



The Rt. Rev'd Michael G. Smith
Bishop of the Diocese of North Dakota

Family: Married to Lisa; 3 children, Hannah (27), Luke (25) and Mary Beth (22)
Hometown: Purcell, Oklahoma; lives in between White Earth Ojibwe Indian Reservation in northwestern Minnesota and Fargo, North Dakota.
Seminary: Seabury-Western
Pre-Collar Career: Professional lay minister in congregations as a musician, liturgist, Christian educator, outreach coordinator and campus minister
Tenure as a priest: 12 years before becoming a bishop 5 years ago
Favorite Movie: *The Shawshank Redemption, Field of Dreams, Places in the Heart, Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and Rudy.*
Most Recently Read: *The Associate* by John Grisham and *A Generous Orthodoxy* by Brian McLaren
Nominated by: The Rev'd Andrew Rollins, (St. Alban's, Baton Rouge); Deacon Dick Almos (Christ Church, Slidell); Lily Wamer (Mt. Olivet, New Orleans); and Sharon Edmon (St. Luke's, Baton Rouge)

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

I've had the good fortune and privilege of serving in Louisiana as a part-time assisting bishop the past two years. After Bishop Jenkins announced his resignation, a number of laypeople, deacons and priests of the Diocese of Louisiana approached me about being nominated. Initially, I thanked them and shared my reservations about whether God might be calling me to serve here or not, but promised to pray about it.

Then other bishops from around the church with ties to Louisiana began to encourage me to enter the process. After the economic downturn and the realization in the Diocese of North Dakota that some drastic decisions needed to be made in order to ensure its future viability, I began to ask my immediate and extended family members what they thought about the possibility of my serving as the bishop of Louisiana. To a person they were at least open and some very encouraging. No one said no. It was at this point that I received an invitation from yet another diocese to enter their search process and began to seriously wonder if God was up to something in terms of a change in my call.

I then formed a "discernment committee" comprised of some trusted North Dakotans to help me think and pray through these matters. At this point, I can say with certainty that I believe I am called to be part of this episcopal election process. I will trust the Holy Spirit's call extended through the Electing Convention this December. If elected I will serve with the confidence that God has called me to serve as bishop in this place and time, trusting that "all things work for good" (Romans 8:28) for those in North Dakota I am concerned about leaving.

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

I was raised as a Roman Catholic in Oklahoma. During my grade school years I was catechized, taught about Jesus, the Ten Commandments and experienced the transcendence of God the Father in the sacraments and liturgy of the Church. (I actually had a very powerful experience of God's forgiveness that has remained with me to this day while confessing my sins to a priest during the third grade!)

In high school I was challenged by Southern Baptist friends to accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior in order to escape the pains of hellfire. While I never actually gave in and answered one of their altar calls publicly, I do admit to praying the "Sinner's Prayer" in private, just in case they were right. In hindsight, I have to give them credit for evangelizing me by introducing me to a personal relationship with Jesus and the Bible as God's word-written.

While in college, my spiritual journey took a two-fold path down the roads of charismatic renewal and working for peace and justice. The former taught me about the Holy Spirit, the joy of praise and the power of healing; the latter about the peace and satisfaction that comes from the hard work of a life lived in service to the poor.

Looking back, I can see how God was at work revealing himself to me as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I can also identify how I was being fed by the three streams of Anglicanism: Catholic, Evangelical and Liberal. This eventually led me to service in the Episcopal Church, a place where I expect to have access to all the gifts and traditions of the Christian faith.

Two of my favorite saints are St. Benedict and St. Dominic. From Benedict and his followers, the Benedictines, I have learned to value *lectio divina* (sacred reading of scripture), moderation, balance and keeping "appointments" with God throughout the day, especially during times of stress and busy-ness. From Dominic and his Order of Preachers, I am learning to live the spirituality of a

answer continued on next page

preacher in terms of prayer, study and preparation for one of my great joys, Sunday preaching.

I strive to be faithful to daily prayer: Morning Prayer using the Daily Office lectionary with a form of general and very specific intercessions (when I say I'll pray for you, I put you on my list), and Evening Prayer using the readings for the coming Sunday to prepare for preaching. I like to be a daily communicant as often as possible, but would prefer to sit in the pews rather than serve as celebrant for daily services of Holy Communion.

