

Essay Questions

In our initial screening process, all candidates will be evaluated solely on their responses to these questions without regard to gender, race, familial status, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, geographic location or any other identifying characteristic. To protect this initial screening process, we are invoking a blind screening of your responses, and we ask that all applicants answer these questions without providing any identifiers to the above. Please do not include pronouns or descriptive language that would divulge any personal characteristics. Your responses will be separated from the other parts of your application (cover letter, resume, and references) and assigned a unique number that will correspond to this application packet.

Essay Questions: Please reflect and respond to the following questions, limiting each of your responses to a maximum of 400 words.

1. In the examination of bishops, you will be asked to “be one with the apostles proclaiming Christ’s resurrection and interpreting the Gospel, and to testify to Christ’s sovereignty as Lord of lords and King of Kings.” What do you understand those words to mean, and (assuming their usual meaning) are there any you hesitate to endorse?

“For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you . . .” (1 Cor. 11:23). Paul expresses best what it means to be an apostle without having been a first-person eyewitness to the life of Jesus. While handing on our faith is expected of all Christians, unique to the episcopacy is the call to be an apostle: one steeped in, enamored of, and living out the faith and tradition we inherit. Paul models leadership in loving service, loving honesty, and loving accountability—all necessary attributes for a bishop. To be one with the apostles is also to be a steward of the sacred deposit—the catholic and apostolic faith handed on to us—which we are expected to hand on to those who come after until Christ comes again. This inheritance is the foundation that prevents us from being “blown about by every wind of doctrine” and yet is still the open ear that lets us “hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

The work of proclamation, interpretation, and testimony rightly begins with our most basic creed: “Jesus is Lord.” A seminary professor of mine was right: “‘Jesus is Lord’ is the first, simplest, and most subversive creed of the Christian faith.” If Jesus is Lord, this means no one else can be: no law, no institution, no oligarch, theocrat, or emperor—not even “me.” To be one with the apostles is to take up this creed and to testify to the truth, that Jesus must be Lord to the exclusion of all other and all else.

I endorse these words without hesitation, realizing that it then becomes the high calling to make them true not just in word but in deed.

2. Like other dioceses, the exit of congregations and communicants in the first decade of this century left lasting scars on our community from which we continue to heal. How have you fostered unity among individuals of differing values and diverse opinions?

I refuse to baptize our divisions and polarizations. Culturally we seem to have made agreement the litmus test for relationship, whether the divide be political, social, medical, or otherwise. The gift of Anglicanism is unity without requiring uniformity. We squander this gift not living up to our ideals, which are so needed now. We compromise our Christian witness to the wider world when we can’t get along with one another.

In my ministry, I have made it my goal that no one should be able to determine for whom I vote. As a priest, this is one of the least important things someone needs to know about me. With those who demonize another person or position I make it a goal to help them find empathy and understanding. “How might a well-meaning and faithful person come to the conclusion you detest?” Wise counsel I’ve heard is when one disagrees with or denigrates another, one must first put the opponent’s position in words the opponent would agree with. Only then is one arguing with sincere belief rather than a caricature, misunderstanding, or misrepresentation.

That said, healthy disagreement is necessary. Vigorous debate is how “iron sharpens iron.” Unity does not mean the absence of conflict. Unity is being able to disagree, to argue, even to fight, and stay family. I do my best to help those under my care see themselves as a Christian people—the family and household of God. In John 15:5 Jesus calls us friends. Paul assures us in Romans 8:7 that “if we are children of God then we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.” I insist that to disagree, even to fight, is something family does. A family that cannot disagree and stay together is not a family, and a family that does nothing but fight is not a family. So the truth is somewhere in the middle. There must be love, and love will ultimately win.

To this end, I have led conversations intending to promote racial healing and mutual understanding. I have maintained and begun new friendships across the spectrum of the Anglican/Episcopal divide. I have participated in and helped strengthen inter-denominational partnerships. And I have lost people from my ministry for my unwillingness to choose quiet over peace. Jesus prays that we all might be one. So do I.

3. One of the challenges that our denomination faces is an aging clergy force. What qualities are you looking for in the next generation of clergy leader?

