



The Rev'd Paul A. Johnson

Rector, Christ Church in Glen Allen, Virginia

Family: Married to Bernadette; 3 children, Samuel (18), Thomas (16), and Peter (14)

Hometown: Born in Hinsdale, Illinois

Seminary: Yale Divinity School

Pre-Collar Career: High school history teacher

Tenure as a priest: 18 years

Favorite Movie: *The Mission, Saving Private Ryan, Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *It's a Wonderful Life* and anything that makes me laugh.

Last Book or Currently Reading: *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* by Jon Meacham

Nominated by: The Rev'd James Quiqley (St. George's, New Orleans); the Rev'd Scott Albergate (St. Paul's, New Orleans); the Rev'd Michael Kuhn (Trinity, New Orleans); and Stephen Braud (St. Matthew's, Houma)

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

I am responding to this process because the Diocese of Louisiana is ideally situated to play a vital role in the future of the Episcopal Church. The Diocese of Louisiana — with its two distinct urban areas; its mix of rural and city communities; its history and self-understanding; and its diverse richness of cultures and traditions — has the chance to be a model for the rest of the Episcopal Church of what it means to be a vibrant and growing people of God in the 21st-century.

I've the good fortune to have some connections with Louisiana. I once spent time in New Orleans studying the community of early jazz musicians. And one summer long ago I was a deckhand on a towboat pushing barges up and down the Mississippi River. It's quite a view of Baton Rouge when your boat is headed south on the river, and you make that bend in the river just north of the city.

And like others, I have been inspired by your response to Katrina. You got to work quickly, and helped others get to work quickly. My sense is that Louisiana is a people that knows what it is like to die and be resurrected; what it is like to have nothing to depend on except Christ and one another; what it means to have our pedestrian concerns replaced by a true understanding of Kingdom life and what matters most.

So I respond because Louisiana has the opportunity to lead the Episcopal Church into a new era. Massive cultural changes mark our world, and they deal to our strengths. The Lord is pitching us a high hanging curve ball, and it's time to swing away. We have been given all the resources to respond meaningfully. We are an historic faith; we love scripture; we appreciate mystery and beauty; we recognize the paradoxical nature of faith and Christian practice; we are open, and relish freedom; we are sacramental, and believe that God can use everything everywhere to reveal God's love and presence and call. And we love Jesus.

A great future is before the Episcopal Church, and I want to be part of it. It will ask us to try things differently, take risks, and challenge our assumptions. We'll make mistakes, because mistakes happen when we take a different path. It will ask us to die daily to ourselves, and live for Christ; to pick up our cross and follow even more ardently, remembering that doing so is impossible when we hold onto our baggage. There is no virtue in playing it safe. Courage, perseverance, and trust will be rewarded deeply.

Those are all truths the Diocese of Louisiana knows and has lived. I respond to this process because of the strength and trust this people has already demonstrated, and because of the opportunities that are uniquely before us. Most certainly it is true — whoever is called to work with the people of Louisiana among these new possibilities is a most blessed and fortunate servant.

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

My relationship with God is based in a fundamental and on-going experience: Life is better when Jesus is in it. It's not perfect, easier, or without pain. But it is better. Because of Christ, there is more love, and joy, and mercy, and hope, and peace, and responsibility in my life than there would be otherwise. Because of Christ, I get to dwell in eternity, and work for eternal purposes.

I rejoice that the Lord changes lives, and asks the best of God's people. Jesus did not say to those fishermen so long ago "as you were." He said, "Follow me." He did not come to make our life more comfortable, but came to bring in the Kingdom. Choose to carry a cross, and our shoulders get sore and we get splinters in our fingers. Sometimes, the faithful life is downright agonizing, and we wonder...

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But goodness...a life lived in relationship with Christ is richer, and more exciting, and more compelling, and more colorful. It is ridiculously joyous that the Lord has entrusted us with this Gospel, and asks of us everything. We — the Church — are the ones who have an eternal reason to get out of bed every morning. Because we have a God we can trust, and who promises that life is always victorious over death, and that when things seem dark there is still a brightness around the edges. Always the Lord is loving, calling, forgiving, equipping, and sending us into the world in peace with all the strength and courage we need to love and serve with gladness and singleness of heart. And there isn't a place we can go, to cite the psalmist, where the Lord won't be there.

