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First female Episcopal prelate of North Dakota described as a ‘breath of fresh air’

Those who know the Very Rev. Bishop Shay Craig say she will bring ‘people together and point them to Christ’.



Shay Craig became the 12th Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota and the first female bishop in the state in March 2026. - Anna Paige / The Forum

MINOT, N.D. — As a young girl, Shay Craig looked with curiosity from her bunk bed perch on Sunday mornings, watching through her bedroom window families filing into, and out of, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, just across the street from her home in Belvedere, Calif.

“It was a very pretty church, and I was fascinated by the kids who carried these candles and sang these songs,” she said, describing the parish’s annual Lenten practice of “Burying the Alleluia.” “They would make a fuss about that, and how you don’t say ‘Alleluia’ throughout Lent. And then, on Easter morning, you ‘resurrect’ the Alleluia.”

Until around age 6, she could only glimpse these moments from a distance, but when her sister, Minka, 20, noticed her youngest sister’s religious proclivity during a visit home, she arranged for friends to walk Craig across the street to church each week.

Their parents, whom Craig described as “evangelical atheists,” wouldn’t have encouraged it. “But she had more backbone than me,” she said of Minka, who informed them they didn’t have to worry about anything. “They probably enjoyed sleeping in, and they could sit in the living room, relax and read the New York Times.”

She recalled being welcomed and gently cared for at church. “I had a learning disability, but they made sure I didn’t experience any shame,” she said.



The Very Rev. Shay Craig (right), who is about to become the 12th Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota and the first female bishop in the state, shows a bible with a signature of Rev. John. S. Thornton, the reverend who baptized the Kansas woman "over a century ago," she jokes, to the Most Rev. Sean Rowe, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church on Friday, March 13, 2026, at the Gethsemane Cathedral in Fargo. On Saturday, Craig will be consecrated as bishop.
Anna Paige / The Forum

On March 14, that same little girl, whose faith only continued to soar, [made history in North Dakota when installed as the region’s first female Episcopal bishop](#) — the 12th prelate of the local church’s history — at a consecration ceremony at Gethsemane Cathedral in Fargo.

A family history of ministry

The earlier challenges of seeking God seemed to merge now into her family’s greater story of faith. Craig’s paternal aunt, Judy Craig, became “the third woman ever ordained a bishop in the world, in the Methodist church,” and her encouraging sister, Minka Sprague, served as an Episcopal priest.

Born in Omaha and raised in California, Craig attended a Quaker boarding school in her teens, later marrying and settling in the Chicago area, where she worked in development and marketing until daycare costs brought her home.

She spent 13 years raising her four children, while inching toward ministry.

Craig, who was grounded in small, agricultural communities, most recently served in Hays, Kansas, ancestral land of her farming and ranching great-grandparents.

Now the Very Rev. Bishop Shay Craig, she could have chosen to live anywhere in the region, where she overlooks 18 congregations, but saw Minot as fitting while her husband, John Houston, completes his year as assistant general counsel for the Kansas Office of Judicial Administration.

“I’m farthest away from Fargo-Moorhead, but everything else is three hours or less away,” she said, adding that when a medical need arises, “I’ll be there by the time they’ve assigned you a room at the hospital.”

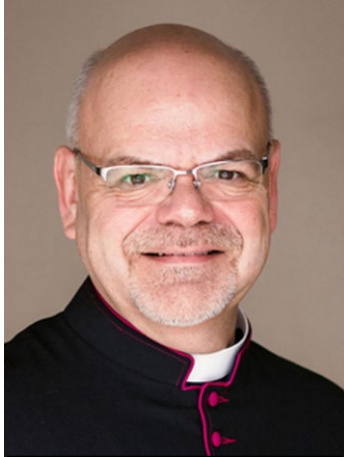
‘A pastoral heart’

Mary Massad, lay minister and warden for the tiny parish of St. John’s in Dickinson, with about nine active members, called Bishop Craig “a breath of fresh air,” coming after a years-long wait for a permanent bishop.



Mary Massad is pictured in Bismarck being filmed for an interview in 2024. - Contributed

“I feel the Holy Spirit working in her, especially since her consecration and seating,” said Massad, describing Craig as fun and personable. “You don’t feel like you’re beneath her.”



The Very Rev. Father Mark Strobel is dean of Gethsemane Cathedral in Fargo.
Contributed

The Very Rev. Mark Strobel, Dean of Gethsemane Cathedral, called Craig a “mendicant bishop” who travels widely to reach those in need. “When you think about various religious orders, or the Dominicans that travel, or even circuit riders from the Methodist church in the past, that’s the kind of role she’s got,” Strobel said.

This connects her deeply to the history here, he added, pointing to Bishop William David Walker, who, in the late 1800s, “outfitted a rail car, which he called his cathedral car, but it was really a chapel,” traveling throughout the diocese to hold missions and establish parishes.

