

The Rev. Sven L. vanBaars

- 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.**

I understand God to be most perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Through his teachings and healings, his witness and presence, his calling into relationship and his sending into the world he gives us many things about which to speak proudly. For me, one of the most profound actions of Christ is his crossing boundaries. John’s prologue tells how he crosses the boundaries of time and space to claim us. Luke, Matthew, and Mark tell how he crossed boundaries of gender, nationality, ethnicity, socio-economic status and cultic division to bring the presence of the divine into the lives that were segregated by fear and false dichotomies. I would want us to boast by telling the story of how we continue to cross boundaries to bring reconciliation. I would want us to boast by allowing our actions and ministries to bear witness to the transformation his transcendent presence has in our lives.

- 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?**

I think I do have gifts that would be useful to the diocese. I am told I am a good preacher. I enjoy pastoral relationships. I have a good grasp of administrative and budgeting processes. But beyond specific ministry gifts, I think the two gifts I have which would be of most use to the diocese are that I am solution oriented and contra-phobic. I don’t think I am particularly creative, but I am good at listening for details and then seeing how the situation can be transformed into a more workable solution. I am would rather face my fears than avoid them.

Throughout my priestly ministry, I have always served in some capacity at the diocesan level. My role as a Title IV intake officer has given me an understanding of the disciplinary process of our church. A gift I used more frequently when I was a member of a diocesan staff was the ability to see how a vision can be operational. It is a gift of sequencing how to inventory gifts and concerns of those involved, training, communicating and then adjusting.

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

It first must be said that I am a lousy, horrible surfer. Now with that huge caveat in place, let me tell you about surfing. You wait and watch; wait and watch; look at the birds, the sand, talk with others; wait and watch and then, you go. Paddle like crazy, feel the power building up beneath you, paddle a little more and then get up. Lean left, right, forward. A thrill. Then tumble, gasp for air. Did I paddle too long and let the crest pass by? Should I have paddled more? I felt the power. Could I have leaned more into it? Too much? Paddle back out.

That is how I have experienced the Holy Spirit. It is waiting, watching, being in community, using my best gifts, recognizing I am in the presence of something much bigger than me, discerning my actions, cognitively reflecting and then being open to it again.

In a church context, one of the places I consistently have this type of experience is when I engage in a conversation about something, usually a liturgy, that took place. From one of my mentors I learned that following a service it is best to ask “where in what took place did God break through despite our efforts?” and “where did our efforts best allow space for the Holy?” I have found these to be much better than “what worked and what didn’t?” In the open, thoughtful, sometimes critical observations that follow, I find the Holy Spirit working, again and again, to bring about creativity and inspiration in the people of God.

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

I agree that we are in a post-Christendom context. It is critical to remember that this refers to the end of Christian privilege, not the end of the Christian faith. We can no longer assume that our sacred writings are widely known or accepted. We can no longer assume that our moral stances are adhered to. We can no longer assume that our worship practices are followed. I have found it very helpful to learn about the experiences of those who have been faithful in a non-Christian privilege context. I find that I am doing more scriptural explanation within my sermons and writings. The culture doesn’t have the biblical literacy that it had a couple of decades ago and therefore we, as Christians, must provide background so that our scriptural teaching makes sense. I also find that I do more expansion of ethical positions and decisions. Our context does not allow us the luxury of using our faith tradition as the unquestioned basis for our decisions. I’ve needed to expand and deepen the explanation of theological premises upon which those decisions are based.

The blessing of this era is that it has the potential to call us into a deeper faith relationship with our creator and redeemer. I’ve found receptivity among my parishioners for Bible study. I’ve found that trying new liturgies often brings new people into the life of our parish but always brings new awareness to our parishioners about why we do what we do. It is an exciting time to be in ordained ministry.

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 when we “refuse to remain spectators to the panorama of injustice” *. It begins with a growing sense of what God’s kingdom is and what ways we are called to be partners with Christ in bringing that kingdom near. It is a collective of peace builders, agitators, theologians, and prayerful Christians using their gifts to assert the dignity of all.

