



The Rev'd Kurt Dunkle

Rector, Grace Episcopal Church in Jacksonville, Florida

Family: Married to Cathleen; 2 daughters, Maddie (15) and Caroline (17)

Hometown: St. Petersburg, Florida

Seminary: General Theological Seminary

Pre-Collar Career: Lawyer — commercial and construction litigation and counseling

Tenure as a priest: 5 years

Favorite Movie: *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*

Most Recently Read: *A Failure of Nerve* by Edwin H. Friedman

Nominated by: The Rev'd Fred Devall (St. Martin's, Metairie); Ed Starns (St. Luke's, Baton Rouge); Ann Ball (All Saints, River Ridge); and the Rev'd Tom Blackmon (Christ Church, Covington)

What has led you to respond to this process for nomination to be the 11th Bishop of Louisiana?

Three reasons: (1) call, (2) gifts, and (3) challenge.

The call. A common thread with each of my callings in ordained life is being drawn from a place of contentment to a new level of leadership and engagement with God's people. When called to the priesthood, I was very reluctant to answer. Being a partner in a law firm suited me; I liked it and it liked me. But, God had other plans for my life. Plans which were not of my own making. Similarly, for my first call as a priest, I was drawn away from the appealing and expected track of parish ministry by agreeing to serve as Canon to the Ordinary in the Diocese of Florida. During that time of conflict after GC 2003, I helped lead the diocese away from schism and back toward systemic health. During that time, I experienced deep satisfaction as members of the diocese moved from conflict to ministering in concert with each other. With my current calling as rector of Grace, my initial reluctance to take on the challenge of re-building a parish where 965 out of 1,000 members departed due to conflict has been replaced by great joy and pleasure at watching that same Holy Spirit move again (now 400+ members with about 150 on Sunday, all after only three years).

Now, the call to participate in your discernment process repeats that pattern. While Grace continues to grow and there is great joy with sufficient challenges remaining for many years, after sincere requests from some of your clergy and lay people, I feel called by God to offer this episcopal ministry, which, at its heart, is a ministry of unifying vision.

The gifts. From your profile it seems my gifts match many of your needs. I am a builder. Sometimes the building is literal: a new pre-school building at Grace, repairing our diocesan finances, or creating a great parish youth ministry. But mostly building is metaphorical. It means building people. For Louisiana, it means building a healthy and visionary diocese so that leaders within the diocese have both the tools *and* the support to build congregations in both numbers (yes, numbers are important) and connection to Christ. It also means encouraging and supporting critical thinking in decision making, never forgetting that the bishop is chiefly a pastor to the greatest treasure of the diocese: its people. It means building Christian community, the Body of Christ. In each of my ministries, it has meant calling forth disparate gifts from unexpected places (including within me), all to create wholeness and health in Christ.

The challenge. I love to see what God is going to do next, particularly in tough times. When Grace needed a rector to rebuild the parish, it was enticing to see how God would work through all of us to rebuild the faithful in Orange Park. Similarly, the Diocese of Louisiana is now in a very challenging place of needing long-term sustainability in continuing the Katrina rebuilding effort together with strengthening traditional diocesan structures to serve — not to be served by — churches *all around* the diocese. The larger and challenging issues of streamlining and rebuilding on all fronts draws me further into your discernment process.

Tell us about your relationship with God. What in your own spiritual practice feeds your life with God and Christ's church?

I am a rather classical catholic (that is, universal) Christian. In my life, God has shown himself through the being of the Trinity. Not the doctrine, but as a good friend and mentor says, the *language* of how we describe God in his fullness: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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God the Father, creator of heaven and earth is almost incomprehensible. Yet he is accessible to me through his creation, the majesty of the world. While we see the creator dimly, we can see and experience creation brightly and clearly. This first person of the Trinity is best described not by his character, but by what he has done. As emphasized in Genesis, "God created...." Simply living in this wonderful part of his creation, the coastal South - my home - feeds much of this part of my life with the Father.