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

My dream for the Diocese of Louisiana is that it be:

- A church in which the mission of the church to restore unity with God and one another undergirds everything we do.
- A church where Jesus Christ is presented, both inside and outside our congregational doors, in such ways that people are led to receive him as Savior and follow him as Lord in the fellowship of the Church.
- A church in which service to the poor and works of charity and justice are viewed as essential parts of the Gospel.
- A church in which all baptized members recognize their call to ministry both in the church and in the world.
- A church whose congregations see themselves as mission outposts of one body.
- A church whose schools are not only excellent centers of learning but vehicles through which the Good News of Christ and his kingdom are shared.
- A church where deacons coordinate parishioners in acts of service outside the doors of our congregations.
- A church that emphasizes campus ministry as important vehicles of evangelism and church growth.
- A church that continues to engage in vibrant and life-changing prison ministries, both for the benefit of inmates and those who serve them.
- A church that continues to be an example to the world of joyful mission and the power of the resurrection after Katrina.
- A church where a renewed Cursillo or Alpha or whatever movement the Holy Spirit provides next for conversion and renewal is part of our lifeblood and that each of our members has experienced a transforming experience with God in Jesus Christ.
- A church where members gather regularly for bible study.
- A church where members tithe or are working towards the tithe as the basic standard of financial giving.
- A balanced church where liberals, evangelicals and catholics share their unique theological gifts and are moderated in their excesses.
- A church that continues to be a constituent member of both The Episcopal Church and the worldwide Anglican Communion.
- A church where youth ministry as a form of evangelism and spiritual formation is a priority.
- A church where worship of any style is conducted with quality and sincerity of heart.
- A church where growth in discipleship is considered normal.
- A church whose preachers inspire and motivate.
- A church where all "sorts and conditions" of people are welcome and "saints from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9) are included and in evidence.
- A church that is flexible enough so that congregations of all sizes have the freedom to organize for ministry and mission in ways that are sensible for different contexts.
- A church where the Gospel is proclaimed both in its personal and social dimensions.

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

This summer I read Phylis Tickle's popular book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Baker Books). She makes the observation that massive transitions in the church happen about every 500 years and that we are in the midst of one such upheaval currently. Basically, Tickle tells us not to despair because history teaches that when these changes take place three results typically occur: 1) a new, more vital Christianity emerges; 2) the formerly dominant expression of Christianity is reconstituted and renewed, and; 3) the Christian faith spreads into new geographic and demographic areas. I believe that three of the most important issues facing the Episcopal Church today during this time of upheaval are the Anglican Communion Covenant, Mission and the Making of Disciples.

Anglican Communion Covenant

In my opinion, an important learning and realization for those who have been able to stand back for a moment, from both sides of the fierce rhetoric and often unfair characterizations around the sexuality debate in our Church and the Anglican Communion, is that this turns out not really to be about sex at all or even inclusion, but rather about ecclesiology and the nature of

answer continued on next page

the church. In other words, the “presenting issue” of appropriate pastoral care for persons who experience themselves as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender, has raised a bigger and more foundational question about who we are as a church and how we go about discerning together the mind of Christ for this and other important questions we will face in the future.

In short, we are at the point in our history where Anglicans worldwide (and I’ve always used the words “Episcopal” and “Anglican” synonymously) are faced with a choice of remaining a “communion” of “interdependent” churches or becoming a “federation” of “independent” churches. I am most definitely in the “communion” camp and have taken a stand to remain a constituent member of both The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, those churches in communion with the See of Canterbury. This is not a popular position, however, when some are choosing to leave the Episcopal Church and form a new denomination and others, by their actions, are choosing to walk apart from the Anglican Communion.

It is for the unity of the Church for which Jesus prayed and its effectiveness in global mission that I believe the Holy Spirit has used the Anglican Covenant process to begin to bring order out of our ecclesiastical chaos. My participation in the “Communion Partners” initiative, with roots in the Presiding Bishop’s invitations to bishops to serve for purposes of Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight and affirmed by the Archbishop of Canterbury at last year’s Lambeth Conference as “the way we should go if we want to avoid further ecclesial confusion,” is for the purpose of supporting the adoption of the Anglican Communion Covenant as the way forward together through the divisions that threaten to divide us permanently. If called to serve as your bishop, I will ask the Diocese of Louisiana to study the final draft when it is released, and through the diocesan convention to endorse the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant and to urge its adoption by General Convention.

Mission

For a depressing read, try the recent Blue Book report of the House of Deputies Committee on the State of the Church. Using our own statistics, with few exceptions, it charts the institutional decline of The Episcopal Church since 2003. There is a notable bright spot, however:

“In August 2005 the most severe natural disaster to affect the United States, Hurricane Katrina, devastated areas of Louisiana and Mississippi and resulted in the greatest relief and redevelopment work this country and church have ever experienced. Financial and volunteer response from The Episcopal Church was overwhelming as divisive issues were put aside and volunteers worked together to begin rebuilding. The sense of internal mission dominated differences of opinion, and The Episcopal Church became one church in mission.”

