



Rev. Mary Douglas Glasspool (YouTube video still).

Glasspool, Mary (b. 1954)

by Linda Rapp

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The election of openly lesbian Canon Mary Douglas Glasspool as a Bishop Suffragan (assistant bishop) of the Episcopal Church in 2009 met with some opposition from conservative elements, but she remains committed to her calling and confident of "God's ever-unfolding reign of love and justice."

The future priest was the child of a priest. Her father was the Rector of St. Simon's Episcopal Church and Vicar of All Saints' Church in New York City when she was born on February 23, 1954. Two months later he was appointed Rector at St. James' Church in Goshen, New York and continued to serve there until his death in 1989.

Glasspool enrolled at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1972. She excelled academically and graduated magna cum laude with honors in music in 1976. She also received the college's prestigious Hofstadter Prize, awarded annually to recognize the outstanding woman in the graduating class.

While at Dickinson, Glasspool had to grapple with two vitally important personal questions, her sexual orientation and the work to which she would devote her life. At the time, the Episcopal church was not as hospitable to gay men and lesbians as it is now, and the ordination of women was still controversial.

Nevertheless, Glasspool recognized her lesbianism and her vocation to the priesthood, and she informed her father of her determination to become a priest.

The Reverend Douglas Glasspool was conservative: he was opposed to the ordination of women and would not even let girls serve as acolytes at St. James'; still, he gave his daughter his blessing to pursue her calling.

"I was an exception to his rules, not an example of the rule itself. That's how he was able to live with it. In his own gracious way, he sort of separated out public and private," stated Glasspool to Lisa Miller of *Newsweek*, adding, "I think he honestly was proud of me on a personal level and wanted to support me but couldn't break out of the kind of characteristics he himself promoted as someone who upheld the Tradition."

Mary Glasspool embarked on her studies at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1976. Three years later, while still a seminarian, she attended the General Convention of the Episcopal Church and signed up to be one of the people giving short presentations before the subcommittee on resolutions regarding sexuality, including whether there should be barriers to the ordination of homosexuals.

She made the point that when talking about human sexuality, one was not talking about "issues" but about people. She concluded her remarks by saying, "I trust that God's love at this Convention will transcend the issues and address the people--all of us--in our wholeness. I trust and pray that that same love will prevent any of us from condemning others--particularly, in this case, homosexuals--in our human, and full, and

loving wholeness."

As she sat down after her testimony, she was approached by her Bishop, the legendary Paul Moore, who was later revealed to have been bisexual and who became the first Episcopal Bishop to ordain an openly lesbian priest. He gave her a big hug and told her, "Now that you've come out to 1,500 people, don't you think it's about time to tell your parents?" Glasspool graduated as a Master of Divinity in May 1981. The following month her father proudly attended her ordination as a deacon.

Glasspool began her career in the Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia, serving as Assistant to the Rector at St. Paul's Church. Three years later she left that affluent parish to accept the rectorship of St. Luke's and St. Margaret's Church in Boston.

In her application to become Bishop Suffragan, Glasspool described the Boston parish as an "exciting branch of the Body of Christ," but it was certainly also a challenging one. Upon her arrival she had only about fifty people on the congregation roll, forty-five thousand dollars for the annual operating budget, and a host of problems, including housing, immigration, social justice, and other practical matters, to address. Under her leadership great strides were made in all of these areas.

During her years in Boston, Glasspool became acquainted with another woman priest, Barbara Harris, whom she nominated for Bishop Suffragan of Massachusetts in 1988. Harris was the first woman elected bishop, a decision that caused considerable controversy.

Glasspool was on the committee in charge of arranging security for Harris's consecration. Precautions included outfitting Harris with a bullet-proof vest to wear under ecclesiastical robes at the ceremony, the same measure that would be taken at the installation of V. Gene Robison, the first openly gay man to become a bishop, in 2003.

Harris, by then retired, concelebrated Glasspool's elevation to bishop in 2010.

While working in Boston, Glasspool also met her life-partner, Becki Sander, who was studying for advanced degrees in both theology and social work. The couple has been in a committed relationship since 1988.

Glasspool left Boston to become the Rector of St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Annapolis, Maryland in 1992. The suburban parish was considerably larger and better funded than the one in Massachusetts, and so she had to tackle numerous administrative tasks in addition to fulfilling her primary pastoral role.

The 1990s were a time fraught with tension over the church's stance on homosexuality. Glasspool did not duck specific questions about her own sexual orientation, but the members of her fairly conservative congregation generally refrained from asking any, and so Sander "was invisible as far as the parish was concerned," Glasspool conceded.

In 2001 Glasspool was chosen to be Canon to the Bishops of the Diocese of Maryland, and with the new post she took on a wider range of responsibilities. "In my heart, I believe there is a significant part of me that is and always will be a parish priest," she stated, but she rose to the challenge of serving the entire diocese through preaching and teaching, attending to the needs and concerns of clergy, organizing retreats, and working on planning and development, among other duties.

Because of the breadth and diversity of her experiences in that position, Glasspool was a strong candidate when the Diocese of Los Angeles sought to elect two Bishops Suffragan in 2009. Bishop Jon Bruno stated that Glasspool's duties in Maryland had been functionally equivalent to the work of a Bishop Suffragan.

One of six candidates in the field, Glasspool was elected on the seventh ballot on December 5, 2009, at which point her elevation was subject to the consent of a majority of the dioceses in the United States.

A few voices were raised in opposition because of Glasspool's lesbianism, but Bruno made a clear statement in her support: "If by chance people are going to withhold consents because of Mary's sexuality, it would be a violation of the canons of this church. . . . At our last General Convention, we said that we are nondiscriminatory."

Some conservative church leaders abroad decried the choice of Glasspool, but Bruno again urged American Episcopalians to adhere to the high standards that they had set for themselves. "To not consent in this country out of fear of the reaction elsewhere in the Anglican Communion is to capitulate to titular heads," he declared.

Nevertheless, the matter of the potential schism threatened by some was important to Glasspool, who, soon after the election in Los Angeles, told Ruth Gledhill of *The Times* of London, "We want to be part of the Anglican Communion, but we are no longer willing to close the door to a significant number of people who look to the Episcopal Church for leadership," further noting that "there are many people who have been freed from the prison they have been put in" because of the church's move toward inclusivity.

She also questioned the interpretation of the few Bible verses regularly cited by those who would condemn homosexuality, and she stressed the importance of reading the Bible in its totality, stating, "The overriding message is that love is the good news."

Along with Diane Jardin Bruce, Glasspool was consecrated as bishop on May 15, 2010. The ceremony was briefly halted when a man and a young boy began shouting homophobic remarks, but the congregation rallied in support of Glasspool and, by extension, of other glbtq members of the church.

Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori was the chief consecrator at the service, which was also attended by many other American bishops, including Robinson, as well as several from overseas.

The installation of Bishops Glasspool and Jardin Bruce was a tribute to diversity. Attending were representatives of four Native American tribes whose ancestral lands are now part of the location of the diocese, and portions of the service were in English, Spanish, Korean, and Tagalog to reflect, at least in part, the heritage of the current congregants.

On the eve of her installation as a bishop, Glasspool addressed the news media, at which time she called the decision to elevate her "a benchmark for the whole church."

"We are being the church that we say we are," she told journalist Pat McCaughan. "We're not just saying it, we're doing it, and there's something very powerful about that."

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