



Essay Questions to be Included with your Application for the Sixth Bishop of The Episcopal Diocese of Southwest Florida

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This portion of your application is part of the **blind** screening process. We ask that you answer these essay questions without providing any personal identifiers. Please refrain from using examples that include pronouns or descriptive language that would divulge any personal characteristics. This file with your answers will be renamed with your unique number that will correspond to your application packet.

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Essay Question 1:

Based on your reading our Profile, what is it about the Diocese of Southwest Florida that excites you, challenges you, and draws you to accept our invitation? (500 word maximum)

The Profile of the Diocese of Southwest Florida describes a vibrant community ready to embark on a journey of creative and transformational ministry. As I reflect on the vision expressed in your Profile, I am *excited* about your clear commitment to grow more vital and resilient congregations, which will require an openness to adaptive change and innovative solutions. In the face of declining attendance and shrinking budgets, many congregations are seeking new ways to share resources, work collaboratively, and effectively engage their local communities. Your diocesan Profile expresses a desire to implement strategies to support clergy and lay leaders in their efforts “to combine Christian *values* and *traditions* with *new ideas* to develop a wide range of ministries” in their communities and beyond.

One aspect of this ministry that I am particularly *drawn* to is “attending to the unique needs and desires of youth and young adults.” I am an Episcopal priest today because of a personal, transformational encounter with Jesus that took place during a high school youth event. The formative experiences of community and worship in which I participated as a teenager have remained a source of inspiration and encouragement throughout my priestly ministry. Consequently, I am deeply committed to the building up of sustainable and vibrant ministries that support and nurture the spiritual formation of our young people. Over the course of my priestly ministry, I have been involved in youth ministry at the diocesan and deanery levels, and the congregations where I have served have each effectively and sustainably grown their youth and family ministries.

The possibilities for the future of the Diocese of Southwest Florida are myriad. However, in order to accomplish the vision set forth in your Profile, it will be essential to identify, nurture, and train both clergy and lay leaders who are equipped to respond to the rapidly changing cultural realities the church is facing today. The development of transformational leaders is *challenging*, but essential if we are to build a sustainable future for the Episcopal Church. I am convinced that many of the issues related to congregational vitality are fundamentally issues related to *leadership*. If the Episcopal Church is serious about making the necessary changes to promote sustainable growth

and renewed vision within our denomination, it is imperative that we renew our focus on raising up leaders who reflect the diversity we aspire to embody. This kind of transformational leadership will require “out of the box” thinking and a deep commitment to follow the movement of God’s Spirit among us. Because only when we are grounded in grace, rooted in love, and empowered by the Spirit are we able to fully live into the vision and mission God has entrusted to us.

Essay Question 2:

Congregational Vitality ranked highest in our Diocesan wide survey. Describe how you orient your attitudes, beliefs and actions toward Congregational Vitality and provide a story that illustrates your experience. (500 word maximum)

Congregational *vitality* is predicated on congregational *sustainability*. In other words, before a congregation can truly begin to imagine a more hopeful *future*, it must first be able to maintain and manage a stable *present*. Congregational stability, both programmatic and financial, is essential, because an unstable congregational system is often characterized by anxiety, fear, and uncertainty about the future. Congregational leaders, both lay and ordained, need to be equipped to respond to this anxiety and fear in order to restore hope, renew vision, and reinvigorate mission. Moreover, *sustainability* that leads to *vitality* will almost always require adaptive and innovative change – and change leads to loss, which results in grief. Therefore, congregational leaders will need to be equipped and empowered to lead change, while also leading with compassion, grace, and a deep pastoral sensitivity to the spiritual and emotional needs of the congregation.

Beyond the theoretical, there are specific attributes and characteristics that seem to be consistently present in growing and vital congregations.

Intergenerational – Congregations that are intentional about recognizing, celebrating, and incorporating the spiritual gifts of all generations appear to be more spiritually vibrant and engaged. This requires that a congregation be willing to invest in ministry *to, with, and for* youth and young adults, but it also requires a congregation to purposefully provide opportunities for intergenerational ministry, including worship, fellowship, outreach, and even pastoral care.

Relational – Another characteristic of growing and vital congregations is an intentional focus on the formation of authentic relationships. We are the body of Christ, called to nurture and cultivate meaningful connections, and to support one another on our journey of discipleship.