This may well be one of the enduring redemptive legacies to come out of the tragedy of Katrina for the whole church. Locally, it is with joy that I have been able to visit All Souls’ Church in the Lower Ninth Ward and to witness a re-visioning and re-organization of Episcopal Community Services as the Office of Disaster Response and its work of redevelopment and justice continues under the banner of ECS.

In 1985 I earned a master’s degree in social work, thinking I might one day serve the church as a deacon, earning a living as a social worker. As a bishop who believes in “sequential” ordination rather than “direct,” I still consider myself a “deacon” and in my ministry have worked to encourage the diaconate as a vital component of a church in mission. We will need more ordained deacons, not to do the work themselves, but to organize and encourage all our baptized members in ministries of service and justice outside the doors of our congregations. I have spent most of my ordained ministry living in communities of poverty, specifically on Indian reservations. I wholeheartedly agree with the Psalmist, that the Lord does indeed “hear the cry of the poor” (Ps. 12:5).

Making Disciples

At General Convention 2003 there was a wonderful resolution (A-135) adopted encouraging all Episcopalians “to develop a personal spiritual discipline that includes, at a minimum, the holy habits of tithing, daily personal prayer and study, Sabbath time, and weekly corporate worship.” Particularly, at this time in history when mainline churches are declining, “nominal” or “casual” Christianity is no longer working for us. We need to be about the business of making real “disciples” who are committed to Christ and his Gospel and who “work, pray and give for the spread of God’s kingdom” in this increasingly secularized and post-modern world in which we find ourselves.

Although I consider myself an “evangelical catholic,” the focus of making disciples is fruitful across the theological spectrum. Barbara Butler Bass, in her book “The Practicing Congregation,” charts what she calls “retraditioning” in mainline denominations. It seems that both liberal and conservative Christians are re-discovering long forgotten spiritual disciplines and practices, resulting in the renewal of congregational life.

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

First of all, I would call us to prayer. All of the great and fruitful evangelistic efforts of history have been undergirded by prayer, beginning with a “novena” in the upper room before the apostolic proclamation of Jesus as Lord on the first Christian Pentecost. After we hear from the Holy Spirit a word about to whom and where we are to go, I would see it as part of my job to hold us accountable and keep us faithful to this calling.

We Episcopalians get “evangelism” right on paper. Our official definition, adapted from the writings of Archbishop William Temple, was first adopted by General Convention 1973 and re-affirmed in 1991: “Evangelism is the presentation of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in such ways that persons may be led to believe in him as Savior and follow him as Lord within the fellowship of his Church.” This definition is actually closer to the Roman Catholic understanding of “evangelization” than to traditional protestant “evangelism” because its focus is not simply to get people “saved,” but also to incorporate “saved” people into the fellowship of the Church.

One of my favorite books on the topic is “The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again” by George Hunter. In this work the writer contrasts the traditional “Roman” method of evangelism with the “Celtic” of the British Isles between the fifth and tenth centuries. He notes that when the Celtic Christians adapted monasticism to Ireland, it organized not to retreat from the masses for the individual salvation of the monk, but rather to be near the people with whom they wished to share the faith of Christ — an “incarnational” and communal approach to evangelism.

He goes on to cite the “Alpha” program as a contemporary form of Celtic evangelism where a “seeker” and his or her questions are invited into the community for discussion and inquiry, before they are invited to faith and belief. I have wondered about the possibility of a diocese synchronizing its calendars so that Alpha takes place at many sites during the fall, perhaps with a joint diocesan-wide “Holy Spirit” weekend. In the springtime, during Lent and Easter, the focus would turn to the rites of the catechumenate as the Church baptizes and confirms, incorporating its newest members into our missional life of worship, service and evangelism, beginning the cycle again.

What do you do to have fun?

I enjoy: reading; being lazy; going to movies; socializing with friends; following college sports; spending time with my family at our lake house; cooking out; eating out; playing with our three grandsons.

Before I became a bishop and had more time, I used to enjoy gardening, working in the yard and playing the piano. These are pursuits I hope to take up again one day.



Michael and Lisa with their daughter, Mary Beth, and grandsons Max, Sam and Charlie

Fact:
Michael is an enrolled tribal member of the Potawatomi Nation of Oklahoma.