

## **The Rev. Canon John T. W. Harmon**

- Questions posed by the Diocese of Southern Virginia to Bishop Candidates -

- 1. Jeremiah 9:24 says “But let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord.” Tell us about who you understand and know God to be, and tell us how as Bishop you would call us to boast in him.**

God is the creator and the eternal source of our existence. God is the universal Spirit through whom all things were made. God is our eternal home, the foundation and ground upon whom our souls seek and find its rest. God has no equal, and there is none to be compared with God. God is all in all. All creation belongs to God. God is the strength of our life. God is the liberating Spirit that frees us from ourselves and makes us worthy to worship and bear witness to the divine presence in the world. God is love.

As Bishop I would invite the diocese to boast in God for the Grace bestowed upon all of us in the presence of Jesus Christ. We will boast in God whose boundless love has united and made us one in faith. We boast in God for renewed mercies and for blessing us to be God’s people in the world. We will boast of God because we belong to God and God cares about us. We will boast of God because God only is holy. God is light, life, truth and all that is beautiful.

- 2. It could be said that each order of ministry has been given gifts for the exercise of that ministry. Looking at your current priestly ministry, do you believe there are gifts you have been given that would continue to be useful to the diocese and do you see yourself as possessing a few episcopal gifts that have not yet been manifested?**

Whenever we consider our gifts and examine our abilities and experiences, especially as they relate to current and challenging responsibilities, we soon discover that the successful enterprise of leadership is closely related to the specific group of people, as well as, the context and character of the community in which one is called to serve. The same is true of the church since it is never separated from the influences of the larger society. While I bring significant administrative, pastoral and fundraising skills from my current and past ministries of nearly thirty years, the ministry of the Bishop of Southern Virginia will require clarity of vision and an openness to incorporate the wisdom of others.

Upon assuming new roles and responsibilities one of the first tasks I undertake is an environmental/organizational assessment, which will allow me to gain insight into the people, processes, and procedures. I possess the innate ability to perceive and crystallize ideas and bring them into realities. I will also bring my proven ability and experience of getting things done without compromising the core values or my integrity and that of the community. My gift as an effective pastor is often extolled.

The gifts that would be useful in the diocese include, my ability to support and nurture clergy and laity in visioning and creativity; prayerful and attentive listening; my ability to adapt and manage change; anticipate and resolve conflicts; my capacity to understand situations and lead people out of crises with a spirit of reconciliation as we seek to embrace new possibilities and paths of hope. I would bring the ability to organize and mobilize people, nurture and foster a strong culture of inclusion and compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, and growth.

It would be an honor and privilege to plant and restart congregations, including campus ministries and ensure a foundation that will fund current and future ministries.

### **3. How have you experienced the creative influence of the Holy Spirit in your ministry?**

For nearly two decades, I have organized cadres of clergy and community leaders to support important and challenging causes. I consider these experiences as the creative influence of the Holy Spirit in my ministry.

As HIV/AIDS was disseminating our community the Spirit's influence lead me to organize the Clergy Leadership Summit on HIV/AIDS, an extensive citywide collaboration of approximately 300 area churches to effectively address the epidemic in the Nation's Capital. The symposium included clergy and lay leaders.

Another influence of the Holy Spirit includes the leadership and vision I offered as a co-founder to the Episcopal Service Corps [ESC], a ministry that is now part of the Episcopal Church's Faith Formation Department. ESC is a federation of young adult service programs across the United States which helps young adults discern the inner "voice" that is calling them to their life's work. ESC helps to develop the skill to listen and respond to God through a life of service.

Other influences of the Spirit in my ministry are the formation of house churches, preaching mission and revivals, Regional Annual Men's Retreats, collaborative support, and shared ministries and worship opportunities with small churches. Simply, I desire to be open and attentive to the working of the Spirit of God.

### **4. Many are describing our world as post-Christian. How have you responded to this new context creatively in your ministry?**

It is important that the church maintains in every age a spiritual presence and voice that speak of its core values in relevant and meaningful ways in the world. Ours is a time of tremendous opportunity for inclusion and hospitality, growth and witness, for teaching within and particularly outside the "door" of the Church. Muchmore, the values and way of life espoused by Jesus, especially the idea or spirituality of love transcends the limitation of culture and political ideology.

While one should approach any context of ministry with humility, kindness, and holiness, we should also claim with the prophet Isaiah that "the Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word." (Isaiah 50: 4) I also believe that we are living in one of the most important eras in the life and future of the Episcopal Church. Since suffering and injustice is present in every age, I feel called to embrace the prophetic response of the gospel imperative found in Isaiah 61:1-3, and Luke 4:18-19 where Jesus said he came "... to preach good news to the poor. ...release to the captives ... at liberty those who are oppressed."

The church is uniquely positioned to be a voice of hope and reason and a spiritual and mindful presence. I have convened Civil and Religious leaders in conversations and partnerships that have helped to reveal the truth about ourselves, expose the brokenness of our world, and at the same time open us to the healing and reconciling love of God. I have organized, in my ministry, creative efforts that benefit the

general public, the church and unchurched. As a ministry offering, we provide Tai chi, Seniorcise, knitted caps, and blanket for newborns, (prayer) shawl for the elderly, bed and breakfast for the homeless, breakfast at a homeless shelter for women, moral support to the immigrant community, temporary emergency shelter for the working poor. I have arranged partnerships with local leaders and businesses to provide as much as 800 winter coats to school age children annually.

