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Obama gives gay bishop a role

V. Gene Robinson will deliver the invocation at an inaugural kickoff event, two days before the swearing-in

By Christi Parsons and Manya A. Brachear
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After angering gay rights supporters with the choice of evangelist Rick Warren to deliver the invocation at his inauguration, President-elect Barack Obama has chosen the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church to pray at the kickoff event for the inaugural festivities Sunday.

Bishop V. Gene Robinson, who advised Obama on gay rights issues during the campaign, is set to deliver the invocation at an event on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial two days before the swearing-in ceremony, aides to Obama said Monday.

Many gay rights activists and other liberal interest groups were infuriated by the prominent role Obama has given to Warren. The pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest and bestselling author of inspirational books supported California's successful Proposition 8 banning same-sex marriage.

To social conservatives, the choice of Robinson was a reminder of their considerable differences with Obama's politics. Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League, issued a statement criticizing Obama's choice of Robinson, calling him "the most polarizing person in the Episcopal Church."

Robinson has become a well-known figure around the world in the debate over gay rights. His consecration as a bishop six years ago set in motion a widening rift in the worldwide Anglican Communion.

When Warren was invited to pray at the Jan. 20 inauguration, Robinson called the decision a "slap in the face." On Monday, though, Robinson lauded what he called Obama's commitment to inclusiveness.

"It's important for any minority to see themselves as represented in some way, whether it be a racial minority, an ethnic minority or, in our case, a sexual minority," Robinson told his hometown newspaper, the Concord Monitor in New Hampshire. "Just seeing someone like you up front matters."

The appearance of both clergymen in the inaugural programs reflects Obama's impulse to acknowledge disparate points on the political spectrum. It also highlights the difficult line Obama is trying to tread as he shares the stage with leaders with differing views.

Tony Perkins, president of the conservative Family Research Council, said: "I find it kind of ironic that some were adamantly opposed to Rick Warren because he was 'divisive.' If you want to talk about somebody that is divisive, look at Gene Robinson. He essentially split one of the oldest Christian denominations in this country."

By contrast, Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said Robinson would be an inspirational figure.

"So many people are going to be sitting in front of their TVs or computers, or around the world, watching this remarkable man offer up prayer for the new president," she said. "The vision will be of benefit to many people, not just lesbian, gay and transgendered people."

In a statement late Monday, Warren was complimentary of Obama's decision to invite Robinson. "President-elect Obama has again demonstrated his genuine commitment to bringing all Americans of goodwill together in search of common ground," Warren said. "I applaud his desire to be the president of every citizen."

Robinson, 61, endorsed Obama in 2007, causing some to wag their fingers at the clergyman for mixing religion and politics.

"As my work shows me every day, leadership means bringing people together and inspiring them to live out their values," Robinson said at the time. "Barack Obama sees beyond the partisanship and hopelessness that have dominated in recent years, and the movement he's building is bringing vital new energy and optimism into our democratic process."

Some Episcopalians blame Robinson for the division between liberals and conservatives in the church in the United States and abroad. Last month, theological conservatives upset by liberal views of U.S. Episcopalians and Canadian Anglicans formed a rival North American province, because they believe Robinson's two-decade relationship with a male partner violates biblical principles.

The growing tension in the Episcopal Church has been keenly felt in California. The Fresno-based Diocese of San Joaquin in 2007 became the first in the country to announce that it was leaving the national church.

Several congregations in Southern California have aligned themselves with more conservative primates overseas, prompting legal action over who owns church property -- the national church or the breakaway parishes. This month, the California Supreme Court ruled that congregations choosing to leave the Episcopal Church may lose church buildings and property because they belong to the national church.

Robinson said in his interview with the Concord paper that he would not use the Bible in his address at the Lincoln Memorial.

"While that is a holy and sacred text to me, it is not for many Americans," Robinson said. "I will be careful not to be especially Christian in my prayer. This is a prayer for the whole nation."