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Diocese of South Carolina

1. Please share a vocational and spiritual experience that has influenced your consideration in your call to the office of bishop, and to the Diocese of South Carolina, in particular.

"I am forced to write these words regarding which I would have gladly kept silent because I fear greatly the power of vainglory. But I have learned to fear more the judgment of God should I, God's small creature, keep silent."

-Hildegard of Bingen

God's call to us is often, especially at first, external, as much as it is internal. That is, the church's call often comes to us before we experience our own individual sense of being called. This was certainly the case in my own call to priesthood. As a young person I routinely raised the prospect of seminary to my brother—for him. God was already active in my own life in ways that I could not yet see. After faithful clergy and laity began to raise the prospect with me, I began to see.

By the time I was approved to attend seminary, I then promptly deferred my studies because I had in my care a fledgling Spanish-speaking congregation, serving as their lay vicar. I did not wish to leave them. I flew over to Sewanee in the springtime to see if it might be possible to take a course here or there or during the summers perhaps. On my way back home, I drove down the mountain to Chattanooga to catch my plane, but was also driving to a different time zone, and my plane was boarding as I arrived. I took off running through the airport and tripped over my luggage and suffered a bad fall. I caught my plane but a couple of days later had to undergo neck surgery.

During my recovery, a parishioner and his mother, both from Mexico, came to see me. My parishioner said:

"As Jesus said, 'The poor you will always have with you.' And we are the poor. And we'll always be here. But it is time now for you to go away to seminary because God is calling you to be a priest."

A few months later I had matriculated at Sewanee as a full-time student, and was reminded that the harvest is never ours, but the Lord's. My parishioner helped me to see that the fledgling congregation I loved so much was God's own, not mine.

It was a similar lesson to one I had learned as a child on the farm. No matter how much one pours oneself into the crop, it can all be lost in an instant during a hailstorm or some other disaster. Rather than cause for woe, though, this recognition actually frees us to do the work we are called to do—to love and serve wholeheartedly and not be tied to outcomes beyond our control. Such a recognition keeps us from disillusionment when the road gets rough.

With regard to the prospect of the office of bishop for our diocese, this story has returned to my memory lately in my desire to be open and not presumptuous about God’s call. I have learned the hard way not to be so adamant in my understanding of what I believe God might have in store for me. Sometimes we have to fall down in order to see clearly.

Numerous faithful people whom I trust deeply have suggested to me that I pay attention and allow for this period of discernment. As members of the Body of Christ, we are members one of another, which means we listen to one another.

Why the Diocese of South Carolina?

Because no other place or people holds my heart as our own beloved diocese. I believe we are called not merely to an office or position, but to a particular place, and within a certain context.

As E.B. White famously recalls in his classic essay on place, describing a thunderstorm on the lake he had loved since childhood:

“It was like the revival of an old melodrama that I had seen long ago with childish awe...The whole thing was so familiar, the first feeling of oppression and heat and a general air...of not wanting to go very far away.”

So, too, I feel about the Diocese of South Carolina.

2. Bishops are to carry out the apostolic work of leading, supervising, and uniting the Church. What talents and strengths do you bring to the shepherding of the Diocese of South Carolina through the challenges we are facing:
 - a. during the transition to reconciliation with the returning congregations, and
 - b. as a result of historical and current issues of inclusion and diversity (age, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality)?

The bishop is the chief priest and shepherd, and symbol of unity—not only unity with the wider church, but also unity within the diocese—and should work to foster unity and trust among laity and clergy—and gather the flock. My sense as I travel around the diocese is that the people of our diocese—both lay and clergy—need to get to know and trust one another better. I think this is simply a result of the fact that our diocese suffered the division in late 2012. As people get to know one another better—with a diocesan bishop in place, something we have not had in many years—relationships of trust and mutual support will develop as we all work together towards purposes outside of ourselves.

Concerning my strengths and talents, I am a pastor, and a teacher. I love to gather people together. I am also a pilgrim and a mender of nets, as well as a farmer and gardener, tending fragile growth while pouring heart and soul into the crop—yet knowing that any growth is brought forth by God, and again, any harvest is never ours but always the Lord’s. I am both a dreamer and a worker, a thinker and a reader and writer, and laborer. My preaching and teaching tend to bring in ordinary images in order to relate to the present day and our own current context. I admit to enjoying troubleshooting and problem-solving.

Since 2009, I have edited an occasional journal of writings from people within the Diocese of SC and beyond titled “Carolina Grace: Gold for the Soul.” It began and continues to be as an instrument of unity and a vehicle for creative expression and worship, a means for allowing us to hear the meditations of the hearts of one another.

