

The Rev. Thomas A. (Lonnie) Lacy II

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.

If you dig down deep enough, you find the root of "vocation" is vox, Latin for "voice." Vocation is literally the voices we hear. It is the words we listen to. It is the conversations through which God pulls us, however reluctantly, toward who he needs us to be.

For years now, God has tried to get my attention through the voices of others. Countless colleagues, parishioners, bishops, and friends have pushed me, saying, "You need to be open to the episcopate. The Church needs your gifts." I have routinely responded, "Yes, but the Church already has me, and I am happy where I am!"

There have been internal voices, too, though. God and I enjoy a robust, conversational prayer life together, developed through years of training in Ignatian spirituality. "Lonnie," God recently asked, "you are indeed happy and useful in your current vocation, but tell me, when are you happiest?"

"Well, Lord," I said, "I'm happiest these days when I mentor other clergy; when they call on me to be their pastor; when I create community for deacons and priests."

"I'm happiest when I form lay leaders; when I teach best practices for congregational development; when I help vestries connect the dots between loving Jesus and making their congregations strong."

"I'm happiest when I do administration and oversight; when I work with others to discern larger visions and create healthier systems; when I make hard decisions and tell hard truths, knowing that a hard truth told today is better than the false comfort of a truth deferred."

"I'm happiest when I find new and timely ways to preach the old and timeless gospel; when I travel and tell people near and far about Jesus; when I get to support others in doing the same."

"But Lord," I said, "all of these are things a priest can do."

"Yes," God replied, "but all of these are things a bishop does."

Meanwhile, other voices have tugged my family's hearts toward Upper South Carolina for years. We have lifelong friends there. I have preached and taught at the cathedral. We visit the Diocese often and have wondered more than once if God is calling us to move there. Simply put, y'all feel like home.

So when your search opened last fall, I said, "Alright, Lord. If you want me to do this, send one more voice. If a nominator calls without my solicitation, I will know it's from you." You see how that turned out.

Years of vocational and spiritual experiences tell me there is a reason why our paths have crossed. It is one thing to be persuaded of a potential vocation to the episcopate, but that vocation means nothing if one doesn't also feel a vocation to a particular people, in a particular diocese, at a particular time.

With all my heart, I feel a sense of vocation toward you, the people of Upper South Carolina. It would be a joy to join you in discernment and find out why.

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?

"Family." That is the first word I think of as I read your profile. Some dioceses function as ecclesiastical corporations run by a bishop-as-CEO. That's one way to do it, I suppose, but it seems you in Upper South Carolina have held to a more excellent way. You strike me as an extended family, woven together by God's grace and the bonds of Episcopal worship, ethos, and affection. You crave not a CEO but a chief pastor. I love that about you.

What excites me about leading EDUSC?

Relationships:

More than once you use the word "kind" to describe your new bishop. Some might reduce that word to just another synonym for "nice," but kindness goes deeper. "Kind" comes from "kin"-as in family, kindred, tribe-and true kinship requires more than mere niceness. It requires trust. So while it helps that I am indeed well known for being a "nice guy," what's better is that I have developed a lifetime of skills in building systems of trust. A kind bishop is a wonderful thing, but a bishop who can help you build deeper, lasting relationships of trust among yourselves? That's priceless.

Collaboration:

The job of a bishop is not to say, "Here is the vision," but to pull people together, encourage them in their gifts, help them grow deeper in Christ, and shepherd them in discerning God's vision together. This is not quick work. It requires seeing ourselves less as canons, committees, and commissions, and more as a community of learning disciples. Collaborative discernment is a gift with which I am well equipped and one of the facets of ministry that brings me the most joy.

Creativity:

Ours is an ancient faith, yet the world demands modern engagement. As one whose fifteen minutes of fame unexpectedly catapulted me onto a larger online stage (see <http://bit.ly/lacytodayshow> and <http://bit.ly/hamiltonparody>), I know well the blessings, challenges, and pitfalls of online Episcopal evangelism. I am tech savvy, software proficient, and skilled at creating online content, but that's true of many of your clergy, all of whom had their own technological baptisms-by-fire in 2020. The question is not, "Can our bishop create compelling online content?" (The answer is yes.) The question is, "Can our bishop lead us in combining, strengthening, and refining all we have learned so we can share the Gospel creatively even after COVID-19?" (Again, the answer is yes.) None of us have all the answers, but I believe my expertise, creativity, and curiosity could serve EDUSC well as we learn together.