Finally, I am committed to God, the church and its peoples and desire to live out a Christian faith and life that is attentive to the life of the soul with expressed love and care for the welfare of all humanity.

5. **What does social justice mean to you? In the Examination of the bishop-elect the last question asked is this, “Will you be merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper?” How might you demonstrate in your episcopate your willingness to fulfill this promise “for the sake of Jesus Christ?”**

Social Justice is the capacity to acknowledge and recognize injustices and inequities in society through organized efforts that seek to address those disparities. It is also expressed in the Baptismal Covenant in that we are called to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself ... strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being...”

Bishops should not only enrich the spiritual wellbeing of members and clergy, but also advance and promote a robust stewardship and outreach equal to our obligations and aspirations. I am further excited and encouraged that social justice is not divested from the ministry of the church, but rather, it invites us all, the church and its resources to a challenging, transforming, and missional way of practicing our faith in the world.

I feel blessed with a pastoral sensitivity that allows me to be present with others and the ability to listen and be nonjudgmental. I am a witness to what an effective pastoral presence seeks to offer in the life of individuals and communities.

I will continue to strive to be voice and presence among the poor, encourage intentional communities and missional efforts where strangers and the marginalized are embraced and defended by our courage and faith. I will collaborate with congregations, civil and religious leaders to address, economic, health and social disparities that diminish and dehumanize our poor, marginalized, disadvantaged neighbors.

6. **What do you see to be the greatest needs of today’s youth? How do you think the church must adapt in order to better meet these needs?**

There was a time when almost every young person was asked “what do you want to be or do when you grow up.” Now, we need to expand and ask different questions. I suggest we begin with this one, “What problems or issues would you like to solve or address? I believe that meeting the needs of today’s youth should begin with intentional inquiries that involve problem solving and support their passion. The church, in order to effectively meet the needs of today’s youth, must create spaces that provide an opportunity for young people to engage in meaningful pursuit and activities that help them resolve challenges. The church must also provide spaces that give rise to hope supported through our worship and witness.

Today’s youth need security and support. They need opportunities that seek to hear and address their concerns in open and creative ways. The Church in some ways can be and provide a place for

emotional, financial, and sometimes physical security and support where youth can be free to fully engage the problems they want to solve. They need the support that helps them achieve their dreams, aspirations and passion. They need the security that protects them from all sorts of violence. The church can be a safe and sacred space for youth.

**7. Likewise, what do you see to be the greatest needs of an aging population. For example, dementia, depression, failing health, Alzheimer's and the needs of the caregivers?**

We are living longer lives and our minds and bodies often cannot support the lifestyle to which we were once accustomed. The need for sustained and compassionate caregiving, accessibility to community centers and gatherings designed to support an aging population is becoming more essential. Churches can fill voids and provide support, resources and access to programs and centers. Churches can be sacred spaces for our aging population to share their wisdom and life stories through intergenerational programs and activities.

**8. Have you seen successful efforts in any diocese which promote a common vision for the work of that diocese as a whole entity? Have these efforts been effective in coordinating the ministries of the laity, the deacons, and the priests?**

I am impressed with the successful efforts in the Diocese of Texas around their common vision. Their effective use of resources to support existing and emerging ministry is captivating. Their current investment in human capital and ministry opportunities is worth exploring. Their growing Missional communities, including college ministry, the development of new congregations seem to make practical use of the gifts and ministries of the laity, deacons, and priests.

**9. Tell us how you think meaningful change occurs. How have you helped facilitate changes in the church? What principles helped guide your leadership?**

Meaningful change occurs when leaders prayerful engage the community they serve, listen empathetically, understand people's concerns and aspirations, motivate and concentrate on the strength of the community, set priorities and ensure that a change or vision is clear. Beyond building a meaningful relationship with the community, it is important to organize an effective team to help manage and implement change. Meaningful change is always people focused and is connected to a larger purpose or vision. It occurs when people are inspired, their engagement is meaningful, and the purpose is clear.

In one instance, I gathered leaders in the parish and presented a concept for a new ministry. They were invited to consider a new vision for children and youth ministry. They were asked to assist in developing a plan. Two leaders were identified to serve as chair and assistant chair. The chair was most effective through the initial phase – of planning and organizing the concept but was uncomfortable with moving to the next phase – of implementing the vision. When the idea was ready for implementation, it became clear that the chair was not ready to lead the next phase. With mutual consent and the support of the outgoing chair, the assisting chair was asked to lead. This was a smooth transition in leadership and the next phase of the program was implemented.

In another instance related to worship, changes were introduced as a pilot and the feedback and consent of the congregation was sought before making it a regular part of the worship experience. We facilitated

a process that focused on making the worship experience more meaningful for the community. The process involved musicians, worship leaders and a cross-section of the congregation. The change was well received and has enhanced our worship experience.

