

The Rev. Dr. J. Derek Harbin

- 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 know God to be an unstoppable force for love in the world. That love is perfectly revealed in Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who does not run away from the wolves that seek to devour us, but lays down his life for the sheep that we might be filled with divine power and love. That love pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit, whose wisdom leads and guides me each day.

I discovered this love in a Diocese that was formed under unique circumstances. In 1895 the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina returned all its land west of Charlotte to the national Episcopal Church. The congregations were too scattered in the rugged mountain wilderness for existing clergy to leave the comforts of city life to serve them. In response, the House of Bishops created the Missionary District of Asheville and began seeking other clergy to minister in this largely unknown and challenging mission context.

Only monks and nuns from inner city New York and Philadelphia would initially answer the call to evangelize and care for the physical needs of the mountain people living in what would ultimately become the Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina. The spirituality and witness of these holy men and women, who trusted God and surrendered their homes, plans, and dreams to follow Jesus, formed the parish in which I came to faith, and witnessed to the way in which I believe we are each called to boast in the Lord.

Weekly we consume the Body and Blood of Christ that we might become the Body of Christ. As that Body, we boast in the Lord when we surrender our homes, plans, and dreams to follow Jesus. We boast in the Lord when men, women, and children die and rise again in the waters of Baptism. We boast in the Lord when we continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers. We boast in the Lord when we persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord. Finally, we boast in the Lord when we claim our destiny to be the physical Presence of the Good Shepherd in the world—partying like Jesus did with the wrong kind of people—as we proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ, seek and serve Christ in all people, love our neighbors as ourselves, strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

- 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?**

One of my parishioners is a bee keeper. Though all honey bees make honey, the taste of that honey is completely dependent upon the type of flower pollen available to the bees of each hive. Buckwheat honey will be dark with a taste similar to molasses. Clover honey will be lighter in color with a mild, delicate flavor. Orange blossom honey will possess fruity characteristics whereas lavender honey will have a distinct, herby flavor. Similarly, my passions and gifts of inspiring people towards a vision, preaching, teaching, youth ministry in camp settings, mentoring and caring for ministry leaders, administration, and the use of compelling liturgical moments for spiritual transformation have each

exhibited different “flavors” depending upon the ministry contexts in which I have served as a priest over the past three decades.

A call to the Episcopate would obviously change the location of my hive! However, I know that the Holy Spirit is faithful and will continue to use these gifts for the people of our diocese, surprising our tongues with new taste sensations that empower us to boldly serve the communities in which we live. If called to be your bishop, I also trust that this same Holy Spirit—who surprised me with the unexpected gift of delivering sermons effectively without the use of notes following my ordination to the priesthood—will surprise me once again by awakening new and unexpected episcopal gifts for the benefit of all our palates.

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

There have been key moments in my life when the Holy Spirit has hit me over the head with a two by four to get my attention.

Princess Diana’s funeral was one such moment. Though the Church of England’s burial liturgy was beautifully executed, the hundreds of thousands of people watching outdoors on massive screens in London remained restless until Elton John sang a special version of *Candle in the Wind*. That was the moment when the Holy Spirit blew over the crowd, inspiring them to sing so loudly that they could be heard by those inside the walls of Westminster Abbey. Using something familiar from the culture in that liturgy provided a portal through which the crowd became engaged with and connected to the sacred prayers and songs that followed. So when Diana’s body was carried out of the Abbey with boy choristers singing, “May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest...(where) the choir of saints have the well-spring of life, the door of paradise,” it was evident that those vast crowds had been touched by the Presence of God. And the Holy Spirit said, “Remember what happened here today.”

