

The Rev. Furman L. Buchanan

1. Please share a vocational and spiritual experience that has influenced your call to enter the process to be the Ninth Bishop of Upper South Carolina.

When I was ten years old, the Rev. Posey Belcher showed me what a shepherd looks like. On December 23, 1976 he should have been working on his Christmas Eve sermon for our Baptist congregation in Barnwell. Instead, he drove an hour and a half to Columbia and spent the day with my dying father and our family at Richland Memorial Hospital.

I am not always the kind of pastor Posey Belcher was, but I never forget his example. Forty-five years later he remains my role model for St. Paul's exhortation-"Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep." Although Paul's words apply to all Christians, I believe his call is particularly relevant for ordained leaders like me.

This past December I learned that one of my special mentors-a dear friend-was dying. I should have been working on my Christmas Eve sermon for my congregation. Instead, I drove an hour and a half to Columbia to pray for him with his family.

I enjoy the challenge of being a faithful pastor to my congregation. One of my hesitations about the ministry of a bishop is the fact that diocesan work is-by necessity-further removed from the rhythm and intimacy of daily and weekly interaction with a congregation.

At the same time, I am completely convinced that the most important commitment for the ninth bishop of Upper South Carolina is to be a faithful pastor. The next decade will be excruciating for many Episcopal congregations, including many within our diocese. They will need someone who shows up-eager to rejoice at every opportunity for rejoicing, but also willing to weep whenever the weight of grief needs to be shared.

Despite whatever functional skills, tactical expertise, or helpful ideas I might be able to offer the Episcopal Diocese of Upper S.C., I would want to be known most of all as its faithful pastor. I would want to keep trying to live up to the words of St. Paul, the example of Jesus Christ, and the model of Posey Belcher.

2. Based on your reading of our Diocesan Profile, what are your first impressions of our diocese? What excites you most about leading the Diocese of Upper South Carolina? Which of your gifts and skills do you see as most relevant to the opportunities and challenges facing this diocese? How might these gifts/skills help with potential growing edges for EDUSC?

My first impressions of the diocese date back to 1988 when I began attending an Episcopal Church in upper S.C. Like 55% of parishioners who responded to the recent diocesan survey, I had no involvement beyond the local parish for years. Even though peoples' parochial connections will most often be their strongest, I feel we need to try some new strategies to promote more integration of prayer, service, learning, and fellowship across our diocese.

My first impression of the Diocesan Profile is favorable. Unity is a laudable attribute and goal in a time when division and schism are not only tolerated, but actually celebrated in political, social, and ecclesial contexts. The question this theme introduces in my mind is also important-unity for what purpose?

I love the official, legal, and lesser-known name of our Church. We are The Domestic & Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church. Our forebears wanted to remind us who we are and why we exist. In the great tradition of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, we continue to exist for the sake of those who are not members already. A diocese is not a loose federation of congregations and institutions with the same logo and home office, though we often act that way. We are actually called to be a society of missionaries, united as living members of the Body of Christ in a manageable geographic area for the purpose of glorifying God with worship and service.

What would excite me most about leading our diocese is the opportunity to invite our people to see themselves and one another more clearly (and sacramentally) as living members of Christ's Body in upper S.C., knitted and joined together, as St. Paul described, to promote the Body's growth in love.

This vision will require adjustments in order to more fully and regularly integrate our ministries of prayer, teaching, charitable service, and fellowship. This vision will also require new investments in the youth and young adult members of Christ's Body which incentivize working together on a common set of shared missions. The only way to build up a community is by building up its people. One of my gifts most relevant to the opportunities and challenges facing our diocese is an ability to communicate a clear, sacramental vision of our shared, high calling. Another important gift is a willingness to risk money, time, frustration, failure, and anything else necessary to pursue our missionary calling together. I would preach about our mission, teach about our mission, and model the priority of practicing our mission at every opportunity. In my experience, most faithful people want to be challenged to be part of something that makes a positive, meaningful difference in other peoples' lives. We share the privilege of being invited to do this together-not as a social service agency, but as a Church willing to love the world in Jesus' name.

3. The demands of being a spiritual leader are tough, but at the end of the day, you, like us, are a human being saved solely by the grace of God. How will you share your own humanity with us and how will you continue to walk alongside all of us while being our Bishop?

