

Bonnie Perry: Answers to Questions

Explain why you feel called to be a bishop; including your discernment process and what you learned from it. What special gifts underscore your call to the Diocese of Minnesota specifically?

I feel called to enter this discernment process because of your description of who and what you are seeking in your next bishop. I am a visionary, entrepreneurial leader. I have a proven record of creating new systems, pastoring and connecting people, and I thrive on gathering individuals to design compelling ministries that embody the Gospel and change people's lives. Frequently these gifts are not best used in the office of the bishop, because most dioceses are seeking someone to manage the status quo or at best to re-package the status quo. When I was nominated for Bishop in the Diocese of California I was intrigued by the search committee's desire to reach beyond their church walls to engage with people who had no connection to the church as it existed. However, in the course of the walkabouts, it became clear to me that I was not the individual God was calling and the people were longing to elect. One comment in particular seemed indicative to me. One man said, "You don't even look like a bishop—how can I vote for you?" I nodded, took a deep breath and replied, "I may not look like a 20th century bishop and I certainly don't look like a 19th century bishop, but there is every possibility that a 21st century bishop might bear some resemblance to me."

In the intervening time I have turned down other invitations to participate in Episcopal search processes. Until yours, I have not read a compelling diocesan theology. I am also aware in the current worldwide Anglican climate it may be very difficult for me, an out, partnered lesbian, to be elected and/or to receive consents. That said I am entering this discernment process now because I was invited and because your vision of a spiritually transformed, culturally appropriate, networked diocese has made me cry with hope for what could be.

Lastly, I am an avid sea kayaker. I will not move to a place that does not border on an ocean or an inland sea. One of your 10,000 lakes happens to be my favorite body of water in the world—Gitchigumi. And, I know that Caribou Coffee makes a better latte than Starbucks.

The diaconate is a major pillar of the Diocese of Minnesota. What has been your experience in supporting, encouraging and making use of the diaconate?

At All Saints' we firmly believe that the Gospel only matters so much as we live it in a way that people's lives are changed. This congregation that had fewer than 30 people on a Sunday experienced its rebirth, its resurrection, through a deep abiding passion for and commitment to outreach ministries. Matthew 25:35, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me..." is the operative theology of our congregation. I see this theology as the cornerstone of the diaconate. I also believe it has to be foundational for the Church in the 21st century. No matter how small, how large, how urban or rural our congregations may be—connecting with people in need, assisting people in distress, using our gifts given to us by our Lord so that we bit by bit alter the landscape of this world; that is the call of Christianity. The 21st century church must be diaconal in its outlook and focus—using the gifts of all who gather, baptized and non-baptized, laity and clergy alike to serve all people, 'particularly the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely,' (BCP p 543).

Currently, I am in an on-going conversation with two people discerning calls to the diaconate. One fellow is such an embodiment of a deacon, being so outreach focused and humble he has had an extraordinarily difficult time even picturing himself ordained. Saying as he moves boxes and boxes of USDA surplus food, “I just show up to help—let me think about it some more.” For more than four years I have been placing the question before him. I am hoping that this will be the year he finally embraces the possibility. The other fellow splits his time between Chicago and Montana. For him, time in one place to do the required coursework is something of an impediment—by no means insurmountable but a stumbling block just the same. It is my hope that the time will come when each of these men will augment their justice ministries with the concurrent liturgical ministries of proclaiming the Gospel, leading the prayers, assisting at the table and dismissing the faithful.

Presently 38 congregations have embraced total ministry. What experiences have you had with total ministry parishes? What would your ideas be to support and strengthen that movement in Minnesota?

In my work with small and large, rural, suburban, and urban congregations in Minnesota, Michigan, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Illinois, I have invited faith communities to internalize the theological perspective that is central for Total Ministry. Ministry is not done to or for people. Successful ministry is always done with people, for the Kingdom of God. Each and every one of us, lay, ordained, baptized or non-baptized is made in the image and likeness of God. Each and every one of us has been given one or more gifts from God that we might use to bring God’s commonwealth one step closer. Thus, a compelling aspect of Total Ministry is the clear statement that meaningful ministry, sacramental or otherwise, is not limited by the absence of on-site, seminary trained ordained leadership. That said, a limiting aspect of Total Ministry is the belief that ministry begins with the baptized. I believe that ministry begins with people. Time and time again I have seen un-churched young people at All Saints’ use their God-given talents for ministry and as a result ask to be baptized. Ministry is a gift from God to all for all. Our faith communities, whatever their shape or ecclesiastical structures, must have space for all people to discover, affirm and use their gifts. Furthermore, I am convinced that this form of ministry only works when everyone in the network fully embraces the veracity of this ministry.

To strengthen this ministry, in the first six months of my tenure as bishop, I would visit every faith community where total ministry is being practiced (some on the weekend and some during the week) so that I might personally hear what’s working, what’s not, what’s longed for and what’s lacking. Then drawing from the canon missionary’s insights and the formal and informal diocesan networks I’d want to gather all interested people and affected parties for prayer and conversation and next steps. Following this I would invite everyone currently involved and anyone interested to travel with me to the next national Living Stones gathering—so that all of us may have a common vocabulary and touchstone experience to undergird the coming year of work and ministry.

Our diocese has varied ethnic and cultural components: American Indian, African American, Hmong American, Spanish Speaking Americans, and GLBT. What has been your experience in working with these groups? What is your vision to strengthen and support these ministries?