Another was the Friday after September 11, 2001. I was driving when I received a frantic call, asking how quickly I could come assist in the distribution of communion at the noon liturgy at our city’s downtown church. Normally the service would draw between ten to fifteen people during their lunch break. That day, five hundred were already present ten minutes before the Eucharist was to begin. The vast majority had no idea what was going on in the liturgy and it was clear to me that they desperately longed to participate in something familiar. I heard the Holy Spirit say, “Lead them in singing *America*.” So I suggested that to the Presider. Hard as it is to believe, his reply was that “We don’t have music at the Friday Noon Eucharist.” Despite my persistent and repeated attempts to change his mind, I was unsuccessful. I was tempted to defy him and announce the hymn, but my lack of courage prevailed. And the Holy Spirit said, “Remember what didn’t happen here today.”

Like others of my personality type, I highly value tradition and history. Because Jesus became a living presence in my life through the vehicle of Anglicanism, my natural inclination would be to fossilize the rich traditions of the Episcopal Church exactly as I received them. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit loves both me and the world enough not to allow me to take that course of action! She has taught me that to reach the people of our world, we have to begin with who they are and not who we are. She has forever dissolved for me the distinction between sacred and secular, teaching me that almost anything in our world (including the wonderful treasures of the Episcopal Church) can be a vehicle through which lives can be transformed by God’s love. And so each day, like a little child holding his mother’s hand, I trust Holy Spirit to lead me, inspire me, guide me, challenge me, delight me, and prod me to use both the riches of our culture as well as our tradition to creatively take my part in ushering in the glorious reign of God.

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

Eugene Peterson, in his translation of John 1, says “the Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” In each place that I have served, I have helped congregations to “move in the neighborhood” in order to introduce people to Jesus Christ.

In a Midwestern town it was adding a third service with rock music and screens in worship; blessing motorcycles, and opening a house next to the church’s property for community teens.

In a Charlotte church plant, it involved the strategic use of marketing, opening a free- standing spiritual center for community children located in a strip mall between a paint store and a dry cleaner, using musicians from local nightclubs and wedding bands, and utilizing screens to aid in liturgical participation, illustrating the gospel with current movie clips, and providing images for our prayers, including one of Osama Bin-laden as we prayed for our enemies and for Dale Earnhardt after he was killed on the race track.

In Portsmouth it has involved the creation of a YouTube channel and a vibrant online and social media presence (so that service members can engage with the parish while deployed and seekers can lurk before visiting); throwing parties for the wider neighborhood to provide pre-evangelistic points of connection with Christians and partnering with the local civic league to build community; creating and sustaining a vibrant Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and Catechumenal process to assist seekers of all ages to explore and deepen their faith; opening a Memorial Garden for anyone in the community who desires a beautiful and economical place to bury the remains of a loved one; hosting community concerts (including the only Virginia Arts Festival concerts for our city each spring); praying weekly for, funding, and tangibly ministering to our neighboring Children’s Hospice and Naval Hospital; providing leadership for an annual Santa breakfast for the children and grandchildren of our city’s police officers; and offering three distinctly different Sunday liturgical offerings to provide a wide diversity of ways in which people can connect with the sacramental life.

Through these visible civic engagements over the past eight years, and because I am personally involved in my neighborhood, I have also had the humbling privilege of becoming the “go-to clergy person,” called upon by my unchurched neighbors in times of crisis, including last rites for the dying and the burial of their loved ones who have died.

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?”

For me, Christian Social Justice is best expressed in the baptismal promises to “seek and serve Christ in all persons” and to “strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.” It, along with Human Needs Outreach, is about fulfilling the second great commandment: to love our neighbors as ourselves.

I have grown to love the people of Southern Virginia. I grieve for the brokenness I experience in our community, nation, and world. I hope you share in that grief. Christian Social Justice calls us to move from grief to action.

As bishop, I believe that I would be in a unique position to challenge, inspire, support, and lead the people of our communities into that action. To put it simply, I would encourage each of us to become like the title character in Dr. Seuss' book, *The Lorax*: "I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees for the trees have no tongues." Like Jesus, let us side with the oppressed and not the oppressor. Let us love, protect, and defend those who have no voice!