Jesus Christ, God's Son, is how God came to us most accessibly and how I relate to him most often. Most of my prayers begin, "Dear Jesus..." That conversation occupies the first hour of every day and continues, on the best of days uninterrupted throughout. Bridging both transcendence (big and far away) and immanence (close and personal), Jesus is truly God and truly man. This fact makes God both personally accessible to me and corporately accessible to the world as the church, in all its forms. For spiritual food from Jesus, my extended daily prayer, thrice-weekly Eucharists, monthly clergy support group meetings and diocesan clergy gatherings (yes, really) help me see the face of the Son of God. In summary, it is "church," the Body of Christ on earth, where I "live and move and have my being."

Finally, the Holy Spirit is that presence of God which reverberates throughout the world... and in my life. Its freshness never stops and "lightens with celestial fire" (Hymn 504) all in my path. It is the way I (and perhaps you, too) pray when words simply cannot express the depth of our need of God and we need the Holy Spirit's intercession (Romans 8:26-27). I always seem to be fed by the Holy Spirit in unexpected ways, but most usually when I reserve long, purposeful times (like on retreat) to hear that "still, small voice of calm."

Now, with all that said, we all default to one particular entry-point with God. None of us can keep the Trinity in perfect balance. For me, a story is illustrative...

Upon ending a spiritual retreat at a rural setting many years ago, one friend said that she was "so tired of hearing how everyone sees God in the trees and the butterflies and the silence of nature. I see God in cities full of people!" she cried. In an instant, I realized my connection with God. I see God in people. The more people, the more God. Church, in all its myriad forms (whether new members, old members, or those who don't yet realize the service to one another in which they are engaged is actually *church*), is where all those people reside. For me, "church" is not just an administrative convenience; it is that "wonderful and sacred mystery" (BCP 515) upon which the foundations of experiencing God are created, best maintained, and where I am most deeply fed.

If elected, what would your "I have a dream" speech for the diocese of Louisiana consist of?

I have a dream that the Diocese of Louisiana will continue to move through Good Friday and joyfully, confidently, and completely emerge at Easter. In other words, that Louisiana will be an "Easter Diocese."

No doubt, a formative event in the diocese — the *entire diocese*, not just New Orleans and environs - has been Hurricane Katrina. The violent ripping of the fabric of society was wide and deep and was felt everywhere. Decades and centuries of injustice were uncovered and laid bare by the receding flood waters. Everyone — the entire country — was affected. This was Good Friday and for many, still is.

But, however significant, Hurricane Katrina was not the only "Good Friday" in Louisiana. It happens constantly and in expected and unexpected places. It may find itself in lethargy of church growth in ways which are completely unrelated to destruction. It may be the failure to take advantage of population shifts without strategically thinking about church shifting and planting new congregations. Or, it can be the slow erosion of vitality and creative collaboration by diocesan lay and clergy leaders for a whole host of reasons. Good Fridays occur often and everywhere.

Yet, for Christians, Good Friday is never the last word. Jesus conquered sin and death then and still does today. We can dwell on past events of all kinds, reliving the big and small Good Fridays of our lives, or we can choose to spend our Holy Saturdays anticipating re-creation and set our face on Easter Sunday. I have a dream that we appropriately recognize and react to all the Good Fridays around us, and then move to celebrating the *resurrection* (not merely resuscitation) embodied in Easter. Easter lasts a lifetime for Christians... but only if we let it.

So, what are the hallmarks of an "Easter Diocese?"

First, hope. Hope in Christ that Good Friday is brief but Easter lasts forever. But more particularly, "sure and certain hope" that comes only through living a Gospel life. We live that out liturgically every year; we should live it out in our diocese, too. I have a dream that we continue to live in hope in Christ in this diocese.

An Easter Diocese is also a place where clergy leaders are constantly supported, strengthened, well compensated (yes, money counts, too) and encouraged so that they are *constantly* getting offers to go elsewhere... but never wanting to leave! It's a place where congregations, regardless of size or location within the diocese, live out faithfulness in unique ways, each with encouragement and respect from one another... and *each* to their full potential. An Easter Diocese creates overwhelmingly healthy clergy leaders.