Profound inclusivity and radical hospitality are two of the gospel ideals the All Saints’ community strives to embody. One of our parishioners, Lillian Calhoun, the first African American woman to work the Metro desk at the Chicago *Sun-Times* said when she was looking for a church, “I came to All Saints’ because someone told me, ‘try All Saints, they have one of everything there’...” Ours is a dynamic community of faith reflecting the diversity of our neighborhood. On Sundays our

congregation is predominantly white, with a number of Asian and bi-racial families. Our Tuesday evening community is split among African American, Latino, Native American, Filipino and individuals of Anglo descent. While the majority of our families are heterosexual, we also have a number of gay and lesbian families with children.

I am in my third term on the Local School Council (LSC) for the nearby public school. Ravenswood Elementary's population is 75% Latino and 10% African American. More than 80% of the children come from families living at or below the poverty level. The school is nestled among single-family homes that were until recently selling for more than \$800,000. Diversity and disparity are the by-words of our local community. On the LSC, I have been a leader in working with and lobbying our elected officials to increase the funding and resources given this school, knowing that education will always be key to challenging the racial and economic disparities of our world.

In addition, when our own diocese was searching for a bishop, as president of the standing committee, I helped to ensure that all qualified candidates would be interviewed in accordance with our church's canons regardless of an individual's race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, physical limitation or handicap. Then, when those elected to the search committee did not reflect the full diversity of our diocese, we appointed six more members in an attempt to guarantee that all perspectives were fully represented. As bishop, I would continue this course, working in conjunction with the people of the diocese to support diverse and inclusive leadership and membership in all aspects of our shared life.

Describe a previous conflict between several parties that you personally have been involved in and how you went about resolving it? What was the ultimate outcome?

In the fall of 2002 we changed our Sunday morning schedule in order to offer a third worship service. Traditionally, altering a congregation's Sunday worship pattern is one of the most conflict-producing endeavors a faith community can undertake. Conflict inevitably surrounds any attempt to initiate change. Conflict breeds internal anxiety, the adrenalin-induced uncertainty individuals experience in their own bodies. It also breeds external anxiety, the uncertainty present in any family, congregational or diocesan system undergoing growth or transformation. For me, managing the anxiety, neither absorbing it nor passing it on to others was the way I chose to ensure that the conflict did not escalate; individuals were able to voice their concerns and be listened to, we could make revisions, and still ensure that the constructive change took place.

To prepare for the inevitable conflict and anxiety we began planning for this change six full years before we implemented it. It was a constant topic at vestry meetings and central theme of our annual meetings. The vestry also initiated a series of forums for congregational conversation on this topic. While some were intrigued by the possibility of another major worship service on Sundays, many were distressed that the community might be split to enable more new people to attend.

I knew that the change would be hardest on our choir. At that time approximately 12-15 people sang regularly. The worship committee and I decided that we'd have music at both the 9 and 11 o'clock. I left it up to the choir members and music director to discern what the musical offerings would be at each service. Although some choristers adamantly asked me to declare which service the choir would sing at, I declined to make this decision. I believed the best way to manage the conflict and the sadness resulting from such a drastic change was to set a few firm parameters and remain flexible about the details, thus enabling the people who were most affected by the change to determine their own course of action. After initiating the new service schedule we decided to stick with it—and not make any major changes for two years. I'm delighted to say—that our attendance

increased 20% after adding the third service. We now have a 9:00 choir, a once a month all ages choir and an 11:00 choir; seven years later people do not picture our Sunday morning schedule any other way.

How would you define the realities facing the Episcopal Church today, and how would you lead the diocese in responding to them?

We are living in a time of uncertainty, upheaval, transition, and possibly renewal and re-formation. Our economy is teetering and a number of our congregations are struggling. Many of our diocesan structures are based upon an antiquated “top down,” corporate model. In this post-modern world globalization and high-speed communication are the unavoidable realities of our newly emerging economy. Any diocese or congregation that longs to do meaningful ministry in this time and place must acknowledge this sea change. Yet, we need not be swept away by the flooding tide of change in this anxiety-ridden world. We can choose to be nimble, visionary, unflappable and steadfast. We can choose to uncouple our bureaucratic, historical superstructures without relinquishing our traditions, sacraments and symbols. We can as the collect says, hold fast “To the blessed hope of everlasting life,” (BCP p 236) which has been given us in our savior Jesus Christ. We can rethink our definition of mission and ministry. We can choose to create meaningful, mutual relationships and partnership with our sisters and brothers around the world. We can rethink Evangelism.

Howard Gardner in his book, *Changing Minds* refers to the need for a university president to be a “*charismatic listener*”. I believe this trait is also essential for a bishop in this 21st century re-formation of our faith. Being networked, connected and in relationship, being able to listen to another individual’s story is the cornerstone of any meaningful ministry. Stories: sacred, profound and profane are the foundation— the rock upon which Christianity is founded. The Word became flesh—not to dictate creedal statements, but rather to be in relationship with all of humanity. Evangelism in the 21st century is about listening to another’s story and asking the question, “Where is God?” What I hear most in Christ’s call to me is the charge to seek out, interact with and to hear the story of as many people as possible—whether or not they happen to be Episcopalian, Christian or even attend Church. Sacredness and Holy moments abound in our world and I believe bishops are called first to listen and then publicly to name the Holy Moments in our world. It is this type of listening in all of our differing contexts which will enable us to hear God’s word, see God’s hope and use our gifts and talents to embody God’s vision for our world.