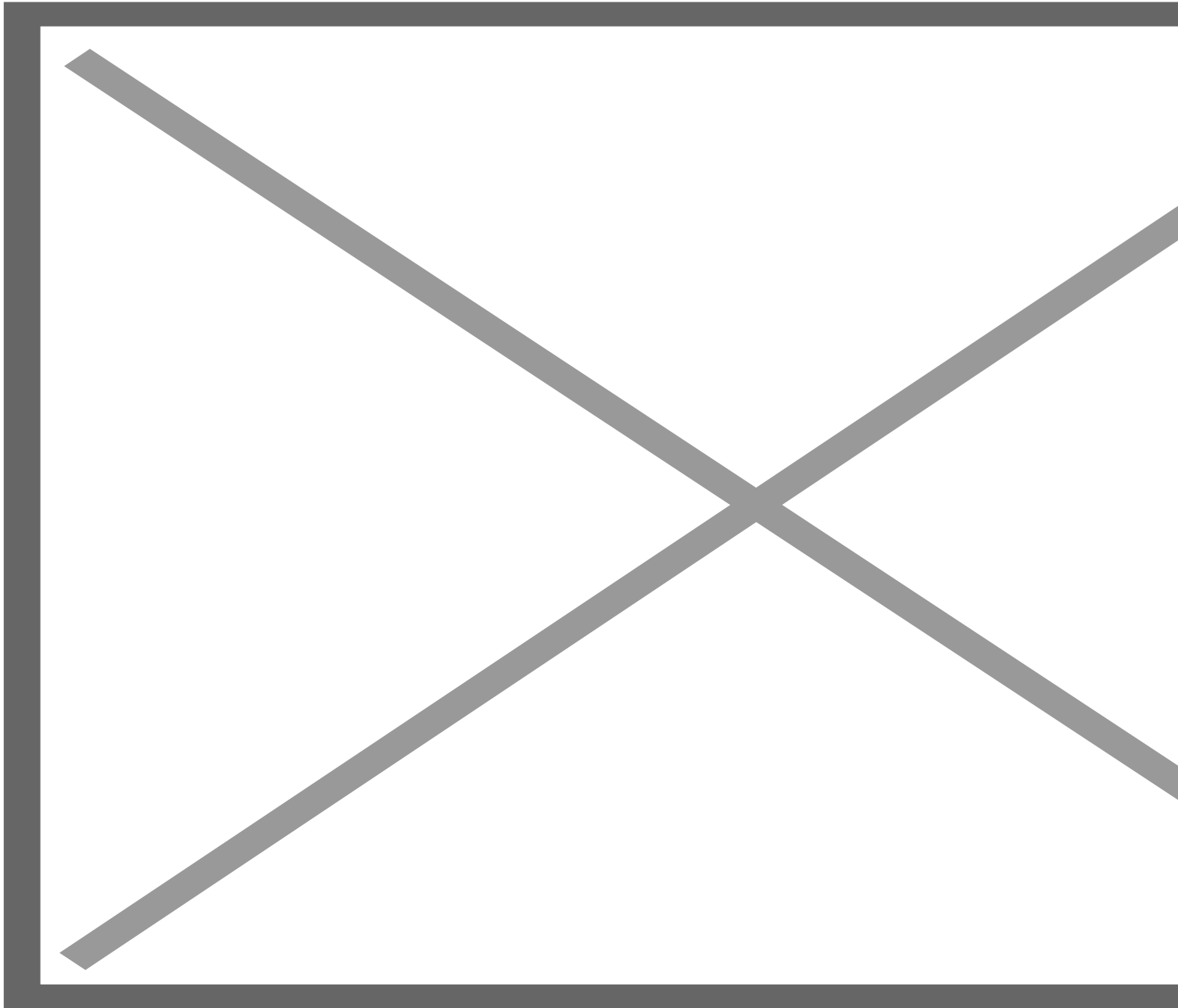


'I feel extraordinarily conflicted about it': Varghese's St. John Divine installation cut short

by [Fiona Murphy](#)

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Matthew Heyed, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, left, leads the installation ceremony of Winnie Varghese, right, as the new dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, September 27, on Manhattan's Upper West Side. (Photo by Maike Shulz)

Nearly 700 people packed the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine on Manhattan's Upper West Side on Saturday to witness the installation of Winnie Varghese, the first queer woman of color named dean of the

world's largest Episcopal Gothic cathedral.

The ceremony, planned for an hour and a half, made clear Varghese's ambition: to promote Christian unity, to emphasize interfaith relationships, and to commit to the numerous reconstruction projects the cathedral demands. The service blended tradition and interfaith witness, with readings from the Torah, Qur'an, a Hindu saint and the Book of Revelation. Music ranged from a Sufi melody to a traditional spiritual, alongside a three-piece Indian band—a nod to Varghese's Indian heritage and a tribute to her family in the front row.

