

The Rev. D. Seth Donald

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.

Our shared experiences of the previous year have been challenging, to say the least. A pandemic, social unrest, political divisiveness, and economic uncertainty have strained our society in unthinkable ways. In addition to these, my southwest Louisiana community of Lake Charles was hit with two devastating hurricanes in the fall of 2020. Before those storms, we had adapted to the changing requirements of COVID worship. After the storms hit, we struggled to recover. Our church was severely damaged. The homes of many parishioners were uninhabitable. The electrical grid was completely wiped out and there was no potable water. Debris piles around the city were like levees of trash lining the streets. Blue tarped roofs colored the city's skyline. The situation seemed desperate.

And yet, in all that destruction, God was present. The message of the cross is that even when death and destruction visit us, new life awaits. After calling my dispersed flock to ensure safety and assess needs, we assisted by matching needs to available resources. I experienced extraordinary pastoral conversations. I used calls and social media to reassure people that God was with us and that we would recover and rebuild stronger than before. We found alternate worship space at the new, undamaged Episcopal High School in town. We continued to use technology for evangelism. We were the recipients of love, prayers, and support from around the world. We began to rebuild our church and our community.

I relate this difficult experience to you because through the tragedy of the storms, I saw God at work. I experienced God meeting us where we were and I witnessed the Holy Spirit working in the darkness of desolation. I realized that God's "power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."

How did this experience influence a call to the episcopacy? These unprecedented challenges have helped me see the power of God's love as it enters into our weaknesses. Those challenges have helped me see that we are all part of something larger than ourselves. Even, or perhaps especially, in a time of social distancing, we need one another. Individual spools of thread may be colorful but they do not create anything substantial until woven together.

The parish and the diocese have a vital role to play in uniting the body of Christ, the church. By uniting into something larger than ourselves, like a diocese under the leadership of a bishop, we are capable of doing exponentially more for God's kingdom. That's what St. Paul is telling us in the letter to the Corinthians, that "just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body."

We are better together than we would be apart. The difficult work of rebuilding has given me an appreciation of the work of the diocese and the uniting role of the bishop. During challenging times people are brought together, humbled into acknowledging their need for the loving, liberating, life-giving way of Jesus. The diocese and the bishop have a vital role to play in uniting us to do God's work.

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?

You have squeezed at least four very good questions into the one asked above!

My first impression is that the Diocese of Upper South Carolina is a spiritually healthy one, poised to listen and respond to God. God has placed a collective desire for unity on the hearts of the people of Upper South Carolina. I sense this desire for unity is not just for its own sake but to gather up God's people and commission them to do more. What that "more" is will need to be discerned together with a new bishop.

It excites me to think that I could be involved in leading that deeper discernment forward, together with you. In this desire for unity, I believe there is an amazing opportunity to show the denomination, the country and the world that "things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new." Upper South Carolina can become a model showing that the love which unites us is stronger than whatever attempts to divide us. Proclaiming God's love through Jesus Christ in thought, word, and deed is more important, more effective, and more attractive than any agenda driven movement or by defining ourselves as antagonists. Our broken, partisan, divided society desperately needs the church to model Christian virtue, unity, and love. God could use Upper South Carolina to exemplify unity and love within our denomination, our nation, and the world.

My leadership has been described as collegial, relational, focused, and adaptable. I have a pastoral compassion for people. I deeply care. I have been shown great love and kindness in my lifetime. From this love I am able to show others the love of Jesus Christ. I find it valuable to hear the various perspectives of others. I want to know where people are coming from and I value differing opinions. I want to relate to others and find common ground. This helps me lead by collegiality and consensus.

We are united to God through our relationship with Jesus Christ. Relationships with Christ and with others are important. "The Christ in me greets the Christ in thee in one great family." It is through healthy relationships that we can develop and strengthen our unity. Strong relationships built on trust endure through disagreements.

I am persistent, consistent, focused, and adaptable in those areas where God has called me. The Centennial Campaign would certainly be an area of attention. Raising funds to do God's work does not intimidate me. Referring to the budget as a Statement of Mission perfectly aligns with my theology of stewardship. If we allow the Holy Spirit to guide us, we will surprise ourselves with what can be accomplished for Christ.

I deeply love my current calling as a priest and rector but I also know that God wastes nothing. My experience as a business owner, employer, and regional executive for a national company

would be useful were I called to be bishop. The various roles of a bishop call for a diverse skill set.