I take my answer from the last question of each of the examinations I have had for ordination. As a deacon, my vow is to seek the glory of Christ not my own. This means stepping into actions when they will bring honor to God, despite the seeming costs to me. As a priest, my vow is to pray in public and private for myself and others. This shapes my ministry as one in the public square, bringing the presence of faith into dialogue with the legal, economic, and political spheres. As a bishop, my vow would be to both live in a manner that shows compassion and to shape the life of the diocese so that the ministry of all baptized members of the church extend dignity to every human being.

**this definition comes from Christopher Rowland.*

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?

The greatest needs of our youth, for sake of this essay I define them as from ages 5 to 25, are the products of three trends - extended adolescence; prolonged exposure to violence; and the pressure of social connectivity.

A lot of the 20 somethings whom I know have not reached the milestones that their parents did at that same age. Their relationships are sporadic or fluid; their employment is often transitory; they often rely on parents, family or friends to meet the costs of living; and housing is often temporary. On some of these, they will be well ahead and on others well behind their peers. I hear them often express feelings of being judged. They are not often in church but when they are they tell me they love being there because it gives them a place of stability. The church needs to be experienced as less doctrinal and more narrative. We too often ask that the teachings of the church be imposed on the lives of its members. Instead, we need to encourage the stories of faithful lives from the members of the church and connect those stories to the teachings of the church. Jesus walked and taught the people in their lives. The Body of Christ needs to do the same.

A tragic reality of our time is the repeated headlines of shootings. But violence is not confined to these news events. Individual lives are impacted by violence within the home and school that is often not seen. Our media are full of images and interactions that are graphically violent. A high school graduate today has likely attended the funeral of a schoolmate; witnessed or been a subject of bullying; and seen hundreds of fictional depictions of murder. When the church is silent on violence it communicates that this is not a reality worthy of its energy. But our young people know this to be a reality, so the effect is that the church loses its credibility to speak authentically on any subject. The church needs to speak out about violence. We need to encourage dialogue about responsible gun ownership and misuse of weapons. We need to be present when a youth of our community dies even if we never meet that young person. We need to model healthy relationships and provide a safe place where our youth can share their experiences.

We have just come through a series of technological changes that have revolutionized how we connect and communicate. Like the period following any revolution, the institutions and patterns we relied upon have yet to fully adapt to this new reality the understanding of community. The pre-teen and teenage year have always been a time of growing self-awareness and identity. The advent of social media platforms and the ubiquitous cell phone while providing an amazing array of opportunities for people to connect with one another also bring an incredible amount of pressure to stay connected.

The church has generally seen its digital footprint as an afterthought – a nice add on to its physical presence. The church needs to envision its digital presence as important as its physical presence. A web page is like the front door welcoming people in. Instagram and Snapchat are like bulletin boards providing visual statements about the life of the congregation. Texts, tweets, emails are like greetings shared with each other at the peace. Dropboxes, Google docs, Youtube, and Facebook are the classrooms where content for formation can be shared. Those under 30 are very fluent in using these forms of communication. By making them a higher priority, we increase the fluency of those in older decades and allow them to understand the pressures younger generations feel about social connectivity. The church which does good ministry in this area is one where an 85-year-old who is about to lose the ability to drive and a 15-year-old who is about to lose their cell phone privileges each understand the

other to be losing access to their community and find ways to support each other in the subsequent emotional turmoil that will follow.

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

My father is 83. My mother died at 44. Since turning 44 I have had the recurring thought that I am having experiences my mother never did. Like so many, I learned much from my mother and yet there are so many experiences and life events that I have had to learn without the benefit of her experience.

A reality of our era is that we are living longer and more actively. The oldest among us are often in ages and situations that their parents never experienced. I think one of the greatest needs of our aging population is the wisdom of the ages. The oldest among us are pioneers in a new frontier and have few guides to help them. This creates anxiety about medical, social, and financial stressors.

Jesus ascends to heaven and leaves behind a community. As the community ages, it figures out how to care for those who are pioneering their way through society. In this time, for these people, we need to do what the church's DNA calls us to do. We need to be connecting our aging population with the life of the church. Training pastoral care teams so that parishioners who no longer drive are not cut off from the church that has been a part of their life. Calling together gatherings where older members can share their experiences, joys, and anxieties. Curating and sharing resources with them and their families so they can make decisions to keep and enhance their dignity.