Around noon, however, Varghese's father fainted. Varghese said she stepped down from her seat at the altar as people began to swarm around him, seeing tears in her brother's eyes and panic in her mother's.

"I didn't know what to do, but I was looking at him, he was out, and he wasn't waking up," Varghese said in an interview on Monday.

After speaking with Matthew Heyd, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, who led the audience in prayer shortly after the interruption, Varghese said she decided to stand firm and take care of her family.

"I thought, I'm here with literally 700 people I love, who love me and love this cathedral," Varghese said. "I know I have a remarkable bishop and canons and leadership—everybody organizing this service. I can just be my father's daughter because these people, they will know what to do."

As Varghese quickly left the cathedral, her father was taken on a stretcher to a nearby hospital. Soloist Rachel Kurtz led the congregation in singing "Amazing Grace" as they exited.

Later Saturday evening, [Varghese posted a photo](#) on Instagram with her father and a caption that begins: "Daddy is feeling much better." He remained in the hospital as of Monday.

"I wouldn't have done it differently," Varghese recalled of deciding to leave the ceremony. "I feel extraordinarily conflicted about it, and I think I will forever."

While planning the installation ceremony, Varghese said she read the cathedral's founding documents from 1892.

"It was very clear on the side of scholarship, diversity, inclusion and the great diversity of New York and migrants to New York," Varghese said. "I was, quite frankly, trying joyfully to reclaim that tradition—and not that we've gone far from it, but I wanted to really name that we are bounded to do this."

Steven Lee, vicar of the cathedral, said he thought the ceremony represented a new chapter for the cathedral, while simultaneously embodying its original mission.

"The range of musical genres, the range of readings, the interfaith voices—it really hearkened back to the first generation that built this cathedral," Lee said. "It said, 'We want this to be a cathedral for all of New York City, not only for a few Episcopalians who live on the Upper West Side.'"

Although Varghese has only been [dean since July](#), Lee said she has already pushed the cathedral to think bigger about its worship. "One way she's helped us to do that is to think about, what would the service be like if we had 100 more children, more people?" Lee said. "Suddenly, we have to ask different questions."

Video screens were added so worshippers can see the preacher more clearly, and the space was rearranged to accommodate larger crowds for Sunday services. Even in smaller details, from polished furniture to a warm welcome from security, Lee said the congregation is "walking taller" under Varghese's leadership.

As part of the service, Vicentia Kgabe, Anglican bishop of the Diocese of Lesotho in the Anglican Church of South Africa, gave a sermon focused on the Bible's Book of Isaiah 58:6-12.

Kgabe and Varghese first connected at a conference for ordained women in southern Africa and have supported one another in ministry since, Varghese said. In the passage, Kgabe explained that the prophet criticizes empty rituals and proclaims true worship as public acts of justice.

Looking to Varghese from the pulpit, Kgabe said, "Let your worship and your witness proclaim that God's kingdom is not only promised for the future, but it is already emerging among you, breaking forth through your prayers, your service and your love."

Lenise France and Sonia Omulepu, both native New Yorkers in their 80s, have been members of the Congregation of Saint Saviour, the resident Episcopal congregation at the cathedral, for more than 30 years. Omulepu said she first met Varghese in the early 2000s, when Varghese was the chaplain at Columbia University and preaching at the cathedral on Sunday mornings.

Omulepu read from the Book of Revelation during the ceremony before Varghese's father collapsed.

"I was in a state of prayer," Omulepu told RNS at a reception that followed in the cathedral's garden. "I felt a lot of love outpouring towards the healing of Mr. Varghese and surrounding Winnie as well with love."

France, who has known Varghese for more than 20 years, said she was ecstatic about her becoming dean.

"When we heard the news, we were so excited because we knew this was going to happen," France said. "This is prophetic, and I see her as a prophet."

During the ceremony's "presentation of gifts" segment, different members of the cathedral community each brought to the altar a small token symbolizing their partnership with the institution. Laura Bosley, executive director of programming who has worked at St. John the Divine for more than 10 years, said she especially appreciated this part of the program—specifically when organ curator Doug Hunt and Kent Tritle, director of music, presented Varghese with a piece of organ pipe.

Bosley said she saw it as a gesture toward the ambition of restoring the cathedral's famed organ. "She wanted to telegraph to people—'I want that back, too,'" Bosley said. "'I want this cathedral to be as glorious as it can be.'"

Although Varghese couldn't deliver her remarks on Saturday, she said she intends to record them as soon as she can. She also said she had wanted to highlight a Malayalam song—the first language of her immigrant Indian parents—selected by Tritle for the ceremony. She said the song pulled the service together.

"For me, the work of the church is solidarity," Varghese said. "What I want to communicate is that our work is solidarity, and we do it by care of the place, the mission and worship of God, but always looking at solidarity—which is very concrete. Who is the person stepped on by this world, who is neglected, who is afraid?" —Religion News Service