Careful engagement and planning are necessary when effecting change. Meaningful change, large or small, should have a vision this is broad and encompassing enough to include all and energize most. Often, the meaningful occurrence of change, particularly challenging ones, depends on the relationship of a Bishop with the clergy and people.

I think of myself as a visionary-servant leader with discerning gifts and abilities that are grounded in a strong pastoral sensitivity and compassion. I believe in building and working with a team. I prefer to consult and involve others in the decision-making process and cultivate a culture of trust and hope. I delegate and allow others to lead and make decisions. I set priorities and delegate tasks. I find it important to work with a team and draw on their knowledge and skills. I am an encourager of people. I care enough to confront whatever is before us and strong enough to lead. I also collaborate and seek consensus.

My leadership is guided by the principle of prayer and humility, respect and collaboration, compassion and wisdom, community and self-awareness, responsibility, love, kindness, and vision.

**10. What are the most essential elements of the church's evangelistic witness? How have you modeled this witness in your own life? How would you encourage the church to engage in evangelism in new ways?**

At the heart of evangelistic witness is a commitment to hospitality. The church's embrace and treatment of those whom God has placed within its reach is often the most visible and essential element of its evangelism. Since worship is a part of our evangelistic witness, what we sing and pray about should also impact our decisions and relationships. Essential elements of the church's evangelism reflect the following – it is Jesus-centered, mission-driven, Gospel-mandated, prayer-focused, grounded in love and support.

I view my life as a public witness and expression of my deep and abiding love for Jesus Christ. My evangelistic witness is modeled through my engagement in house church gatherings, work with social justice issues, including poverty and homelessness, HIV/AIDS, prisons, returning citizens, recovering communities, those struggling with addiction and immigrants. For more than twenty years, I have also led young adults in a year-long experience of living in intentional Christian communities while learning and working with social service agencies that serve and advocate for the poor and marginalized.

Missional communities (floating church) is a new way in which I would encourage the church to engage in evangelism. Evangelism in this way creates sacred spaces that are grounded in prayer and presence with the intent of loving neighbor and engaging in intentional and purposeful relationships. These efforts are rooted in the Gospel imperatives and spiritual practice of love, meeting people where they are. They are rooted in an expressed common interest and concern for meaningful, transforming relationships and partnerships. Missional communities are just another way for Christians to stay awake and remain relevant in the world. It is a step beyond traditional and house churches.

**11. As Bishop how would you nourish and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries to encourage diocesan outreach efforts?**

As Bishop I will encourage and foster unity, respect diversity and support the full inclusion of all within the community of faith, the body of Christ. I will seek to provide a pastoral presence that nourishes and supports all baptized persons in their gifts and ministries. I will promote and inspire outreach efforts that invite the diocese to explore new and emerging praxis and create opportunities for anyone to serve. I will engage the diocese in *listening-conversations* and asset mapping. The information gathered, regarding strengths and available resources, will be used to facilitate discussions about missional and community outreach efforts that address the needs within the communities the diocese serves. Equally as important, is the realization that a bishop is also called to lead congregations and clergy into a deeper relationship with God and each other, and to make more evident God's love and presence in the world as well as, in our individual lives.

I will also organize teaching and preaching missions, strengthen existing ministries that provide training and formation opportunities, further equip and support all baptized persons in their ministries. I will seek to enlarge the ministry of the laity, to include lay preachers and encourage the ministry of the diaconate to assist the diocese in understanding the needs of poor and marginalized people in the community.

**12. Why should the church struggle to be more diverse? What equips you help the church effectively deal with the challenges of becoming more diverse?**

There are tremendous strength and unimaginable creativity in diversity. There are also incredible opportunities that inspire learning and growth in diverse communities. Diverse communities do not die out easily, they are a marked expression that we are becoming more like the Kingdom of God, that heavenly vision described in Revelation – "... I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands." – *Revelation 7:9*

Each of us bear the image of God. We are more fully the people of God when no part of us, that is God's image, is diminished or excluded and all are accepted and find their place, purpose and promise within the body of Christ. Diversity reminds us of our need for each other.

I currently serve a diverse, cross-cultural congregation with members from about 20 countries. They come with varied theological and social aspirations and concerns. In many ways, they have equipped and prepared me for the challenges of leading and shaping diversity within the diocese. With them, I am a servant-leader among leaders.

Furthermore, the privilege of living and embracing a diverse and inclusive community nurtures hope and cultivates meaningful relationships that present extraordinary opportunities for worship and witness.

**13. As you have been discerning God's call in this process, have you received any insight into what you might like to focus your attention upon during the first few months of your episcopate in the Diocese of Southern Virginia?**

Within the first few months, I will give attention to encouraging and engaging the diocese in a series of *listening-conversations* that will consider emerging aspirations and current concerns of congregations and the clergy. It is hoped that these *listening-conversations* will, foster a sacred space for building meaningful relationships, provide insights into the strengths within the diocese and a

deeper understanding of the culture. This will allow us to cultivate the kind of community God is calling us to be. Particular attention will be given to exploring ways that support and strengthen congregations while cultivating a meaningful relationship with the clergy.