Pastoral care of clergy, sacramental leadership, administration and personnel, strategic visioning, and involvement in the governance of the broader church are exciting challenges that would draw on my past experience.

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?

By acknowledging my limitations, practicing balance, and empowering others, I am a servant leader. Along with his divinity, our Lord was fully human. He got hungry. He got tired. He wept. He needed time alone. He experienced a full range of emotions. He maintained balance in his life and in his relationships. We often forget or ignore that we require the same balance. The call of clergy is, at the same time, the most challenging and the most rewarding work.

As a recovering perfectionist, Covid and hurricane work have both reminded me that Jesus does not expect perfection but asks for faithfulness. We must remember that we are finite. We are limited in what we can do by time, resources, and capacity. That does not mean we lower our standards. Acknowledging our finitude means that we are gentle on ourselves so that we are more loving, more grace filled pastors to our people. Acknowledging our limitations empowers us to share the gift of ministry with others. I am willing to be vulnerable and honest as we walk together in discipleship.

A bishop-elect is asked in the Examination portion of the ordination service: "will you sustain your fellow presbyters and take counsel with them; will you guide and strengthen the deacons and all others who minister?" A bishop has a pastoral responsibility for the spiritual health of the clergy. Retreats, spiritual direction, continuing education, rules of life, sabbaticals, and time off sustain clergy well-being. A bishop who maintains a healthy work-life balance gives permission for the clergy of the diocese to do the same. Self-care is a discipline, not an excuse for laziness. In a frenetic world, the church needs priests who are deeply centered in Christ and at peace in the midst of a chaotic, divisive, and consumptive society. Clergy burnout was an issue before the pandemic and it has only increased stress and workload. As church leaders we must be aware of our limitations.

Sharing my humanity with the good people of Upper South Carolina would mean that I am able to acknowledge my own limitations and help others acknowledge their limitations. None of us are invincible. None of us have attained perfection. If we were perfect, we would not need a savior. Bishops are not superheroes but humble leaders. Having the courage to admit mistakes and ask forgiveness is part of being human. Humble servant leadership is required in the Examination. "Your joy will be to follow him who came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

As a Rector or as a Bishop, I know I am not meant to function alone. An effective bishop hires staff to complement strengths and weaknesses and invites others to minister in the diocese. Just as Jethro counseled Moses to share leadership, a bishop empowers others to a life of shared ministry. We are all ministers by virtue of our baptisms. We are all called to serve.

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

Episcopal visitations are important in the life of a diocese but a bishop's ministry involves much more. There is an administrative obligation that cannot be ignored. Committee meetings, convocations, and annual conventions must run smoothly and efficiently. However, a bishop should also be present in other ways to the people of Upper South Carolina. Whether at a parish barbeque or an oyster roast, a Happening event, or a Camp Gravatt gathering, a bishop's participation in the life of the diocese should show people the bishop is more than a crook carrying confirmation machine. I see the next bishop in the midst of you and in the shared ministries of the diocese, living out ministry from a place of togetherness.

The next bishop will lead beautiful liturgies in our timeless Anglican tradition but I also envision the next bishop laughing with you and breaking bread with you, crying with you, and sighing with you. I've always believed that we in the church should take our work seriously but that we should never take ourselves too seriously. Intentionally getting out of the Diocesan office and spending time with people in the convocations, forming relationships and getting to know one another as fellow coworkers in God's kingdom would be important to me.

If elected, I would be representing Upper South Carolinians to the broader Episcopal Church, to other Christian bodies within the diocese, and to the unchurched. The bishop of a diocese has a responsibility to be present at state-wide and community events. As a parish priest, I have opened the Louisiana State Senate in prayer and given presentations to groups such as the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana. The Fellowship of South Carolina Bishops and their initiatives in education and racial justice are excellent collaborative ministries and ways to further ecumenical and social justice work in South Carolina.

One of my favorite spiritual authors, Henri Nouwen, articulates my thoughts. "My own desire to be useful, to do something significant, or to be part of some impressive project is so strong that soon my time is taken up by meetings, conferences, study groups, and workshops that prevent me from walking the streets. It is difficult not to have plans, not to organize people around an urgent cause, and not to feel that you are working directly for social progress. But I wonder more and more if the first thing shouldn't be to know people by name, to eat and drink with them, to listen to their stories and tell your own, and to let them know with words, handshakes, and hugs that you do not simply like them, but truly love them." Visitations are just the beginning. Being woven together in unity and love first require that we get to know one another in relationship. We spend time together. That fellowship compels us to further action but it is fellowship with one another and with Christ that is foundational to our community and our lives together as the Body of Christ.

