

Brian Prior: Answers to Questions

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

Having worked on a diocesan staff for two different bishops and on the Standing Committee during the call process for our present bishop I have come to realize something: while bishops are called, they also “grow into the office”. I am not certain I am called to be a bishop. I am certain that I am called to be faithful to the gifts and experiences God has given me for ministry. Each diocese is different, each episcopate is different, and each calls forth certain gifts for ministry. The discernment process for me is based on what gifts the diocese is looking for and if those gifts are consistent with what others and I believe I possess. With this in mind, when I began to receive phone calls from individuals from the Diocese of Minnesota encouraging me to enter the discernment process I asked each the following questions: “*What do you believe are the specific gifts God is calling forth in the next Bishop of Minnesota?*” “*What are the gifts you have experienced in me that you believe are consistent with what God is calling forth for your next bishop?*”

I then began a dialogue with my “council of advice” - family, spiritual director, bishop, and leadership coach. These folks know me best and are also painfully honest with me. After prayerfully considering the conversations with those who are encouraging me, and those who know me best, I then decided to move forward with the discernment process.

There are two specific areas where my gifts have been discerned as potentially beneficial as the IX Bishop of Minnesota. First, I have served at all levels of the Church from camp counselor to Vice-President of the House of Deputies. I understand the structural and system complexities of the Church. I have served on a diocesan staff resourcing, networking and supporting congregations and have started a church familiar with the feeling of being underserved. I know first hand the challenge of distance that creates a sense of isolation and separation lived out in the urban and rural diocesan demographic mix. I am acutely aware of the diversity of whom we are as a Church recognizing we are shaped by our different realities based upon our cultural context. As such, I understand the demands of equality and inclusion. Through non-anxious servant leader mentors and a healthy life-giving process I have learned how to lean into the inevitable conflicts that are a part of being community. My multi-level experience and understanding of the life of the Church may be the leadership the diocese is seeking in its next bishop.

The second area is my formation. I was “raised” and nurtured in the collaborative, relational, creative camp and youth ministry. My own spiritual transformation came through experiencing God’s grace work through me and those I shared the journey with to provide life-changing transformation for others. Consistently trusting that God would do incredible things through us we open ourselves to allow the Spirit to take the lead. Encouraging transparency and authenticity each person is valued and utilized for the gifts they offer. Committed to a life of prayer, meditation and life-long learning I continue to discern what God is calling forth from me. My grounding in collaborative, relational servant leadership may be what God is calling forth in the next season of episcopate leadership for the Diocese of Minnesota.

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?

I am very pleased to hear that the diaconate is a major pillar of the diocese. The ministry of the diaconate has been central to my faith journey since I was in college. At that time I served at the Cathedral of St. John, Spokane. It was during that time that I became more familiar with the diaconate as this was my first encounter with this ministry. Throughout my adult life and particularly since my ordination a significant number of deacons have been and continue to be very valued colleagues.

In the years that I have served at the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection numerous individuals have discerned their gifts for ministry. These have been powerful processes to be involved with. Of these individuals, six have discerned ordination. And of those, three of the six were called to the diaconate. It is an honor and a privilege to be on this prayerful journey with those called to serve.

At a diocesan level I was part of establishing the School For Ministry. At its core, this school had as its major focus the discernment, formation and training of a number of individuals for ministry. The vast majority of these were in the diaconate process. Likewise, when I served as the President of the Standing Committee we worked collaboratively with the Commission on Ministry to restructure the formation process. We were intentional to incorporate ongoing formation and support for those in the process and for those recently ordained.

At the larger Church level I served with Standing Commission on Ministry Development during the time of the Canon III revisions. Much of this focus was on the formation and ministry of the diaconate.

At every level and every opportunity in the Church I have supported and utilized the ministry of the diaconate. It is my intention to continue with this practice as I recognize and understand the important role the diaconate plays in the mission of the Church.