That word, 'alongside,' is the key word. In the incarnation, God showed an undeniable preference for living, suffering, dying, and rising to new life alongside the human family. 'Alongside' is the divine *modus operandi*!

As a practical matter, I have found 'alongside' to be the best vantage for surveying the needs of the flock-the eager, the wanderers, and the laggards. St. Augustine of Hippo famously complained about the burden of episcopacy, having to "straighten out trouble-makers, console the fainthearted...wake up the lazy, check the contentious, put the conceited in their place, calm down rows, aid the poor, free the oppressed, encourage the good, endure the bad, and, ah, love them all..."

I don't know how I will manage to do all those things well, particularly in light of the fact that so brilliant a saint as Augustine found it to be so burdensome. I can only offer a glimpse of how I have attempted 'alongside ministry' as a priest. I believe it requires the strength to push for what matters, and-equally important-the humility to listen and adapt. This past Christmas, I was determined to lead my congregation in doing two things: (1) remaining safe by gathering in small numbers, and (2) standing outside in the cold, spread apart with masks on, to sing some of our favorite Christmas carols after each liturgy.

I believed in my heart that my people would never forget the night they stood in the cold and rain, singing glory to God in the highest. After all, even the angels on that first holy night were not spared the elements. In my communications, I led with this idea. The problem came when I began leading The First Noel at a pitch too high to sustain. A musically gifted young woman, visiting from California, immediately recognized our dilemma, raised the volume of her voice and re-set a lower pitch at which we could actually finish the phrase-born is the King of Israel.

All effective leaders must remain in close enough contact with those being led in order to listen, adapt, and therefore-stay together. In contexts where I am a follower, I particularly appreciate leaders who are willing to listen. Throughout my life, it is not solely the expertise of great leaders I have admired, but also their willingness to listen earnestly to those they lead.

As a leader, I don't like making mistakes, especially embarrassing ones. Yet, I have never feared making mistakes. They are simply the inevitable, unripen fruit which comes before the harvest. Most of us learn best by trying, and trying requires the risk of falling down and getting back up to try again.

I think often about a bit of wisdom I learned from Bishop Dorsey Henderson about trying something in good faith. He said, "God will either bless it, or-in time-redeem it." In other words, God is with us-alongside us-in our strivings, always eager to bless and just as prepared to redeem.

4. How might your ministry of presence to the whole diocese be manifest in addition to visitations?

Especially in the wake of separation we have suffered during quarantine, I believe it is incumbent upon the ninth bishop to physically visit every parish, mission, and institution of our diocese at least once during 2022. As I noted in the last answer, incarnation-showing up alongside in the flesh-is the divine modus operandi. There is no comparable substitute. I offer this-not like a campaign promise, but as a reasonable expectation our geographically compact diocese deserves from whomever is called.

Next, I believe it is essential for the ninth bishop to employ a comprehensive array of media channels-from personalized cards and letters to regular emails and social media posts-in order to keep us informed about the mission we share as well as our local, particular reasons for rejoicing or weeping.

Beginning with a redoubled effort to establish more direct, digital communication links with the laity of Upper S.C., I feel our next bishop needs to regularly invite our people to prayer and service for the needs of the Church and the world. I believe it is also important for our bishop to regularly express gratitude for the variety of gifts which emerge from these invitations.

Third, I think it is reasonable for us to re-consider whether we are structured and staffed in an ideal way to promote common prayer and mission as a diocese. For example, I am not persuaded that every member of our diocesan staff should be based in Columbia. Every effective enterprise I know which spans a territory has employees stationed in more than one place.

Another observation I would like to offer is that we have been blessed in recent years with the ministry of up to three assistant (retired) bishops, increasing the number of annual visitations. Unfortunately, we have said good bye to each of these dear souls. I feel the leadership of our diocese needs to explore ways to foster more frequent visitations. Even though more than half of our 24,000 souls are found in the eight largest parishes, our smaller congregations wait just as expectantly for their episcopal visitation.

Fifth, I believe our ninth bishop must have a heart for youth and young adults, an often overlooked group who are increasingly choosing to overlook the Church in return. I have participated in several 'Happening' youth events during the last decade not only because I have been invited, but also because I have found walking alongside our youth to be deeply rewarding.

