

Woman among four nominees as next Episcopal top bishop: Moving forward amid threats of schism

by [Kevin Eckstrom](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

One woman from Nevada and three southern men have been nominated to lead the Episcopal Church for a nine-year term as the badly divided denomination faces an uncertain future and threats of schism after decades of fighting.

The four bishops—J. Neil Alexander of Atlanta; Henry Parsley of Birmingham, Alabama; Edwin Gulick of Louisville, Kentucky; and Katharine Jefferts Schori of Las Vegas, Nevada—were nominated last month by a 29-member nominating committee to serve as presiding bishop.

The church's new presiding bishop will be elected June 19 at the Episcopalians' General Convention in Columbus, Ohio. The winner will be installed November 4 at the National Cathedral in Washington.

Many U.S. churches are watching the Episcopalians closely as they confront intrachurch conflicts over homosexuality and biblical authority—and the next few years will be a critical test of the denomination's ability to remain intact. Whoever is elected will have to guide the U.S. church through painful internal divisions and deal with growing isolation from sister churches abroad.

Three of the four bishops come from the church's Southeast region, which is one of the few areas not losing members. Schori is the first woman nominated for the job. If elected, she would be one of the highest-ranking women leaders in American denominational life.

"We believe any of the persons named, if elected, and with God's help and the prayerful support of the church, can provide the leadership required in the Episcopal Church at this time," the nominating committee said in a statement.

Most of the nominees are considered moderate to liberal, and no one from the church's conservative wing was nominated. Additional people, however, can be nominated; the deadline is April 1, in order to allow time for background checks and medical and psychological tests.

"There is no orthodox candidate, that's very clear," said Kendall Harmon of South Carolina, a leader of the church's conservative wing.

Of the four nominees announced January 25, only Parsley voted against the election of openly gay bishop V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire in 2003. And while observers say Parsley is sympathetic to evangelicals, he has shown little patience for conservatives who want to break away from the denomination.

One bishop who voted against Robinson and could have gained conservative support is Charles Jenkins of New Orleans, who reportedly was on the final list but withdrew to focus on rebuilding his diocese after Hurricane Katrina.

The church's current presiding bishop, Frank Griswold, is not allowed to run for a second term under church rules.

Once elected, the new presiding bishop will be the top officer in the 2.3-million-member church, and will represent the U.S. church to the other 37 member churches of the Anglican Communion.

Ever since Robinson's election, Anglican leaders from the Third World have pressured the American church to repent of its actions, and Anglican leaders in England have grown restless with the go-it-alone policies of the communion's U.S. and Canadian members. So far, the U.S. church has remained mostly defiant.

The presiding bishop has no direct authority over other bishops and cannot dictate policy within either the U.S. church or the Anglican Communion.

"All of these candidates I'm delighted with," said Ian Douglas, a professor at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "They're all strong bishops who could provide good leadership for the church in these times."

The four nominees:

- **J. Neil Alexander**, 52, of Atlanta. He is perhaps the most liberal of the four nominees. He is widely considered a formidable theologian who has managed to

keep his thriving diocese together. “He’s committed to the progressive stands of the Episcopal Church and he’s just as committed to those people who disagree with him,” said Louie Crew, an openly gay member of the church’s Executive Council from East Orange, New Jersey. A former Lutheran, Alexander has served in Atlanta since 2001 and is said to have a passionate interest in liturgy.

- **Edwin Gulick**, 57, of Louisville. He is best known for his work on ecumenism, serving as the cochair of Anglican-Catholic dialogue in the U.S. and on an international Catholic-Anglican panel. He was ordained in 1974 and served parishes in Maryland and Virginia before he was elected bishop in 1994. Some observers regard Gulick as the most middle-of-the-road candidate. He voted for Robinson’s election in 2003. He also voted against a conservative-led resolution that said Christians are “conscience-bound” to disobey actions of the church that they feel are unbiblical.

- **Henry Parsley**, 57, of Birmingham. His nomination was not a surprise to many who say he has been openly campaigning for the job. He is widely seen as a compromise candidate—a southerner with sympathies for conservatives but also a firm commitment to hold the church together. When overseas Anglican bishops converged in Birmingham last month for a rally with conservatives, Parsley dismissed their call for an apology. Parsley, who has been a bishop since 1996, is described as quiet, well read, and respected among the other bishops.

- **Katharine Jefferts Schori**, 51, of Las Vegas. Because of her gender, some consider Schori’s to be the most exciting—and potentially complicated—candidacy. Ordained in 1994, Schori had served only six years before she was elected bishop for the small Nevada diocese in 2000. She is described as an open-minded progressive. Schori might not be accepted by some international Anglican leaders, many of whom still do not accept the ordination of women, much less women bishops. But supporters say Schori, a Ph.D. in marine biology and a licensed pilot, would be unflappable.