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?

For my entire priesthood the church has been talking about youth and the ever-changing culture and challenges they face. As our younger brothers and sisters in Christ grow up in an online world full of judgement and superficiality, I think the greatest gift we can offer them is participation in a community of faith that loves them unconditionally as they struggle to discover who they truly are.

Even though we have shifted confirmation closer to the more mature age of 16, and even though we know that multi-generational faith conversations are more fruitful than those that occur in isolated age groupings, it is rare to find communities where young adults are given the opportunity to strategically engage in deep faith conversations with other adults many years their senior. We proclaim in our canons that youth 16 years and older are adults in the Episcopal Church but we often only provide lip-service to their status as adults, rarely allowing them any real voice or power in decision-making. (Most church directories I see still even list college-aged members as "children" under their parents' listing!)

The youth I know are tired of Christianity becoming entangled and indistinguishable from the corrupt political systems of the world. They don't want to have to compromise their intellectual integrity and want a safe place where they can wrestle with tough questions and doubts. They want us to join them as they struggle with the real issues of bullying, gun violence, social justice, sexuality, privilege, and race. I think that they want our communities to be places where their LGBTQ friends can be welcomed, affirmed, and not be treated as second class citizens. I think that they want to be involved in the hard and messy work of social justice. I think that they want us to be more like Jesus, caring for our environment and for those that the world casts aside.

I think our temptation is to adapt in the wrong direction. I don't think that our youth are looking for the church to be "cool." They have been advertised to for their entire lives; the last place they want to be "sold" a product is at church. I think that they long for people who can help them connect faith to the reality of their everyday lives. I think they are looking for Jesus in baptism, communion, scripture, the suffering, the poor, the lonely, the marginalized, and in you and in me. In their challenges and longings, I think they call us to authentically worship and live more fully for the God we proclaim.

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?

My parents are 87 and 83 and my father-in-law is 90. My mom never allows people to know how old she is because she says that people who are perceived as old "become invisible" (her words). When she retired several years ago, people were shocked to discover how "old" she really was! Had my late mother-in-law's physicians seen her for the incredibly active adult she was instead of an "old woman," I believe that she would have recovered from her final hospital stay. Our culture values the new and young rather than the old and wise.

Currently in my parish I have one senior suffering from untreatable chronic pain. She asks me all the time why God won't just let her die. Were it not for the ministry of our congregation, another would have laid on the floor in pain for days with no way to reach anyone for help. A third suffers from early onset dementia and her family struggles to find the resources to keep her from being institutionalized. Our health care system is broken and many of our seniors struggle to balance medical costs with basic living expenses. Christian Social Justice demands that we advocate for these needs.

Over the years I have led numerous groups on religious pilgrimages. Rami, our guide in the Holy Land, loves to share how his multi-generational household supports one another. As children marry, the family simply builds an additional story on top of the house for the new couple. Children, parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents live together in community. In the midst of our culture, where nuclear families often live in isolation from one another, many of our seniors find themselves in a particularly fragile position. The Church is one of the few surviving institutions in our culture that respects the dignity of our seniors and offers the physical and spiritual benefits of a multi-generational community.

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?

One of the resolutions presented to last year's Annual Council included language declaring that "the primary community of the Episcopal Church is the Diocese" and that the "Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia is the Body of Christ in this region, made up of many members, called to do the kingdom-building work of Jesus" in mutual support and care for one another.

I experienced these words as being profoundly true during my tenure in the Diocese of Northern Indiana in the 1990s. I was the rector of the only Episcopal Church in four counties and with rare exception, most of my colleagues found themselves in similar ministry settings. Because of our common isolation, we longed to reach out to one another in order to build community and to find ways to support one another in our common mission. Our bishop, Frank Gray, was masterful in his ability to create an environment in which lasting friendships could be created among clergy and their families. My deepest friendships and happiest memories of adventures with my clergy peers remain from that era. Annual Councils offered opportunities for lay persons to work together, learn together, pray together, and party together. For all of us, the Diocese was a "we."

