

Sean Rowe elected youngest presiding bishop in Episcopal Church history

by [David Paulsen](#)

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Bishop Sean Rowe. (Courtesy photo)

Sean Rowe, bishop of the Episcopal Northwest Pennsylvania and bishop provisional of Western New York, was elected and confirmed June 26 to serve as the 28th presiding bishop of the denomination. His nine-year term as presiding bishop, the face and voice of the Episcopal Church and its chief pastor, begins November 1.

The House of Bishops elected Rowe on their first ballot in a closed session. The result later was announced publicly in the afternoon session of the House of Deputies, which greeted the news with cheers. The deputies proceeded to confirm him with a nearly unanimous majority, 95 percent in favor.

Rowe was elected from a slate of five nominees. The other presiding bishop nominees were Nebraska Bishop J. Scott Barker, Central New York Bishop DeDe Duncan-Probe, Pennsylvania Bishop Daniel G.P. Gutiérrez, and Atlanta Bishop Robert Wright.

In a speech following the confirmation vote, Rowe acknowledged some of the challenges facing the Episcopal Church at a time of membership decline when some dioceses say their ministries are struggling under financial burdens and diminished congregational vitality.

“It’s not too strong to say we’re facing an existential crisis,” Rowe said— not because the church doesn’t have something to offer the world, he said, but “because the world around us is changed and continues to change and is changing all the time. God is calling us ever more deeply into the unknown.”

But Rowe pointed to signs of a more hopeful future in some of the collaborative experiments underway in some dioceses across the church, including his own dioceses.

“We know that we cannot continue being the Episcopal Church in the same way, no matter where we live,” he said. “It’s time to reorient our church . . . to support dioceses and churches on the ground, where ministry happens.”

Rowe, 49, has [led the Erie-based Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania since 2007](#), and also serves as bishop provisional of the Diocese of Western New York through a partnership the dioceses established in 2019. He previously served as bishop provisional of the Diocese of Bethlehem from 2014 to 2018.

Rowe is the youngest bishop ever elected to serve as the church’s presiding bishop. He also was the youngest Episcopal priest in the US when he was ordained, at age 24, and he was the youngest member of the House of Bishops when he was ordained and consecrated at age 32.

The presiding bishop has a range of responsibilities, as outlined by the Episcopal Church’s Constitution and Canons. Those include presiding over the House of Bishops, chairing Executive Council, visiting every Episcopal diocese, participating in the ordination and consecration of bishops, receiving and responding to disciplinary complaints against bishops, making appointments to the church’s interim bodies, and “developing policies and strategies for the church and speaking for the church

on the policies, strategies and programs of General Convention.”

There are few canonical requirements for presiding bishop candidates. They must be members of the House of Bishops and cannot yet have reached the church’s mandatory retirement age of 72.

Curry was [elected in 2015](#) as the church’s first Black presiding bishop. Before him, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, [elected in 2006](#), was the church’s first female presiding bishop. Her predecessor, Presiding Bishop [Frank Griswold](#), was the first to serve a nine-year term, after the church shortened the presiding bishop’s term from 12 years.

At a news conference after the election and confirmation, Curry offered encouragement and praise for the bishop who soon will take his place.

“I couldn’t be happier to be able to present to the House of Deputies the 28th presiding bishop-elect,” Curry said. “If you look at the history of the presiding bishop, they were all elected for a particular season and time and a particular vocation. . . . My brother sitting to my right was called for, as it says in the book as Esther, ‘for such a time as this.’”

Rowe said it was an honor to be elected to succeed Curry, “who has brought life to this church and a kind of energy and a focus on Jesus and the Gospel in a way that we’ve not seen in a generation.” He continued that he looked forward to helping “usher this church into whatever it is being called into in this next phase and season of life.”

“We don’t exactly know what that is or what it looks like,” Rowe said. “What we know is that God is in the midst of it and that love is the way, and if we continue to live and move ever more deeply into those ways that the world can be transformed around us in Jesus.” —Epicopal News Service