“I’ve noticed, too, that she has a deeply pastoral heart,” Strobel said, expressed through both personal interactions and preaching. “And I think that’s lovely.”

She’ll fulfill well the commission of a bishop “to bring people together and point them to Christ,” he said, buoyed by “a courage borne of the Holy Spirit” that he’s noticed in her.

The Rev. Helen Svoboda-Barber, a friend and mentor, noted in an email Craig’s family history of “strong ranching women who didn’t always see eye to eye, but learned to work together for the common good,” which Craig applies to ministry, “always working with others to share Christ’s love in words, thoughts, and actions.”

Not drawn to “idle chit-chat,” Svoboda-Barber said, Craig seeks the heart, meeting people where they’re at. “She cares. She remembers. She uses this information to get a sense of the place and the potential everywhere she goes.”

‘A straight shooter’

Svoboda-Barber also described her as “a straight shooter” who won’t leave people guessing where they stand with her, but who can be trusted.

Calling her faith “gritty and hard-won,” Svoboda-Barber said Craig once told her, “I have seen the giants. And I know God is bigger than that,” showing she understands that life is messy, but that “God came down into the messy brokenness of this world to be with us;” a reality she’ll undoubtedly model and “live into” here.



Helen Svoboda-Barber attended Bishop Craig's consecration at Gethsemane Cathedral in March.
Contributed / Rev. Megan Holding

Craig was voted in by North Dakota's people, Svoboda-Barber said, because of her outstanding qualities; she's not only Christ-centered and gritty, but intelligent while also "happily drives a gator in a cattle round-up." Most of all, she's someone "who loves God and loves you, too."

The Rev. Brenda Roger, a Lutheran pastor in central Kansas, became a collaborator with Craig while they were both serving in Hays. "In my opinion, you (in North Dakota) have been given a wonderful gift. She is a gem of a person," Roger said, remarking that she'll never forget Craig's welcome when she was just starting out in ministry.

"That welcome was sincere, and it's so rare these days," she said, noting that her friend also balanced out her tendency toward seriousness with a wonderful sense of humor. "She was always good for a laugh; I appreciate that as well."

Craig, she said, is an adept builder, bringing people together and finding ways to grow the communities into which she's immersed.

'A beaming smile'

During the interview process, the Rev. Dn. Beth Lipp of St. George's in Bismarck had a chance to observe Craig and the other candidates during their "tour around the diocese."

"When I first laid eyes on her, I thought, 'Wow, she is tall, and I love those cowboy boots with that skirt!'" she said, chuckling. "But the most important thing is that she has this beaming smile on her face."

At their last stop at a United Tribes powwow, Lipp was impressed by how Craig interacted with the people. "Our diocese has quite a few Native American congregations, so that was wonderful to see," Lipp said.



Rev. Shay Craig is pictured with friends, left, Brenda Roger and Rev. Kim Frederking in Kansas in 2002.
- Contributed



Rev. Bishop Craig, left, and Rev. Brenda Roger, Lutheran pastor, right, are pictured at her ordination in Hays, Kansas, in 2023. - Contributed

Along with its North Dakota communities, she noted, the diocese includes one Minnesota congregation, St. John's in Moorhead, with its substantial Sudanese population. "We are a unique diocese and very diverse," Lipp said.

Lipp said Craig "challenges us to step out of the box," but will carry out the Episcopal Church's shared commitment of maintaining "the tradition of our beautiful liturgy" and "showing God's love to any who enter our doors."

"She's kind of charismatic and has a lot of energy, and stamina," she said, adding, "We couldn't be happier to have her here."

‘God is working here’

Not that long ago, Craig was eyeing retirement. She and Houston, her second husband, had bought “this cute little place” in Kansas, and she was pleading with him to buy fainting goats, she said, laughing at the memory. But eventually, she was gently nudged in another direction by those recognizing her gifts.

In time, Craig saw North Dakota as similar to the kinds of other places she’s known; isolated with some extraordinary challenges and where hope can become lost. But God is working here, she said, and the people are resilient and ready. “I think it’s because they’ve been searching so long (for a shepherd) and never lost hope,” she said.

In her “listening phase,” she’s been gathering data through meeting clergy and the people, and learning new languages, including some Lakota, Ojibwe, Sudanese and Arabic. “I’m beginning to have a sense of what (the Spirit here) sounds and feels like, and it’s familiar, but it’s also a new sound,” she said.

Bishop Craig described this period as “tomb time,” like the quiet, reflective period before Easter Sunday, adding that though the Resurrection is near, it never looks the same as before, because new life comes with “all of its scars.”

And yet, she added in hope, “We’re on the verge of a whole new season.”



By [Roxane B. Salonen](#)

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