Opportunities:

As I read between the lines of your profile, I see multiple opportunities. You desire a stronger diaconate. You want to further build your youth, college, and young adult ministries. You hope to address diversity and reconciliation in new and honest ways. As a lifelong Episcopalian, each of these are near and dear to my heart. It would be a joy to join my experience to yours in courageous pursuit of these goals together.

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?

Like you, I have known plenty of clergy, especially bishops, who seem to worry that we won't trust them--or that they can't trust us--if they show us too much of who they really are. I imagine this starts from a good place: a place of wanting to maintain healthy boundaries, of trying to show no partiality, of balancing the countervailing roles of chief pastor and primary overseer. Gone too far, though, and the result is a bishop detached, aloof, alone.

Good shepherds must be able to do two things at once. First, they have to keep the whole flock in view, which requires perspective and distance. At the same time, they have to live and walk among the sheep if they are to help them find their way. The same is true for bishops. Trustworthy spiritual leadership requires both self differentiation and real connection in equal measure.

What might that look like?

Preaching Grace (and Living It, Too):

In your question, you've already named the most important part: grace. Grace is my singular touchstone, the place from which I preach, teach, and lead. Why? Because I need it every day, and so do you. The saving grace of Jesus Christ allows us the freedom to be honest, vulnerable, and real. If I hope to convince you that you are loved and reconciled to God, I can only do so as your fellow human being, or--as D.T. Niles once put it--"one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

Life Beyond Visitations:

Knowing each other as actual humans saved by grace requires more than a single liturgical visitation once a year. I'll say more in the next question.

Embracing Limitations:

We trust God provides the right bishop with the right gifts at the right time, but no bishop has it all. I will strive daily to learn and grow, but I will also be honest about my limitations. I will forgive myself when I cannot do it all. I will ask you to do the same. I won't try to be super-bishop, and I won't ask you to be super-people. Faithfulness is more than enough.

Family & Workaholism:

While I envision an active, energetic episcopate among you, my first vocation is to my family. I'll have dinners to go home to, track meets to cheer on, piano recitals to attend. Though we rarely see bishops with families these days, my family is my best safeguard against workaholism and my most consistent source of God's grace. Embracing the humanity of a bishop's family gives him or her room to more fully embrace you and yours.

Support from Outside:

Good leaders share, but they can't share everything. Over the years I have developed an excellent support system, including a healthy prayer life, a therapist, a spiritual director, a strong family, a physical wellness regimen, and lifelong friends outside the Church. All of these allow me to love, care for, and forgive myself, which better equips me to do the same for you.

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

I've lived nearly my entire life in the center of the Diocese of Georgia, a sprawling place with 70 congregations flung across 33,000 square miles. (By comparison, Upper South Carolina seems to be about 13,000 square miles.) I know too well the challenges of staying connected as a diocese, especially when geography makes the bishop seem a world away.

For that reason, I was quite taken with the following words in your profile: "We want you to get out of Columbia and be a sacramental presence in our congregations, at the formation events at Gravatt, and enjoy the fellowship/fundraising events for our local outreach ministries."

Reimagining Episcopal Visitations:

First, I believe the Church is long overdue for evaluating and reimagining how our bishops spend time with us. In the current model, a bishop "ping-pongs" across the diocese each weekend, landing back at his or her desk every Monday. While this approach surely has its benefits, when was the last time we assessed it against our current needs and capabilities? How might our modern mobile culture allow a bishop to spend time of a different, deeper quality with us while remaining remotely connected to the diocesan office? These are questions bishops and dioceses should be exploring together.

Convocational Mini-Residencies:

To take that thought a step further, what if, once a year, your bishop didn't dart right back to Columbia, but spent a week in your convocation? What if he or she made a visitation on Sunday? Got his or her hands dirty with another church's local outreach on Monday? Treated the clergy of the convocation to lunch on Tuesday? Met with teens or the local Canterbury Club on Wednesday? Ate barbecue and enjoyed a parish's annual talent show fundraiser on Friday? Offered a prayer retreat with the Daughters of the King on Saturday? The idea would not be to create new work because the Bishop's in town, but simply for the Bishop to joyfully join you in the real life you're already living.