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It is a place where resurrection visions run rampant. Visions of how we use the 92 new acres of Solomon Conference Center for fully engaged youth ministry both for individual churches and the entire diocese. Visions of God's people continuing to take a lead on rooting out systemic social injustice *at the same time as* the church in all its healthiest forms gets "back to business." It is a place where schism has no home and Episcopalians everywhere look at Louisiana and say "look how those Christians love each other... why can't we be like that?"

I have a dream that in Louisiana, our best 200 years are *ahead* of us.

What are the three most significant issues facing the Episcopal Church today? How do you see your leadership as it pertains to these issues?

First: Leadership, leadership, leadership. Our single greatest need as a church - whether in local parishes and missions, on the diocesan level as bishop and staff, or nationwide — is to identify, prepare, support and retain excellent (not merely good, but *excellent*) leaders in the church. Excellent leadership is a system-wide solution to most of the church's "issues." Solve the leadership issue and most of the others follow.

In a diocese, a bishop's role is to lead by example for the wider church family, but almost more importantly to make sure there are excellent leaders at every level throughout the diocese. Whether at the newly empowered Episcopal Community Services, recruiting and/or ordaining parish and mission clergy who are truly excited about life in the Episcopal church, or helping all people unfold the richness of their gifts to a hungry and waiting world, excellent leadership empowers those around them. Body building comes from developing energetic, joyful and visionary leaders, both lay and ordained.

Excellent leaders know that a healthy system is self-sustaining *and* lives within its means. Excellent leaders know the difference between stewardship and fund raising. Excellent leaders are always searching for the community vision, and casting their own as God leads them. Excellent episcopal leaders are guardians with enough precision to make our faith recognizable from one generation to the next, but with room enough to allow the prophets of the church to speak and act in a safe and protected environment. Excellent leaders create structures which succeed well after the leader departs.

It's that simple. Priority number one is to identify excellent leaders: men and women who will join me in facing the serious issues of our day with critical thinking, bold in hope and deep in prayer.

Second: Factionalization and Fractioning. Since the turn of the last millennium (that is, about 1054), the Body of Christ has spent an inordinate amount of time and energy splitting into factions in an ever-increasing pace. Sometimes over national boundaries; sometimes over theology; even more often over rote church-control. Yet, if we are serious about following Jesus' prayer to his father that "we all be one, just as you and I are one," despite our differences — sometimes even significant — factions thwart the Holy Spirit's ability to move among us and instruct the faithful.

For example, with the current hot-button issues about human sexuality, I have personally watched the Episcopal Church lose important voices in the worldwide debates because conservatives just leave the church. This results in greatly deteriorated discussion. Similarly, our more liberal brothers and sisters who see this season of change as "triumph" have unhelpfully contributed to the international angst and continued distancing. With factions and fractions, there is plenty of blame to go around, but nearly never enough grace. So, rather than stopping at step three of Matthew 18 regarding conflict resolution, we are called to proceed to the little-used step four: treating our members who disagree "as Gentiles and tax collectors." Thus, some controversies remain unsolved for generations, but in the interim we are instructed to draw the other *closer*, not push them away. Again, scripture is instructive for the entire church, not just one "side."

Third: Growth. See answer [to the next question].

How would you facilitate a renewal of the Great Commission in this diocese?

Simply put, Matthew 28:18-20 means growth in Christ *through* his body and *to* his body. The Great Commission was Jesus' last attempt to make sure the disciples knew their job in the church. Now it's our turn to translate this into *our* job.

The job of the bishop, in particular, is to make sure growth is happening. In other words, to keep the issue "hot." A wise person once said, "what you feed, grows. Be sure to feed the right things." The role of bishop is that of head gardener, keeping growth in numbers and spiritual maturity at the forefront of episcopal ministry and keeping the diocese well fertilized to encourage that growth.