The greatest spiritual leaders have been and are still being transformed by Jesus Christ and participate with Jesus in transforming others. We measure lots of other things and we can train for lots of other things. But without the personal and collective transformation of the Gospel the church is just one of myriad competing benevolent nonprofits. The church is called to be different, and every generation of clergy leaders is challenged to understand what that difference means in their particular time and place. Skills must differ with context. Yet from each and all, I want to hear and feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives and understand how the Spirit empowers them to lead. Vestries and Mission Boards will decide what they need on their resumes, I will be interested in the content of their character and the one who inhabits their hearts. Rather than a new message, I’m looking for effective translators of the old, old story.

4. Almost two years have been spent in struggles with the COVID pandemic and the many social, political, and economic challenges it brought forward. Where do you see hope springing forward in the Episcopal church? What are some of your hopes for the Diocese of Florida?

No one likes instability, yet instability is a catalyst for change. Our church is brimming with fear about what these last two years may mean for worship, giving, service, even our very existence. Yet our story is filled with similar moments in which God is faithful. Like all moments when God’s people have faced challenges, my greatest hope is that in this moment we will trust in God and have the courage to follow where the Spirit leads. This is the hope that allows the Lord to sleep soundly in the bow while the disciples panic over the storm.

Being part of a tradition that has lasted more than 500 years means we have been here before. Through fire, famine, plague, pestilence, and war the church has stood, changed, and grown. I see hope

in the eyes of those who know we will continue to stand, and that the church will be here to greet our Lord when he comes no matter what name appears on the sign at the road. Our hope is in our ability to think bigger than the crises in front of us. I see hope in people who have found ways to support one another and stay in contact even when contact is forbidden. I see hope from those in our church who are making contact again the moment it's possible, even when it still might not be advisable. These are people of faith, people in our church, who decide that the call to serve is greater than the need for caution.

My hope is that the people of the Diocese of Florida make this kind of individual courage a collective one. I worry that during the pandemic we have stopped fearing the virus and begun fearing one another. Our greatest opportunity at this moment is to choose love instead. In your profile you expressed your wish to build bridges across difference and become better connected with those around you, and with those in the larger church and Christian family. My hope is that you bring your authentic selves to each of those encounters. The church and the world need people united in the faith, with pride in who they are, with permission for others to be who they are, and confident in who God is.

5. Being familiar with the profile published in connection with this search, what do you see as our diocese's biggest challenges/opportunities moving forward? And, based on your previous experiences, how have you addressed similar challenges or developed new opportunities?

The greatest challenge you identified is turning decline into growth. Combining “declining attendance”, “attracting and retaining new members”, and “attracting young families” easily makes this your most pressing concern. The church is dealing with this broadly. There are ways the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Florida should deal with it specifically.

Our tradition's biggest challenge is our self-confidence. The narrative of mainline decline is being treated as a fait accompli, and we act as if we're just holding on for as long as we can. We worry about evangelism for fear that whatever someone believes already is probably fine. We apologize for our tradition, that we're not the megachurch or the parachurch. We have access to a deep, rich, biblical, Episcopal tradition and we worry people come to our church in spite of who we are and not because of who we are. Or we're so proud of our tradition we think people should just discover us on their own—meanwhile we sit on our hands and await their arrival. I think these are the challenges from which all our other challenges derive. We lack confidence in ourselves, or are so confident we think growth is magic.

To face the identified challenge of diversity and inclusion in the diocese will mean asking deep and difficult questions about your own comfort and assumptions, and opening the doors to those who have felt “other” until now. In ministry I have done work to open these doors and question these assumptions, and this should be a broader conversation in every diocese. Many of us are asking these questions, and walking through this together would be a benefit of increasing engagement with the wider church. I intend to bring that engagement and encourage such confidence and outreach.

Growth will require courage. We have to be brave enough to prune what needs to grow better, uproot that which has gone to seed, and plant in the best soil we can find. Otherwise, we're running museums and mausoleums. This should not be.

Churches reflect their leadership, so attracting the next generation of families will mean attracting the next generation of leadership. There is great opportunity in deep, mature, evangelizing faith that sparks wonder and curiosity in others if we're willing to go to them. Bishop Curry quotes Billy Sunday, “Heaven help the devil if the Episcopal Church ever wakes up!”