



After Rick Warren Flap, Gay Activists Cheer Obama's Invite of Gene Robinson

By Dan Gilgoff

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The gay-rights movement is expressing elation over President-elect Barack Obama's invitation to gay Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson to give the opening invocation of inauguration week after reacting angrily to Obama's selection of evangelical megachurch pastor Rick Warren to deliver the invocation on Inauguration Day.

The Robinson invitation shows that "ultimately, Barack Obama is a friend to the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] community," says Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay-rights group. "I believe his administration is going to inspire us and advance our agenda more often than not."

"At the same time," Solmonese continued, "both the Warren and Robinson decisions give us a clue about what the road ahead is going to be like. This is the beginning of a long journey."

The Human Rights Campaign and other gay-rights groups sent letters to Obama asking him to rescind the invitation to Warren—who disapproves of homosexuality and who opposes certain gay rights, including the right to marry—after his inauguration role was announced last month.

"There was a sense of uproar around Rick Warren," says Darlene Nipper, deputy executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "People were confused, fearing that maybe the [president-elect] isn't the individual we thought he was."

The Robinson invitation, she said, "is an important step for knowing that this is someone who believes in the inclusivity of all Americans."

A source familiar with inauguration plans said that the Obama team had planned to give Robinson a public role at the inauguration even before the Warren flap, though Robinson's invitation was issued much more recently. "It's inaccurate to suggest that this was a reaction to the Rick Warren complaints or criticism," said the source, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, Robinson's 2003 election caused a rift in the church, provoking several dioceses and dozens of parishes to secede in protest. Though he'd been an early public supporter of Obama, Robinson called the inaugural invitation to Warren "a slap in the face."

"I'm all for Rick Warren being at the table," Robinson told the *New York Times*. "But we're not talking about a discussion; we're talking about putting someone up front and center at what will be the most watched inauguration in history, and asking his blessing on the nation. And the God that he's praying to is not the God that I know."

Robinson will give the invocation at this Sunday's official opening to the inaugural week activities, at Washington, D.C.'s Lincoln Memorial, while Warren will give the invocation at Obama's swearing-in on Tuesday. "It will be an enormous honor to offer prayers for the country and the new president, standing on the holy ground where the 'I have a dream speech' was delivered by Dr. King," Robinson wrote in an E-mail this morning to Episcopal Café, an Episcopal website. "It is also an indication of the new president's commitment to being the President of ALL the people. I am humbled and overjoyed at this invitation...."

Despite the fallout the Warren invitation engendered in the gay community, the Human Rights Campaign's Solmonese says the Obama transition team has been "very enthusiastic to the list of agenda items for the LGBT community."

That wish list includes executive orders for instituting nondiscrimination policies for federal employees on sexual orientation or gender identity grounds, for interpreting the Family and Medical Leave Act to include same-sex partners, and to enact a congressionally approved end to a ban on HIV-positive travelers from entering the U.S.

"Four years from now, will we believe that we have made more progress for advancing gay equality than at any other time in our history and than under any other president?" says Solmonese. "I think the answer is yes. That is what's paramount."