Engaging in Formation Together:

The typical Episcopalian gets all of one hour a year with the Bishop. One liturgy. One sermon. Maybe one coffee hour thrown in, too, if they're lucky. No wonder bishops seem more like foreign dignitaries than chief pastors. I dream of an episcopate where we have multiple opportunities to grow deeper in Christ together. Where the Bishop participates in diocesan prayer retreats and hosts conferences for lay people. Where he or she gathers with the deacons on an annual basis. Where your teens come home from Happening feeling like they know their Bishop because he or she stayed the whole weekend and participated fully.

Technology & Media:

As we've learned in the pandemic, nothing replaces in-person fellowship, but quality online ministry can go a long way. A thoughtful monthly podcast or a regular YouTube series are ways through which a bishop can not only routinely offer his or her voice, but can also convene the voices of others in unexpected, compelling ways.

- 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?**

The world is in flux, but the one thing that is the same yesterday, today, and forever is the reconciling love of Jesus Christ. That is a love you in the Diocese of Upper South Carolina know well.

First, any new bishop will need to listen deeply to how you have already approached conflict and division in recent years. You and God have already been about this work for some time, and I would want to hear first from you about what has gone well in those conversations and what opportunities and challenges remain.

When addressing those challenges, gifted people called by God are our greatest resource. In my own diocese, we have had tremendous success in raising up a diverse cadre of clergy and lay leaders with gifts for conflict management. Each person receives intensive training from an organization such as Kaleidoscope Institute or the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center and are then available to be deployed throughout the diocese as needs arise. A trained mediator can be sent by the Bishop to assist a parish in a local conflict, or the whole team can be called upon to craft conversations for the diocese when a divisive matter emerges. Having such a team positioned throughout the diocese also injects health into the system simply by having their skills and competencies available in everyday life.

Similarly, while we always have to be ready to respond to conflicts as they emerge, it is even more important to build trust proactively into the system. One of the most surprising ways I've found to build trust is through laughter and joy. "Play" humanizes us, whether it's kids playing on the church lawn, clergy having a night of fun at clergy conference, or the whole diocese gathering for an annual picnic at Gravatt. We live in serious times beset by serious conflicts, but the pursuit of joy goes a long way in keeping us human. Again, see <http://bit.ly/hamiltonparody>, a moment of joy that brought unexpected hope to people across the globe.

When dealing with serious matters, though, I've found the most effective way to offer Christian hope is to point unrelentingly to what God has done, is doing, and still promises to do. This may seem obvious, but it runs counter to our inclinations. As our divisions mount and our opinions ossify, we are increasingly inclined to call others out and demand that they change. Sometimes this is warranted--even prophetic--but it hardly ever leads to hope. The true prophet of hope is one who points to God, reminds us of our baptismal identity, and sets our woes within the broader narrative of God's plan for humanity.

That approach speaks to how I've sought to advocate for social change during this difficult year. Like everyone, I've had moments of intense anger, even a couple embarrassing outbursts, none of which were effective in making any real change. In my small town of Tifton, however, what

did work was when I called my fellow pastor Rudy Porter after George Floyd died. "Rudy," I said, "we have to do something. People are hurting. Trust is low. The city's on edge." Two days later, on a sultry south Georgia evening, the black pastors, white pastors, police force, sheriff's department, city council, county commission, mayor, and citizens gathered across from the courthouse in the center of town. For two hours, we prayed. We put our hands on each other's shoulders. We spoke honestly about our pain and our fears. We confessed that we love each other. We covenanted to remain one as a city.

That evening was only possible by the grace of God and because Rudy and I knew and trusted one another. For Tifton, Georgia, that was an evening of actual social change, more effective than any single tweet or Facebook post ever could have been.

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

The only thing I would like to add is that I bear a lifelong affinity for bishops who value the youth and college kids of the diocese and take time to join them at important events. I grew up in the church, and the bishops of my youth are a large part of why I am a priest today. While youth and college students were mentioned only briefly in your profile, I know that they are of tremendous importance to you. I hope they will be to your next bishop, too.