Other than that time in Northern Indiana, I hear most people referring to the diocese as a "they." Yet exciting ministries like Camp Henry and the Diocesan Catechumenal Process I was a part of years ago in the Diocese of Western North Carolina or the stellar rejuvenation of Chanco on the James in our own diocese today, give us brief glimpses of how exciting life can be as a "we."

In the Nineteenth Century, the Episcopal Church adopted as its name The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society and proclaimed each of us a missionary. For the Twenty-first Century, perhaps reclaiming this heritage might help us creatively discover more "we" moments in our common diocesan life. With what pronoun would we describe ourselves if we were able to build a loving community of Christians across Southern Virginia that played together, laughed together, learned together, worked together, and prayed together so that each diocesan ministry center and local congregation could effectively "move into the neighborhood," making disciples for Jesus Christ and serving those in need?

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 in the 21st Century occurs when leaders are able to articulate a shared purpose and then give people permission to take the necessary risks in order to accomplish that purpose in an ever-changing environment. Over my thirty years of priesthood, the Holy Spirit has refined my capacity to adapt to new circumstances and developed in me the maturity and stability necessary to nurture congregations to risk moving outside our walls into the neighborhood.

I have had extensive experience leading and addressing meaningful change. I have introduced processes to help unchurched adults embrace the Christian life. I have developed worship that is faithful to Anglicanism and connects with those for whom traditional Anglican worship does not often reach. But most significantly, I have helped numerous congregations go out from the doors of their buildings and follow Jesus into the neighborhood. For that is where I believe the Church is called to be in the 21st Century.

This process toward meaningful change takes time. Communities must first trust their leaders and that trust can only be built as leaders demonstrate their technical competence and build meaningful relationships among the individuals within that community. As I work to build those relationships and trust, I believe that people find me to be prayerful, loving, collaborative, reliable, patient, imaginative, observant, enthusiastic, loyal, hard-working, willing to give credit to others, and optimistic, always seeing the glass half-full rather than half-empty. But once we have built that community of competence and trust together, how then do we as a church risk trying something new?

I learned to shoot both a rifle and shotgun at Boy Scout summer camp. Both for the still target on the rifle range, and the clay pigeon on the shotgun range, I was taught “ready, aim, fire” as the sure way to always hit my target. In the world of Christendom, that approach also served us well. Since we could always see our target, all we had to do was aim correctly and our ministries would be successful. But in the post-Christian world, we can become afraid to fire because we don’t know where to aim and we don’t want to make a mistake. In this context, we need to learn a new “sequence.”

Before laser guidance was invented, artillery personnel were trained with a different shooting sequence: “ready, fire, aim.” They would prepare and fire the shot, look to see where the shell landed, and make adjustments before firing again. Many shells would be “wasted” adjusting their aim until they finally hit the target. Throughout history, significant advances only came after hundreds of misses.

Jesus says, “Little children, do not be afraid.” Let’s take some risk. Let’s fire away and allow the Holy Spirit to adjust our sights!

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 our baptism we promise to “proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ.”

Evangelism isn’t complicated. It simply means sharing our story of faith. We find it so easy to tell everyone about a new movie we have seen or a restaurant that we love. Why can’t we do the same for

the amazing things God has done for us in Jesus Christ? People aren't wanting us to be an expert in theology. People just want to know how Jesus has made a difference in our life.

Now I know as Episcopalians we can worry about being pushy. So an easy first step is to pray, "Lord send someone across my path today who will give me an opportunity to share something about my experience of you." You would be surprised the many different ways that God will answer that prayer!