With regard to reconciliation, I subscribe to Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s admonition that reconciliation requires a proper confrontation—that is, true reconciliation requires justice and truth—honesty with respect to past, present, and future—when dealing with one another, as well as gentleness.

Since not long after the massacre at Emanuel AME Church, the Reverend Dr. Kylon Middleton, Pastor of Mt Zion AME Church in Charleston, and I have co-facilitated a weekly interracial Book Study in which we deal with matters of race, together with truth and justice and conflict and reconciliation. The work is grueling; the work is poignant; the work has been life-changing. So many relationships have developed and deepened over these last five years. New people join all the time, and not only from within SC.

It has also been our privilege to host regular Okra Soup suppers. We like to follow the slogan of Civil Rights leader Esau Jenkins: “*Love is progress, hate is expensive.*” We have supper and listen to a speaker, followed by focused conversations around tables.

For years now, we have been teaching that okra soup, with roots in West Africa, is the quintessential American dish—in which every ingredient is essential, every ingredient retains its own individual flavor, every ingredient enhances the flavor of the whole. It takes time for all the flavors to coalesce, and there's always room for more at the table. In the greatest diversity we find our highest unity. We believe in unity, not uniformity, as Bishop Guerry would say. Any proper confrontation always begins with ourselves, looking deep within our own heart.

We are aware that our work—be it the Book Study or the Okra Soup suppers—has become something of a model. We recognize that our efforts are not perfect, but neither is community perfect this side of the grave, but it can be “beloved.”

To me, the returning congregations are as sheep without a shepherd, in need of living water that only our Lord can give, and a deep hunger for the gospel of Christ, the good news of resurrection that is open and available to all. Spiritual devastation was wrought upon our entire diocese. A severe trauma was inflicted upon our collective soul. We need to be understanding of the effects of trauma and how to foster avenues for healing and wholeness. The road to reconciliation will be long. It will be rough. It has been long and rough already. But it is our road to walk, together—not only in this life, but also the next.

With regard to the lingering legal action against us in the state court, now back before the South Carolina Supreme Court, I cannot predict the timing or result of any judgement, but imagine we will hear something sooner rather than later, perhaps when we least expect it. All the while, we move forward in faith, remembering that we are stewards. As stewards know that we labor on behalf of future generations, just as previous generations have labored on our own behalf.

Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple once said:

“It is not we who can heal the wounds in Christ’s body; it is only by coming closer to Christ that we can come closer to one another.”

As we become Christ, as we show Christ to one another and the world, our fractured body begins to heal. It is hard for us to imagine what a restored diocese might look like, because it will be a new creation, a resurrected people—more than we can ever ask for or imagine.

The question in this essay deals in part with reconciliation with the returning congregations, but the question we need to ask ourselves as a diocese is this:

Do we want reconciliation and healing? That is, do we want to be restored with the people that left the Episcopal Church and our diocese and who now worship in the parishes that are no longer a part of the Episcopal Church?—many of whom, I should point out, after all this time, we likely do not even know yet. I am not talking about returning to the Diocese of SC pre-schism. I am not talking about returning to what once was. I am talking about reconciliation and healing. We do not know what reconciliation and healing for our diocese might look like, because it will be God’s work, yet to be realized—but I do know that it is the work we have been given, our cross to pick up daily as we strive to follow our Lord.

We have a history in our diocese of saying “No” — “No” to African Americans, “No” to women, “No” to members of the LGBTQ community. Let’s be careful we don’t say “No” to those who are not now a part of us, especially because their presence among us might upset the cozy feeling of a club. As Jesus said:

“I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.”

We are not a club, we are a church, Christ’s own Body.

Concerning further matters of inclusion and diversity, I believe it is important to remember that our own legal struggle in SC is nothing less than a powerful struggle for justice—for the LGBTQ community—and for all. We do not consider this often enough, but this is why it is taking so very long. The road to deep justice is always arduous, and often outrageous. We in the Diocese of SC truly believe in, and have sacrificed to become, a church that belongs to all—no matter age, ethnicity, race, gender, or sexual orientation. We did not ask for this struggle, but it is our struggle—a struggle for truth and justice, as well as restoration and resurrection. Our martyred bishop once mused:

“The truth is worth struggling for.”

Cleveland Sellers, scapegoat for the Orangeburg Massacre in 1968, noted on the 25th anniversary of the massacre:

“Truth comes to us from the past...like gold washed down from the mountains. The only way we find the truth is to examine the past honestly...I’m not angry because I know justice will prevail...”