Missional – Finally, congregations that are focused on something beyond themselves are more likely to be thriving than congregations that are primarily turned inward. To be a *missional* congregation is more than having an active outreach ministry, although that’s important! A *missional* congregation is one that cultivates a relationship with the surrounding community and seeks to identify where God’s Spirit is at work in the world about us.

In one congregation I served, there were several ministry groups that met throughout the week for various purposes, including study, prayer, and outreach. However, these groups were disconnected, and the coordination of these ministries placed a high demand on the time and energy of our staff and volunteers. So, after much prayer, listening, and planning, we decided to create an entirely new mid-week gathering that would seek to integrate many of these diverse groups. The mid-week gathering, which drew 80-120 weekly attendees, was based on a simple model, which included a shared meal, informal worship, fellowship, and teaching. The new model successfully incorporated the three characteristics described above. It was *intergenerational*,

bringing together all ages for a shared meal and corporate worship, followed by small group gatherings for children, youth, and adults. It was *relational*, allowing for meaningful connections and a deepening of relationships not always possible during the busyness of Sunday mornings. It was *missional*, providing an opportunity for greater engagement with our local community through fellowship and service.

Essay Question 3:

The ministry of all the baptized (MOAB) is a vital, active part of our diocesan and congregational life. What is your understanding of MOAB? Please share one or two stories from your experiences of MOAB and tell us how you would encourage these ministries in Southwest Florida. (500 word maximum)

The baptismal liturgy of the 1979 *The Book of Common Prayer* defines baptism as “full initiation by water and Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church” (p. 298). I frequently remind the members of the congregation I serve that baptism is the foundation of *who we are* and *all we do* as followers of Jesus. Baptism is not simply a past event, but a present reality that shapes and defines our entire life. Through baptism, we are marked as Christ’s own, empowered for ministry, and endowed with unique spiritual gifts, which are to be activated and used for the building up of the Church. I offer the following examples of the ways I have witnessed the importance of MOAB in my own ministry contexts.

Community Food Pantry – The congregation I currently serve has maintained an on-site food pantry for many years. Prior to the pandemic, the food pantry was housed in a storage area connected to our Parish Hall and the recipients of the food were primarily homeless individuals in our local community, many of whom would visit the pantry on a regular basis. When the COVID-19 pandemic turned our world upside-down, our church buildings were closed, including the food pantry. Within just a few weeks, the Chairperson of our Outreach Committee approached me about reopening the food pantry to serve the growing needs of our local community. In response to this unprecedented crisis, the food pantry was completely reimagined. A new and expanded space was renovated to house the pantry. A drive-thru system was created to safely and efficiently distribute the food. Financial donations were solicited to purchase gift cards, which would allow families to purchase perishable items not provided by the food pantry. Within a few months, we went from serving about 40 individuals *a month* to serving 80 families *a week*. Donations grew exponentially. The number of volunteers grew at least tenfold. Local businesses joined in the effort. And the entire ministry was coordinated by a team of dedicated and compassionate lay leaders – the ministry of all the baptized in action!

Leadership Gatherings – In addition to outreach, I have sought to be intentional about training and equipping lay leaders in the congregations I have served. In order to accomplish this goal, I have instituted quarterly gatherings of ministry leaders. The purpose of these gatherings is threefold – community building, training, and communication. After the very first leadership gathering, we began to see a change in how our ministry leaders related to one another and their respective ministries. This has been one small, but significant step toward building a community of leaders within our congregation – leaders empowered to use their spiritual gifts and fulfill their baptism covenant.

It is this second example that I believe is most applicable to the role of a Bishop, as one who is called to “encourage and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries.” If I am called to be a Bishop, I believe part of my responsibility would be to assist in the training and equipping of leaders through intentional formational and educational opportunities.

Essay Question 4:

What have you found most compelling in Christ's call to you? How is this related to your interest in becoming the bishop of our unique Diocese? (500 word maximum)

I have been a follower of Jesus and a member of the Episcopal Church since my childhood. Throughout my life I have assumed many roles and responsibilities; however, my identity as a disciple of Jesus remains at the core of who I am. The experience of Christ's call in my life cannot be tied to a particular moment or event, but can best be described as a journey. Over the course of this spiritual journey, I have grown in significant ways, but most importantly, I have come to a deeper knowledge of my *identity* in Christ and the extravagance of God's *grace*.