As church communities, we must have an outward focus. For too long the Church has spent large amounts of energy on institutional management. Each of us has only so much time in a day. In the congregations I have served, we have worked hard to reduce institutional time demands so that members of the congregation have time to meet their neighbors, pray for their neighbors, and serve their neighbors. We also make it a priority to sponsor "pre-evangelistic" neighborhood gatherings where we can party with our neighbors! Conversations about faith will naturally occur as relationships grow.

For example, my current congregation hosts an annual Mardi Gras costume party for our community with authentic Cajun food and a live Jazz band. Who could have ever guessed that while dressed as a pirate I would be asked by a man in a lobster costume and a woman dressed as a flapper from the Roaring '20s to engage in a deep faith conversation! One of the two would die and rise with Christ in the waters of baptism; both would end up as members of our parish.

Modern adaptations of the ancient catechumenal process (in which people discover and explore new faith with others over an extended period of time) are invaluable tools the Church must use for evangelism and faith formation. The enthusiasm of those who come to faith or renew their faith not only inspires me but invigorates the entire congregation to reach out into our community once again.

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

For me, Human Needs Outreach is also expressed in the baptismal promises to "seek and serve Christ in all persons" and to "strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being." It, along with Christian Social Justice, is about fulfilling the second great commandment (to love our neighbors as ourselves) and Jesus' story of the Great Judgement in Matthew 25 (whatever you do to the least of these you do to me).

Although human needs outreach efforts might take place collectively in convocations or in a larger diocesan-wide effort, I envision that most of our work in this area will be uniquely fulfilled on the local missionary frontier of our congregations.

As bishop, I see my role as a permission-giving mentor, midwife, coach, and cheerleader. As much as I am physically able, I want to be with you in your communities, working alongside you, and affirming your work by offering a ministry of presence.

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?

We should struggle to be more diverse because many of our congregations do not reflect the wondrous diversity of our communities. We should struggle to be more diverse because by engaging those who are different from us, our perspectives are widened. We should struggle to be more diverse

so that we can have a clearer picture of the pain and suffering of our neighbors. We should struggle to be more diverse because at the last day we will join that vast multitude that no one can number, from every “nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9).

I recognize that I am a white male. I live in a community that is 53% African American and struggles daily with issues of race and injustice. I recognize that until our culture dismantles the notion that the “norm” is somehow white, male, and straight, progress in diversity will be difficult. However, I am blessed by a teenage daughter who continually challenges me to think differently and I actively work to listen to the experiences of women, people of color, and other groups to learn from them. As Bishop I would continue that important work of listening and actively insure that Diocesan leadership and events reflect the diversity of our communities.

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?

As a former church planter, I know the importance of living among the people God has called me to serve. For nine years I have lived with you and celebrated the wonderful leadership of Bishop Hollerith as he re-established trust among the people of our Diocese. It is a good foundation upon which to build at this exciting juncture in our diocesan life!

Over my thirty-year priestly ministry, I know what it is like to serve in a small church. I know what it is like to serve in a congregation that is on the periphery of Diocesan life. I also know the joy of being in a congregation that is included fully in the life and witness of wider diocesan life.

In my first three months as a new Bishop, I would want to:

- 1) Prepare for my responsibilities for Annual Council at the end of February
- 2) Have one-on-one conversations with each member of the clergy in our diocese to discover how I might serve them, their families, and the congregations in which they serve.
- 3) Establish a visitation schedule (both Sunday and weekday) that assures maximum annual coverage of the Diocese and meaningfully advances each congregation’s mission.
- 4) Host a gathering in each Convocation with my sisters and brothers in Christ.
- 5) Honor Bishop Magness’ ministry as our Bishop *pro tempore*.
- 6) In light of our bishop’s 2019 presence at Camp Chanco, plan with Chanco’s leadership how I might best support the 2020 Summer Session (including, but not limited to, assisting with programming and/or living on site).
- 7) Before pursuing conversations about budgets and funding, begin conversations about Diocesan mission and structure. Why do we do what we do? Is there a structure that might be more effective in serving our common life and mission?