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 aware of efforts in Episcopal dioceses that seek to promote common vision. These are usually funding based efforts and are generally focused on one aspect of common ministries such as conference centers, social justice, or college ministry. As a denomination, we Episcopalians do not exhibit great strength in this area. For six years I led a diocesan effort to build shared ministries in five functional areas. I found that we had to be open to on-going discernment on what and how those ministries encompassed. I found we had to communicate much more than our best advisors told us to. I found that one of the biggest challenges we faced was anxiety from parish leaders about resources being taken away from the parish. The effort was able to do much. As a native Virginian, it pains me to admit this but for many years I have admired the way the Diocese of Texas has used a two-tier funding approach to build community around missional work. That program uses lay and ordained leaders to have inter-parish conversations about how they work together as a diocese. While the primary focus of that effort is to secure budgetary resources, a beneficial effect is how it has encouraged a deepening of relationships.

We would limit ourselves if we looked only at Episcopal dioceses. Generally, Roman Catholic dioceses have a stronger history of advancing a common vision. While we could learn from some of their efforts, we must ask how the differences in polity between our denominations would change how we approach these efforts. Additionally, one of the prevailing models of church growth has been the multi-campus congregation. I find this movement interesting since it uses the same pattern from which dioceses originally began. In healthy examples from multi-campus, I see that regular communication between

the lead pastor and the site pastors is absolutely critical. These churches have also used technology in ways that help connect the campus with satellite locations and use gifts of the laity to do so.

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 one wholesome person interacts with another wholesome person with the help of the Holy Spirit. The presence of the holy calls for a degree of honesty that allows each person to acknowledge a way in which they need to grow in wholeness. The presence of the holy also provides each with gifts that encourage that growth to take place. It is messy. It is life-giving. There are no shortcuts.

The foundation of all meaningful changes at the societal level is people. The foundation of meaningful changes within people is the heart of the individual. Meaningful change only takes place when the Holy Spirit, who knows the heart of each person, is involved.

I've helped facilitate change by bringing my whole self to be present. It is tempting to bring only my cognitive thoughts about what could be done or should be done. It is tempting to bring only my emotional self and feelings of joy, disappointment, anger or hope. It is tempting to bring only my memories of what I have experienced. The challenge is to bring my whole self to be present. It requires a degree of honesty and self-awareness. It is challenging. I've helped facilitate change by being open to and calling upon the Holy Spirit to be present.

25 years ago, I was being recruited for an exciting job in a distant city. On the way home from the interview I had a long layover in the Charlotte Airport. I began making a list of the pros and cons of the job, but that list didn't get to my question about whether I would take the job if offered. So I pulled out another piece of paper and began writing what would be my creed for work and life. For the last quarter century, I have followed these principles of leadership. They are not my creation but are taken from other sources. The leader is not greater than the team. A good leader is one who learns. A key indicator of the leader's effectiveness is how the organization functions when the leader is not present. A leader knows and uses the gifts and skills of the team. After returning home I was offered the job but didn't take it. I realized I would have been working for someone who did not fit my understanding of leadership.

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?

I believe the most essential elements are best known in the Eucharist. It is cognitive drawing upon the knowledge of God's work of redemption. It is experiential calling us to receive Christ in our hands. It is spiritual inviting us to be in relationship with the Holy.

American Christianity has long been bifurcated between those who see evangelism as a cognitive acceptance of faith as admission into a future perfection and those who see evangelism as addressing human needs before spiritual needs. On the one hand, we see traditions that hold winning souls as the goal. On the other, we see traditions that hold a Maslow-like view of addressing primary needs before salvation can be addressed. Our tradition is blessed that in the Eucharist we are given a witness that

addresses both ends. Our problem is that we don't often think of Eucharist as feeding in preparation for proclaiming the good news.

