during her time as priest and bishop. "This is an exciting time in church history," she said.

Her election at the denomination's national convention last June came as somewhat of a shock to church observers.

Not only was Jefferts Schori the first woman to be nominated for the position of presiding bishop, she had only been bishop of Nevada -- a small diocese with about 2,200 active members -- since 2001. She is also an Episcopal convert (she was raised a Roman Catholic) and a "second-career" bishop, after spending most of her adult life in the study of squids and other ocean creatures.

Many members of the church's liberal majority were overjoyed at Jefferts Schori's historic ascendancy to the church's top job. But some conservatives have balked -- either because of her gender or because of her support of gay rights in the church.

The day after her election, the diocese of Fort Worth, Texas -- one of three Episcopal dioceses that does not ordain women -- said it would seek the leadership of a foreign primate instead. Some other dioceses later made similar requests, but Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the spiritual head of Anglicanism, apparently has not acted on them.

(On October 27 at Lambeth Castle in London, Williams had what was described as a “cordial and collegial” exchange with Jefferts Schori and her predecessor, Frank Griswold, according to Episcopal News Service. Jefferts Schori said she appreciated their “frank conversation about challenges in the Communion.”)

Jefferts Schori said she does not take the actions of the conservative bishops personally. "I understand that three bishops have theological positions. ... They don't believe in the ordination of women. That's a minority view in our church," she said. "It's not about me; it's about what I represent." -*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*