Growth happens by making sure we authentically live out what we are and stop worrying about what we are *not*. Again, where we spend energy produces growth. The fact is that we attract 2-3% of the general population; let's make sure we capture 100% of that 2-3%! How? By being authentic to what we are: an Episcopal Church and not trying to be everyone else (you know, trying to out-Baptist the Baptists, or out-Roman Catholic the Roman Catholics, etc.). At Grace, truly being the Episcopal Church in all of its best forms has grown our Body quickly and deeply.

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At its core, we are a worshipping community, coming together in the name of Christ, being fed, and proceeding out to do amazing things in Jesus' name. For example, this year at Rally Day, we had ten baptisms at one service. A pretty good Great Commission day! In our case, Great Commission-style growth means identifying a need for a ministry to families with children with autism in our community, and then starting it (our Silent Flock ministry has grown to about 35 every month). Great Commission growth even means opening car doors in the morning at our day school. Great Commission growth means using all the opportunities available... and *never* being lazy. That's a key part.

Sometimes Great Commission-style growth means making brand new Christians from non-believers. But it also means interior growth, taking tepid believers — both inside and outside of our church — and setting them on fire. We can do it through rich and full liturgy which speaks directly to the soul in the poetry of movement, song and ritual, the fresh evangelism of Cursillo, diocesan-wide youth offerings at Solomon, or joining in God's re-creation of an entire society decimated by natural and man-made disasters. Beginning with the bishop — but never ending there — the Great Commission calls for Body building by boldly witnessing through our words and deeds to how God is acting in our lives.

Finally, the last line of the Great Commission is so important right now. Jesus says, "I will be with you always, to the end of the age." This oft-forgotten final admonition is rock-solid comfort. During this time characterized by anxiety in the wider church and world, Jesus assures us that we cannot screw up so badly that we are abandoned. That assurance is how people and institutions of varying theological and cultural viewpoints can live comfortably together. Whoever or whatever we are, Jesus has given the final word that he will always be there. We are not alone. This has shaped my leadership in the church.

What do you do to have fun?

To have fun, I like to be around people. That doesn't just mean that I "do well in social settings," but that I obtain, not spend, energy being around other people. As an example, after a hard day's work, I like nothing better than to invite people over for a drink and dinner. We like to entertain. From small parties with friends to hosting large, winter oyster roasts, getting together for a party is an important way to make and nurture relationships. For me and Cathleen, close contact with others is re-creation/recreation.

Being with people also means being with my family. I both like and love my family. We play well together. Whether it is traveling near or far, sitting on the beach during vacation, or just cooking in the kitchen and enjoying really long week-night dinners together at our round table, my family gives me energy. Every Monday (my day off), Cathleen and I take a several hour morning walk around the neighborhood, combining exercise and "marriage maintenance," and I often cook. The time with my family is truly a time of re-creation/recreation.

The builder part of me is nurtured by activities which create. I love to work in the yard and cultivate our garden. This is both a release (to experience the "instant gratification" of cutting the grass) and gives energy (to plant a new bed and participate in its maturity and beauty). I actually like to "putter" around the house, and when we had a boat, the ever-expanding jobs of marine maintenance gave a constant source of refreshment. I like to build things; it gives me energy.

To unwind, I like to read. But, since so much of my life has been spent reading about "serious" matters, to truly unwind, I choose fun magazines. Whether it's Travel and Leisure, Bon Appétite, or some boating magazine, flipping through pages of words and pictures meant to entertain lifts me away and allows me to relax, usually to the point of sleep. Which leads me to the final re-creation/recreational activity: sleep! I like to sleep.

Finally, I have to be frank. The idea of living in a diocese where eating good food with interesting people is almost considered a spiritual discipline may take primacy of place in my "what do you do to have fun?" category of the future. I thought I should disclose this potential weakness.



Fact: Kurt's two sisters are 15 and 17 years older than him; it was like growing up in a house with three mothers, he says.

Maddie, Cathleen, Caroline and Kurt