Identity - I think one of the most significant challenges facing many of our parishioners, especially our young people, is a crisis of identity. There is a cacophony of voices vying for our attention, but there is only *one* voice that defines who we are, and that is the voice of the One who calls us *beloved*. Just as Jesus at his baptism heard a voice from heaven declaring his identity as *God's beloved*, so we are given the same identity at our baptism.

Grace - The identity given to us at baptism is an expression of God's unconditional and extravagant grace, unearned and undeserved. The experience of grace has profoundly shaped my vocation as a priest and congregational leader. I am keenly aware that *all I am* and *all I have* is a gift from God, not of my own making. The longer I seek to faithfully follow Jesus, the more deeply I have come to recognize my need for grace. I know that I am unable to live the Christian life in my own strength, but with God all things are possible!

A bishop is called "to be in all things a faithful pastor and wholesome example for the entire flock of Christ." I believe that in order to be a spiritual leader for others, one must be spiritually grounded in the knowledge of one's own *identity* as God's beloved and as a recipient of God's *grace*. This is especially true for a bishop, who is given the responsibility of oversight, and who is called to "follow Jesus who came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many." A bishop is called to "nourish God's people from the riches of God's grace." With regards to the uniqueness of the Diocese of Southwest Florida, your Profile describes a Bishop who is first and foremost a *spiritual leader*. Of course, a Bishop needs to be able to effectively manage resources and provide administrative oversight, but as "chief pastor and teacher," the Bishop leads by example, always seeking to humbly and faithfully proclaim Christ in both word and deed.

Essay Question 5:

Describe how the pandemic has informed and transformed your ministerial experience the Episcopal Church. Describe how the pandemic has informed and transformed your vision of the ministry of a bishop. Tell us about how you would live into this vision within our Diocese. (500 word maximum)

The pandemic accelerated and deepened the need for the Episcopal Church to engage technology as an essential part of our mission and ministry. Prior to the start of the pandemic, the congregation where I serve was *discussing* the need to offer a live-streaming option for our Sunday services. We were *discussing* the need to create more video content, since our culture is becoming less reliant on print-based communication. We were *discussing* the need to increase our social-media presence in order to more effectively communicate with our local community. When the pandemic hit, we immediately had to put our discussions into *action*. We began live-streaming our

services immediately using a make-shift system hastily assembled by our volunteer audio/visual team. We moved most of our small group ministries to Zoom. We began offering daily Morning Prayer through Facebook Live. Our thrift store pivoted to online platforms to continue to generate revenue. And we developed an entirely new *virtual church website* to simplify access to these resources, and to help facilitate and coordinate an entirely new way of being the church!

For many months, we sustained a vibrant virtual presence, which provided opportunities for our members to stay connected and to remain spiritually grounded amid the pandemic. Attendance at online Bible studies and other fellowship gatherings actually *increased* during the pandemic. We eventually raised the funds to install a permanent live-streaming system. We also hired a Technology Coordinator and Social Media Marketing Assistant to sustain these new ministry initiatives. However, even though the pandemic has profoundly altered the way we will do ministry in the future, there remains a deep spiritual need to be personally and physically connected to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. There also remains a deep and abiding connection to our church buildings as sacred spaces. Many clergy, including myself, watched as tears streamed down the faces of our parishioners when they were finally able to return to our buildings. Moving forward, diocesan and congregational leaders will need to balance these two impulses – the need to engage creatively with technology and the desire to remain physically connected to one another and our sacred spaces.

One of the perennial challenges facing any bishop is the sheer size of the diocesan community. One of the comments quoted in the Profile expressed the desire that the bishop have “a ministry of presence.” And yet, it is often difficult for a bishop to be physically present in every congregation even once a year. However, through the use technology, the bishop has the potential to more effectively communicate through video content, social media, and live-streaming technology. The ability of the bishop to be more “present” to the diocese and to more frequently connect with congregational leaders would almost certainly create a more unified diocesan community, and would allow for greater clarity and consistency when it comes to communicating the mission and vision of the diocese.