

Episcopal Protest of Top Bishop Increases More Dioceses Reject New Female Leader

Katharine Jefferts Schori voted to approve the election of the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican Communion, and she has allowed the blessing of same-sex couples in her diocese. (Paul Vernon - AP)

By Alan Cooperman Washington Post Staff Writer Monday, July 3, 2006; Page A01

To visit Episcopal parishes across her huge but sparsely populated Nevada diocese, Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori pilots a small airplane. She often bumps down on tiny airstrips, but wherever her single-engine Cessna 172 lands, she is welcome.

That's about to change.

On June 18, the Episcopal Church's General Convention elected Jefferts Schori to a nine-year term as the denomination's presiding bishop, making her the first woman to head any branch of the Anglican Communion, the worldwide family of churches descended from the Church of England.

Although she will not take up her new role until November, six U.S. dioceses already have rejected her authority, and that number is rising. Many church leaders expect that by the time she takes office, about five more, for a total of 10 percent of the nation's 111 Episcopal dioceses, will have joined the rejectionist camp.

Moreover, conservative Anglicans overseas have made no secret of their hope that the archbishop of Canterbury, the spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion, will not invite Jefferts Schori to the next gathering of the heads of the 38 constituent churches in 2008.

Gender is only part of the reason that some conservatives in the church are unhappy about her election. Jefferts Schori, 52, is also firmly planted in the U.S. church's dominant liberal wing. Three years ago, she voted with the majority of Episcopal bishops to approve the New Hampshire Diocese's election of V. Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican Communion. She has allowed the blessing of same-sex couples in her Nevada diocese.

Most recently, she irritated some conservatives by speaking about "Mother Jesus" in a sermon.

Trained as a scientist as well as a theologian, she entered the priesthood relatively late in life, 12 years ago, after an initial career as an oceanographer specializing in octopuses and squids. Her husband is a retired professor of theoretical mathematics, and they have a daughter serving in the Air Force.

The Rev. Ian T. Douglas, a professor at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Mass., said Jefferts Schori edged out six other candidates for presiding bishop because she is not only "whip smart" but also "very methodical, clear and measured" in her thinking.

To those who accuse her of heresy for referring to a female Jesus, she responds with a typically learned disquisition on medieval mystics and saints who used similar language, including Julian of Norwich and St. Teresa of Avila. "I was trying to say that the work of the cross was in some ways like giving birth to a new creation," she said. "That is straight-down-the-middle orthodox theology."

Yet she acknowledged that she likes to shake people up a bit.

"All language is metaphorical, and if we insist that particular words have only one meaning and the way we understand those words is the only possible interpretation, we have elevated that text to an idol," she said in a telephone interview. "I'm encouraging people to look beyond their favorite understandings."

Jefferts Schori's "all language is metaphorical" approach is a giant red flag to traditionalists at home and abroad who believe that the Episcopal Church is heading toward schism because it has departed from the

plain words of the Bible.

“The incoming presiding bishop has made her positions very clear – that she is committed to the new agenda, committed to same-sex blessings, committed to having same-sex partners in the leadership in the church – which means she is also not committed to the faith as delivered to the saints,” said Bishop Robert W. Duncan of Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh was among the first dioceses to reject Jefferts Schori’s authority, along with South Carolina; central Florida; San Joaquin, Calif.; Fort Worth; and Springfield, Ill.

Her election may also hasten the departure of individual congregations. Two large congregations in Northern Virginia, the Falls Church and Truro Church, announced last week that they will go through “40 days of discernment” this fall to consider their status.

“We prayed and hoped that the General Convention would really turn around and change direction, but obviously it didn’t,” said the Rev. Martyn Minns, who is retiring as Truro Church’s rector and has been named a bishop in the conservative Anglican Church of Nigeria.

Virginia Bishop Peter J. Lee said he hopes to persuade both congregations to stay. He declined to say whether he would fight to keep control of their buildings and property if they left the denomination – one of the main disincentives for congregations to break away.

Duncan, of Pittsburgh, said none of the dioceses that have spurned Jefferts Schori are quitting the Episcopal Church. Instead, they are asking Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams for “alternative primatial oversight” – the naming of a conservative primate from some other country to oversee them temporarily, he said.

Jefferts Schori called the request “an anxious response” that was “quite predictable.” “Most of the bishops who protested have been protesting for years about the presence of ordained women in the church,” she said.

Thirty years after the Episcopal Church began ordaining women, three U.S. dioceses – Fort Worth, San Joaquin and Quincy, Ill. – refuse to allow female priests. Elsewhere in the Anglican Communion, change has come even more slowly: 13 of the communion’s 38 churches have no female priests, and besides the United States, the only countries with female bishops are Canada and New Zealand.

Raised as a Roman Catholic in Oregon, Jefferts Schori switched to the Episcopal Church with her parents when she was 9. But her deeper turn to faith came at 22, when a close friend died in a plane crash.

At the time, she was taking a graduate course in the philosophy of science and “reading Heisenberg and Bohr and Einstein and the great physicists who talk about mystery,” she recalled. “Both things were, I think, a great nudge to send me off looking for spiritual answers.”

In her study of marine invertebrates, she said, she saw “the great wonder and variety of creation.” And when federal research funds began to dry up in the 1980s, three members of her congregation in Corvallis, Ore., suggested she become a priest.

Cathy Roskam, the suffragan bishop of New York and a friend of Jefferts Schori, said women hold 3 percent of the leadership positions in the Anglican Communion.

“Many women feel that were we represented even close to the percentage we have in the pews, we would not be having these divisions over human sexuality,” she said of the hierarchy. “Of course, women differ over sexuality. We just wouldn’t be dividing over it.”

Jefferts Schori agreed. The message of her election, she said, is not that Episcopalians don’t care what other Anglicans think, but “that we’re more interested in feeding hungry people and relieving suffering than we are in arguing about what gender someone is or what sexual orientation someone has.”