When I was a seminarian, I served a church plant. Each Sunday the team would roll up with a trailer in front of a High School and begin to create "church" in the common area of the building. Members would set out signs and chairs, unpack and prepare the altar, greet each other and visitors when they arrived and then put it all away again. We would regularly mail out flyers to local neighborhoods and staff booths at local events so that the church's name, location, and ministry could be known. Once a month we went through neighborhoods and knocked on doors to have conversations about the church. What I saw was that most people came to church because of the relationships they had or had developed with lay members of the church. I also saw that some people came because of a special service or ministry the church was doing. Also, I witnessed that participating in the life of the church created excitement or energy.

What I learned as a seminarian in a church plant, I have used as the rector of a colonial church. I believe that each person wants to be a worthwhile member of a worthwhile cause and that one of my tasks as rector is to find and encourage ways for members to be active in the life of the parish. I value participation because it honors our Anglican tradition of worship and gives members opportunities to own and share their church with others. Although this parish pre-dates the creation of our nation, we still need to work so that the people of our community know our name, location, and ministry. Like water skiing, the church is most stable when it rests on two strong legs. Our tradition and history is one. Our current ministry to the community around us is the other. To be effective in evangelism requires us to honor and develop both legs.

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

Organic outreach comes from our love of neighbor. It calls us into a relationship with others. Sadly, quite often outreach in our churches takes the form of money alone. Money can do a lot, but it only answers financial questions. Our outreach efforts must be broader than only financial.

From my career in fundraising, I learned that asking for money was never the first question. The first question was almost always "Do you believe in what we are doing?" If the answer was "no," asking for money was the stupidest thing you could do next. The conversation would need to turn to the ways the organization and the individual were out of line with each other. If the answer was "yes" you often would hear reasons why they believed and were excited about what we were planning. Moving the question about money further back in the conversation produced an understanding of dreams, hopes, frustrations, gifts, and resources.

It would be good and challenging work, but I would nourish people by promoting conversations and dialogue where the baptized share the ways they love their neighbors and dream about the ways that love could be further manifested. In the parish I currently serve outreach primarily takes the form of food. When I arrived almost nine years ago we did outreach via our checkbook. We had conversations about hopes and dreams and challenges. We shared the issues we knew were present in our community. One theme continued to draw us into joy – food. We began a weekend feeding program with the local elementary school and are now in year 6 of that ministry. We intentionally opened ourselves to organizations that were doing good work to improve our community.

As a leader, I have long found useful Aristotle's words about money. "To give away money is an easy matter and in any one's power. But to decide to whom to give it, and how large, and when, and for what purpose and how, is neither in everyone's power nor an easy matter." To me, this quote puts the burden on the leadership to sort through detailed and weighty issues so that a wider community can discern how to use all resources – not only a financial one. As a bishop, I would support ministries by bringing discernment and clarification so the simple matter of loving one's neighbors can be within any baptized members power.

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

There are two reasons the church should pursue this struggle – the future and the present. I believe that at the end, our Lord calls all believers into the heavenly banquet. A foretaste of which we get to experience in the sacrament of Eucharist. At this banquet, the cultures, races, genders, and social divisions fade away. We pursue diversity in because it prepares us for this gathering.

Mark's Gospel puts it most succinctly, we are called to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. In order for the church to do this, we must be multilingual and multicultural. We cannot share the good news if we don't speak the language of those with whom we seek to share. We pursue diversity because it allows the church to do the work it is called to do.

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?

When I took up running about 2 decades ago, I learned that I loved to sprint. I would take off at top speed only to stall, panting and puffing, a short distance later. I trained myself to start at a slower pace and to settle in for the long haul.

If I am called to serve the Diocese of Southern Virginia, it will be for a long tenure. It will be akin to a marathon, not a sprint. My first few months would be focused on taking the time to meet people and establish relationships. My attention would be on learning the stories of the Diocese and knowing the people who God has called to be the church in southern Virginia. Being a bishop involves a different rhythm than being a priest and while I am a quick learner, I will want to take a little time to get adjusted to that rhythm. In my conversations with those recently elected to the Episcopate, they have told me of 10-12-hour days filled with meetings during their first weeks and months. If I am to learn from those who have recently experienced adjusting to the office of Bishop, I would do well not to falsely believe that I could affect anything beyond learning who the Diocese is. My focus would be on the people.