Still, there are practices the Church has experienced that help us "get in God's way." I do believe faith — trust, really — is something we practice. We keep at it, when it's easy and when it's difficult, so that we are ready for the crucial moments of action. For me, these are some training methods that help me stay in God's way and stay in practice:

- To linger in the scriptures daily;
- To connect with the Lord regularly in personal prayer;
- To be in meaningful fellowship with family and friends who listen without judgment and speak the truth in love;
- To serve others outside my own congregation;
- To observe Sabbath, as best I can;
- To see if I can find something to laugh about each day, for this life we've been given is way too important to take too seriously;
- And, of course, to be regular in worship and participation in the Sacrament.

There are others, but these are the practices that matter for me. It's good for each of us to practice the disciplines that help us be connected. Because when we're connected, we're made ready. And when we're ready, God makes us able for whatever is it the Lord has in store for us next.

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

In 1957 Martin Luther King, Jr. first spoke of "the Beloved Community" in a newsletter of the newly-formed SCLC. It was a vision of a community marked by shalom, mercy, justice, love, service, and full relationship.

This transforming vision was formed not at the center of our nation's life — not in Washington or New York — but at the edges. It was born of struggle and injustice, out of suffering and pain. It is another testament to how out of the worst God creates the best.

This worthy vision has captured our attention. It has created both discomfort and energy. It makes us less likely to sit off by ourselves, satisfied with what is. Born of a time when the waters were so deep we could not touch bottom, it has revealed that there is more to our future than "what we've always done;" that we are called to the adventure of new things; and that it truly is possible for the people of God to help transform the world for Christ.

The Diocese of Louisiana has been a witness. Now...in these difficult times for our tradition...the challenge is before us of applying this vision of transformation not just to the world, but to the Church we love. We are proving that we will do just about anything to serve the world. Jesus smiles upon that dedication. Now, are we also willing to do just about anything to serve the Church?

It is a great time to take a chance; to imagine new ways of raising up new leaders; to consider how best to provide and seek the training and teaching necessary to speak to a new world; to move beyond conversations about how to include and begin the conversations of how to invite and reach; to seek new ways of starting new churches that model the life of the beloved community; to imagine a structure for our common life that affirms this basic truth of the Church: that a diocese is a people, and its primary work happens when we show up to work on Monday morning, or get up in the middle of the night to change our child's diaper.

These are the opportunities to engage, not by our own might or power, but by the Spirit of God.

When we go to sleep tonight, may we remember that we have a holy covenant with the people of Louisiana. When the first Protestant church was established in the Louisiana Purchase, it was the people of Louisiana who chose us. In accepting their choice, we made a compact with them...that no matter what, we would be their church. We have a responsibility to live into reaching out and seeking the lost, forming them as disciples, and then teaching to live as Jesus lives. It is a responsibility placed upon us not just by Jesus, but by our history with Louisiana.

And if ever there was a generation equipped to live into this responsibility and vision, it is 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?

The issues and challenges facing the Episcopal Church today are legion. Among them are numerical decline; declining material resources; a loss of our voice to younger generations; fracturing within our own Church, and between the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion; the resolution of our discernment regarding the place of persons in same-gender relationships in the life of the Church.

Mostly, however, I believe these are symptomatic of greater challenges. Therefore, a way forward may look something like this:

Unleash our people. The Church is the people of God, gathered and sent. The best ideas for reaching others and serving others almost always come from the people of the Church. A diocese is a people, and it is the people living their lives in the world who best know their neighborhood, their neighbors, and what works.

Therefore, a vital element in any bishop's leadership is knowing and loving the people they serve (which is every person in the diocese); being present; ensuring the diocesan structure is responsive to congregational initiatives; creating means for training; and saying "yes."

Unleash our imagination and creativity. We are in a time of discontinuous change. The path by which we will move beyond our challenges is not a path of trying harder, or doing the same things better, or giving new answers. Instead, the path is marked by asking new questions and trying things differently and allowing our imagination and creativity to be made free.

Therefore, a vital element in any bishop's leadership is asking good questions; valuing innovation; and looking to the edges, for it is around the edges — in places often hidden from plain view — that the most exciting and creative work and ministry is being done.