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

My initial experience with total ministry began while serving in Province VIII with my introduction to then bishop of Nevada, Wes Frensdorff, a pioneer in total ministry. These were formational times in my understanding of ministry. When I began to serve the Diocese of Spokane part of my responsibility as the Director of Development and Program was to work with a wide variety of congregations. It was an incredibly rewarding opportunity helping congregations explore potential new ways of being engaged in ministry. This was also what motivated me to be a part of starting a new congregation.

When we began the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection twelve years ago our fundamental guiding theology (using the language of baptismal ministry) was based on total ministry. As such, one of our primary mission imperatives was to be a ministry-centered faith community engaged in God's mission.

With the Baptismal Covenant as our core document, we began to live into this mission imperative by holding a series of conversations for the purpose of discerning what God was calling forth from us both as a faith community and as individuals. It was during these times of prayer and engagement that individuals began to identify their gifts for ministry.

Today the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection continues to be shaped and empowered by being a ministry-centered faith community. Individuals are continually given the opportunity to discern their gifts and then encouraged and empowered to use those gifts for ministry.

In my experience many faith communities often begin the process of exploring the possibility of total ministry based on economics. In the over twenty years that I have been living out the theology of total ministry I have become convinced that this is not necessarily tied to finances, rather is applicable in the context of any faith community.

As has been stated the Diocese of Minnesota is embracing the theology of total ministry. As with other dioceses, this may have been precipitated in part due to economics. Regardless of the reason, my hope would be that the diocese has been able truly appreciate our baptismal call to use our gifts for ministry to engage in God's mission.

I am passionate about working with any faith community that desires to be engaged in exploring ways that all the baptized can discern and then share their gifts for ministry.

In my experience the primary way to support and strengthen total ministry in the diocese is through spending time with the faith communities. Total ministry is based on building relationships while prayerfully discerning what God is calling forth from the community. Follow up is critical through providing the necessary resources to equip, empower and encourage individuals to use their gifts for 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?

The small rural farm town I grew up in was, unbeknownst to me at the time, a multi-cultural community. As a young person my friends were Spanish Speaking Americans, American Indian, African American and Anglo and I had no idea that this was not everyone's reality. I went to school, played sports, worked in the orchards and even "fell in love" for the first time with kids from different racial / ethnic backgrounds and thought nothing of it.

Likewise, I grew up in a family where my parents had friends and socialized with both gay and lesbian couples. As such it was not challenging for me when in both high school and college a number of my closest childhood friends told me they were gay or lesbian.

Frankly, it was not until I was in college and began serving in the larger church that I became painfully aware of the level of homophobia, sexism, racism, ageism and bigotry in both our church and the larger culture. My entire scripting was based on an assumption that everyone was not only welcomed, but also encouraged to be full members of the community.

This experience was a major part of my motivation to attend seminary at CDSP. I not only wanted to be a part of a seminary that was intentional about embracing diversity, but I also wanted to live in a community where I did not represent the dominant culture.

My time at CDSP and my continued work in the larger Church, especially my involvement with youth ministry, was transformational. The core Gospel justice value of inclusion became a theological priority. Consistently since that time I have worked to challenge systems that at best marginalize, and at worst outright exclude others based on race, gender, sexual orientation or age.

The foundational question that I always ask those I serve with is this: who is not, and why are they not, at the table.

In my experience, the critical dynamic of embracing the Gospel justice value of inclusion is to spend time with others in the context of their culture and community. It is to be intentional about listening to their story, to their reality. It is discerning with them the gifts for ministry they feel called to share both within their context and the larger community.

I was blessed as a young person to grow up in a diverse community. Subsequently I have been blessed to have a significant number of friends and colleagues in ministry who have continued to enrich my life and vocation. With that said, the amount of work and witness still needed to combat the lack of respect for the dignity of every human being is unquestionably clear.

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?

It was the breakthrough Sunday when we tore down the hanging plastic construction sheets and entered the new sanctuary section of our new building. As you might imagine there was a palpable sense of excitement and accomplishment in the air.