I believe it could be an exciting challenge for the ninth bishop, our Standing Committee, and Diocesan Executive Council to imagine the ways in which we might be more in touch with one another. If the answers to our structural and resource questions are determined by how well they promote our shared ministry of presence, then I believe we will respond faithfully as a missionary society which is committed to prayer and service in Jesus' name.

5. Across our country and within the diocese; there has been conflict over a variety of issues including differing views on diversity and inclusion, there has been concern about health, the economy, and systemic racism; and there are the challenges of the pandemic and the realities of ministry within it. Tell us your thoughts about how you would continue the healing process among various groups, how have you proclaimed a message of hope during this difficult time, and how have you advocated for social change in a way that unites?

"Those black boys have their own church they can attend," someone said to my mother after I brought two of my black high school friends to worship for the second Sunday in a row. "Those boys will go to church wherever they want, including here," my mother replied.

I am thankful for the witness of two parents who were kind and loving, and also unafraid to be firm and speak up for people when they were not being treated fairly. They had a clear understanding of the just, merciful, and hospitable ways of Jesus.

Healing-individually or communally-first requires an honest diagnosis. The Greek word 'diagnosis' means 'to know through (and through).' It involves close examination and often more than one expert opinion. Therefore, the first step for people like me who have not suffered exclusion, injustice, or oppression is to know about it more thoroughly. Following the example of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, there must be truth before there can be reconciliation.

My congregation has benefited from programs like 'Just Faith' which help people learn and experience the truth of what life is like for others using the lens of the Gospel. We also have benefitted from the creativity and compassion of the Rev. Marie Cope, who introduced us to a #MeToo-charist, when women and men across our land were discovering the liberating courage to say, "Me too!" More recently, when the U.S. Capitol was under siege, we went online to simply pray The Great Litany-a 472-year-old common prayer, tailor-made for January 6, 2021. Through worship and education, we have attempted to listen, speak, and pray honestly about uncomfortable subjects.

The goal of Gospel justice is neither virtue signaling, nor ridiculing; although speaking the truth can expose the shamefulness of some people. Still, Jesus ministered to both the oppressed as well as Roman soldiers who oppressed them. The consequence of Jesus-styled ministry is the shaming of hypocrites and bullies only because the truth is faithfully brought to light. Ultimately, his purpose (and ours) is to try to welcome everyone home into a just and peaceable kingdom.

My birthday is also the feast day of William Wilberforce, a persistent and formidable crusader for the abolition of slavery. Whatever divisions and exclusions I might confront as a leader, he had it harder; and nevertheless spoke up powerfully and beautifully for the sake of truth, justice, freedom, and peace.

The way I pray and speak about uncomfortable subjects will be disappointing to some who feel as though I am pushing too hard and to others who believe I am not pushing hard enough. The only way I know to contend with those tensions is to listen deeply, try to understand honestly, and then bear witness in word and deed truthfully and compassionately. My goal is to lead in the challenging, hopeful, and uniting manner I see in Jesus' ministry and in the examples of saints who have gone before us and shown us the way.

6. Is there anything else you would like us to know?

I would like you to know that this is my first exploration of episcopal ministry, and-most likely-my last. I cannot imagine opening myself up to the burdens of this type of ministry anywhere else.

I also believe in joy, because I have experienced it for myself right here in this diocese where I have served. I anticipate that there can be joy in the challenges we face together as the missionary society we are called to be in this part of S.C.

I am sure my approach to leading us through challenges will not suit everyone. My skills and experiences are most certainly not sufficient for all of the assigned responsibilities. Mistakes in judgment and practice are inevitable. I can (and will) only promise that if I were entrusted with this authority and responsibility, I would value and hold that trust as the precious gift that it is.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the sum total of all my faith and doubt revolves around one reality: I am thankful for the truth, beauty, and power of Love.

I believe this Love is knowable in the God and Father of all that is, seen and unseen. I believe it is fleshed out-particularly for us-in the face of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Last, but not least, I believe it is sensible to us through the power of the Spirit in whom we live and move and have our being.

Whatever I might be able to do as a faithful shepherd for Upper S.C., I would do with Love for the glory of God and for the blessing of God's people, including those who are not already members of Christ's Body in this place.