Unleash hope, and release our fears. The Episcopal Church faces challenges. No doubt about it. To pretend that we don't is to hide our head in the sand. But fear makes us clutch. We retreat into a fortress mentality, trying to protect what we have by doing and saying what we know. We place limits on ourselves. But there is nothing to fear. This is a great time to be an Episcopalian. It is the time for which we have been prepared. We have not been brought this far for no purpose. We have a unique and vital role to play in the spiritual life of Louisiana, this nation, and the world, and already, because God is good, how we might do that is emerging.

Therefore, while a bishop is to guard the unity and discipline of the Church, they are also to guard the faith (BCP 517). They keep it. They keep trust in God, and remind others to keep trust in God. They encourage, and proclaim hope as much as they proclaim love. And they find some way to say to someone every day: "Nothing is impossible with God."

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

First, we celebrate the best parts of our heritage as Anglicans: Our ancient tradition; sacramental worship; common prayer; incarnational theology; open hearts and spirit of inclusiveness; an appreciation of paradox; and the experience of joy in mystery and beauty.

And we celebrate the best parts of our heritage as the Diocese of Louisiana: Our responsiveness to human need; care for those around us; spirit of hospitality; and the practice we have acquired helping others to help. We claim all the things we are already doing to live out the Great Commission.

Were I called to serve, a next step to facilitate this renewal would be to visit (outside of a Sunday visitation) every congregation and worshiping community in the Diocese of Louisiana in order to spend time with clergy, leadership, and people; to drive or walk around the places in which we minister; to eat a meal where people in the community eat meals; to listen, learn, and ask questions such as "What's the most exciting thing your congregation is doing?" "What are your greatest joys, and your greatest concerns?" "How can the diocesan structure help your congregation fulfill its vision for ministry?"

Through these visits and any appropriate formal discernment and visioning process, we would discover what God is asking us to do. Then, armed with this common vision, we develop identifiable strategies and goals for what we believe God is asking to accomplish.

As well, for the sake of all involved, it is essential for anyone considering a call to the episcopacy to be clear about the godly passions and purposes to which one is willing to devote their energies. Mine look something like this:

- Effective and powerful ministry by, with, to, and for young people of all ages. It may be Louisiana could be the diocese known for having a youth minister attached to every congregation; and even, that we could be the people that trains youth ministers for the entire Church.
- Effective diocesan ministry of teaching, training, and preparing the people of the Diocese of Louisiana to be kingdom-bringers where they are in this new era. Possibly this could be done within the framework of the already established School for Ministry. If not, we create another method that will achieve the same goal.

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- Development of new ways of recognizing and raising up new leaders in the Church, especially among young adults. In particular, we seek out and call persons with an entrepreneurial and missional spirit.
 - Affirm and encourage the mission and the ministry of the churches and the Church through a diocesan structure that is transparent, effective, efficient, and aligned with our common priorities.
- Finally, we smile upon mistakes and “failures.” Both are evidence that we are engaging the future with vigor and resolve. And we remember that from as far back as the beginning, a bit of foolishness for Christ goes a long way.

What do you do to have fun?

My greatest pleasure is being with my family...watching a movie together, because just being around them is a joy...or taking the dog for a walk with my wife, for it seems that it is when walking the dog that we talk most about what matters...or taking ballroom dance lessons with my wife because it's always fun to dance.

For exercise, I like to run. And yes, I find running fun.

I like being outside, but I'm not outside often enough. A perfect vacation for me is a week at the beach.

I've had the opportunity to travel some, and enjoy it. The most exciting places have been the unusual places. I've been graced to be on foreign mission to Sudan, Peru, and the Dominican Republic, and value the connections God has created there.

I read a fair amount. Sometimes, it's reading that relates to life in the Church. But when reading solely for fun I read history and biographies, along with the occasional novel.

Reading the newspaper is a simple daily pleasure, but I read the sports section first. Tony Stewart is my favorite driver, and I've been part of a fantasy baseball league for fifteen years without ever winning a thing.

I've played the string bass since I was fourteen, and if I could listen to only one composer for the rest of my life it would be Beethoven. Better than anyone else, I believe, he balanced both passion and form.



Bernadette, Peter, Samuel, Thomas and Paul

Fact:

Paul plays electric bass in a band called **The Rockin' Samaritans**. He says they miss a few notes here and there, but the band is loud and has fun – and that's what matters most when it comes to rock n' roll.