- 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?**

Our democracy has been tested and our society has been strained. Like a fairy tale that begins with the phrase "darkness covered the land," it seems we all carry a burden as we collectively deal with division and conflict. We are beginning to confront the brokenness of our past so that we may share a hopeful future. The pandemic has created fear, separation, economic crisis, and political instability. And yet, we know from Isaiah "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined." And from John that the light of Christ "shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." As Christians, our greatest defining attribute is not our gender, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, profession, or political party but the love of Christ that lives in each of us. The love that unites us is more compelling than the adjectives that describe us.

Throughout my ministry, I have endeavored to preach the gospel without explicitly endorsing a political platform. The gospel is my only agenda. Yes, our faith should certainly impact the way we vote but our tradition has always been one that allows for differences in opinion. Episcopalians do not issue edicts replacing independent thought. Our theology is found in our Prayer Book, enacted in sacramental worship, and practiced in the world as we go out in peace to love and serve.

What is healing and hopeful is perspective, focus, and civility. In one sense there is nothing new under the sun. In another sense, Christ is making all things new. An overview of salvation history tells us that God plays the long game. World history has witnessed numerous pandemics, civil unrest, societal atrophy, division, and wars. Nothing is new under the sun. And yet, Christ is making all things new. If we are in Christ, we are a new creation. We are woven together in our baptisms to Christ and through him, to one another. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; we are all one in Christ Jesus.

There is no room in the church for the hatred of any group. All are welcome. All are God's children. Movements like Becoming the Beloved Community are long term efforts to promote a culture of reconciliation, justice, and healing. We are to be repairers of the breach when it comes to injustice of any kind. We are to live into our baptismal vows to "respect the dignity of every human being."

The Episcopal Church has clearly spoken on access to marriage equality. We should also respect the conscience and theology of those who espouse a more traditional view of that sacrament. Regardless of differences in opinion, we show charity to one another and treat one another with dignity and respect. We are to be kind and compassionate to one another particularly when we disagree. As long as we focus our energy on what unites us, there will be room for

differences. A diocese of people who center their lives on Jesus Christ and commit to following him is a diocese that is woven together in love, entwined with one another in one great tapestry.

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

Yes, I would like to share a little bit about my personal life and some thoughts on discernment. My wife and I have been married 21 years and we have been blessed with three beautiful daughters: Mary Brooks (18), Eliza (16), and Mae (12). Mary Brooks is preparing for college this fall. Eliza plays high school volleyball and Mae is a budding pianist. For the last two years, Amy was the Executive Director of two nonprofit organizations that house and care for autistic adults. She recently ended a fruitful tenure there. Amy's grandfather was an Episcopal priest and we are both cradle Episcopalians. When we are able to do so again safely, we love to travel. I have a pilgrimage planned to the Holy Land in 2021 which has been rescheduled multiple times due to the pandemic. I enjoy gardening, hiking, fishing, and any other excuse to be outdoors. I love to read and always have a book on hand and several waiting. My golden doodle, Olive, takes me on daily walk. I am a 3 (Achiever) on the Enneagram, an ISTJ on the Myers Briggs, and I land in the Executing, Relationship Building, and Influencing domains on the StrengthsFinder. My life is grounded in prayer and scripture and nourished by the sacraments. I find meaning and identity in my relationship with Jesus Christ and I desire to be led by the Holy Spirit. I enjoy offering and receiving spiritual direction and I find renewal from an annual retreat. I am humbled and honored to be discerning this call with you.

In this search and in any discernment, we seek to hear and follow God's will. We ask that God's will might be heard collectively. We do not discern vocational calls in isolation. We confirm what we hear with others who prayerfully listen to the Holy Spirit. Like Mary, we trustingly make ourselves available, proclaiming "here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." We pray that God's word and God's will might be heard with clarity.

I believe the Holy Spirit is nudging me, asking me to open myself up to the work of a bishop. I have not arrived at this conclusion in a vacuum but in prayer and with the encouragement of others. After reading and resonating with Upper South Carolina's thoughtful, Spirit filled, clear, and compelling profile, I believe the Holy Spirit is calling me into this discernment with you. If you sense the same, I look forward to seeing where God might lead us. May our faith in God and love for one other be strengthened in this time of mutual discernment.