Moments later I walked into the sacristy where a significant portion of the altar guild was engaged in a heated discussion. My presence brought the conversation to a stand still. Then the woman who was clearly both the most angry and animated asked me, "Where is the altar rail?" Quickly another woman responded, "The open space is great we do not need an altar rail!"

My conflict management and resolution skill set began at a very early age when I served as a Camp Director. Daily, even hourly, issues would be raised between staff members, campers, parents and clergy. I was also fortunate to have good healthy mentors who introduced me to the works of the family systems writings of Edwin Friedman, Murray Bowen and Peter Steinke.

In this heated exchange, for which I was increasingly being blamed, it became clear to me how important it was to acknowledge and affirm the differing perspectives. It was also important to stay personally self-differentiated, and to offer an agreed upon time to have further conversation.

The next day I gathered the design committee to determine what if any conversation had taken place during the design phase about an altar rail. Minutes were reviewed and amidst the literally hundreds of decisions that were made a conversation about the altar rail never took place.

During months of design meetings, and numerous walk-throughs with both the architect and the contractor not one single person asked about an altar rail. Amidst the thousands of details that go into building a new church the one that was missed was the altar rail. And yet, I knew that the altar rail, or choosing not to install one, was a significant concern for individuals' personal piety.

This, like countless other design decisions, became an opportunity for God's grace. Attempting to make the most informed decision we undertook an architectural historical study of the use of church railing. This information was then shared with the entire congregation. From here we used an *appreciative inquiry* approach and held a series of prayerful conversations with interested individuals in the congregation about their experience and perspective on the altar rail.

With non-anxious leadership being key, opportunity was provided for learning, as well as listening and affirming a variety of perspectives that led to a clear sense of what our community was being called to.

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

Upon return from the controversial actions of the 2003 General Convention the congregation where I serve was faced with a dilemma. Many were thrilled with the decision of the consent to the ordination of Gene Robinson for the episcopate of New Hampshire, others were disappointed while still others seemed unfazed. Yet, because of the significant publicity surrounding the actions of General Convention many wondered what the impact would be on the congregation: specifically, the public's perception of our faith community.

As the Chaplain to the House of Deputies of this General Convention I knew first hand the palpable experience of the Holy Spirit during the deliberations and final decision. That same experience of the Spirit also filled the leadership of our church as it precipitated and prompted us to discern a clearer sense of our identity as a faith community.

The subsequent outcome was the establishment of *Team ECOR*, our monthly partnership in ministry with the community. Adorned with matching hats and shirts members of the congregation engage in hands-on mission and ministry in the larger community. This is to such an extent that on countless occasions folks from the church report when telling others which church they are a part of the response is, "That's the church that really cares and is always out in the community."

I believe claiming our sense of identity is the single most important reality facing the Episcopal Church today. For too long we have embraced either the status of being an enigma or being defined by others. All the while the Church has become consistently irrelevant to the rest of the world.

The good news is that many have become acutely aware of the promptings of the Spirit. We are being led into greater clarity of our identity as the Church. Friend and colleague J. Philip Newell, as well as Brian McClure, Phyllis Tickle and Diana Butler Bass have been particularly articulate in their descriptions of this time as a new birthing, or the beginning of a new Reformation and that of an emerging Church. They make it abundantly clear that we as the Body of Christ are being called to live out our baptismal ministry to manifest Christ's love in both new ways and those ways that have escaped us.

As a fifth generation Anglican / Episcopalian this has the potential to be very disconcerting. And yet that which is being call forth is not about changing our essence or ethos, but rather gaining a clearer sense of identity grounded in the mission and ministry of all the baptized. While manifesting our identity is a major issue for the Church I see it as neither daunting nor insurmountable. Instead, I find these to be exhilaratingly challenging times to be a part of the Church. Through conversations with individuals from the diocese and in reading both the profile and the material from the Mission Strategy Network, I am particularly encouraged with the promptings of the Holy Spirit that are already taking place in the Diocese of Minnesota.