Even now, in the year 2021, the state of SC still has yet to apologize for this blight upon her very soul, our soul. The Orangeburg Massacre is emblematic of the larger blight of which we are all painfully aware, the healing of which continues to be at the core of some of our most painful work.

The greatest struggles for truth and justice sometimes take much longer than they should in this earthly life. But let us beware of the human wish to dispense tidily with struggle, simply because it is inconvenient and we have perhaps grown weary at times.

Flannery O'Connor noted in her prayer journal:

"Nothing can be possessed but the struggle. All our lives are consumed in possessing struggle but only when the struggle is cherished and directed to a final consummation outside of this life is it of any value."

3. Where do you envision the Episcopal Church's ministry during the next decade? What actions have you taken as an active participant in the future of the church and how will that inform your work in the Diocese of South Carolina?

Every day, I am acutely aware that the rebuilding and restoration ministry of our diocese is for the future. It is for the present, but we undertake this work on behalf of generations yet unborn. We stand upon the shoulders of those who labored in their own difficult day, and we, too, are laboring on behalf of those who will follow us. I have a deep and abiding sense of the presence and support of the communion of saints who bolster us with their love and prayers.

By the wider Episcopal Church's own reckoning and reporting, membership and Sunday attendance are sharply declining across the church, and that was before the pandemic. We need to be aware of these trends in the Diocese of SC in order to work to resist such trends. We are peculiar in the Diocese of SC, idiosyncratic, a bit quirky—but we have something wonderful to offer, to the world and to the rest of the church. We have endured too much, lost too much, learned too much, not to avail ourselves of the true gift that has been given to us.

That gift—our cross, more sweet than bitter—is to see and be Christ's Body in a fresh and new way, as a pilgrim church, nimble and travelling light—open to burgeoning growth and an expansive vision, together with shared responsibility in a common mission. We cannot become mere keepers of a private club in which speaking and thinking alike are required and deviation from the majority is looked upon with both condescension and even disdain. God help us if we try to make ourselves clones of others. Were we to do so, we would, sadly, reject and squander the gift that is ours. It is in becoming ourselves that we become Christ.

Now and in the years to come, better use needs to be made of clergy and lay people who know what it takes to grow congregations. Congregations that are

growing and well-situated geographically tend to have hardworking laity and clergy who are secure in themselves, with an openness and willingness to empower people, and an emphasis on worship and thoughtful and nourishing liturgy, as well as hospitality and service to the community. These are the ancient hallmarks of a thriving church, and they are the hallmarks of a vibrant church of the future.

The Episcopal Church also needs to rediscover the language and practice of call, among both clergy and laity, and beware that positions of leadership at every level do not become superficial popularity contests. Christ called his disciples. Many fine people are willing to serve and help build up the church, but they need to be asked, they need to be called. Sometimes, too, the best thing for bishops to do is get out of the way and lead from behind, in the manner of the good shepherd.

As for actions regarding the future of the church, everything I do is with an eye toward the future, as well as the present. All the work, for example, in restoring the Bishop Guerry story to the collective memory of the church occurred with not only the present in mind, but also the future. It was he who once said:

“If we take a backward glance today it is only that we may gain fresh strength and courage for the future, and the great work to which God has called us.”

4. How have you built relationships in your ministry and how might you build relationships among the diverse worshipping communities in our diocese?

The whole underlying concept of my ministry and life and personality has to do with relationships. It gives me great pleasure to see the saints equipped for the ministry of the gospel. The strongest relationships—the ones that are eternal in nature—occur when God’s people labor together on behalf of others and in a common mission, working together to build up the Body of Christ.

Serving in a part-time capacity as archdeacon has allowed me to travel around the diocese on a regular basis, especially among many of our mission congregations—both those formed after 2012, as well as our longstanding missions. When the schism occurred and we needed to begin to re-organize, I was already on the ground and immediately began working with people in many places, both pastorally and practically. Much of this was made possible owing to the many connections already in existence over many years.

Additionally, serving as subdean in a very large cathedral congregation, as well as all my various community endeavors, requires the ability to build and sustain relationships.

As a young person in the church I was formed in community and was taught the baptismal call of us all to serve. For many years I was deeply involved in our diocesan ministry with the church in the Dominican Republic. This ministry took me not only to the DR—occasionally for the entire summer—but also around our own diocese. I served on the vestry in my early twenties. It was my privilege as a teenager and then, young adult, to serve on two search committees for rector. As a high school teacher for nine years I relished the time spent with young people in the classroom.

All of my work has been with people. When we launched the Spanish-speaking ministry, I visited with folks in their homes and places of employment and was regularly called into the island schools to serve as a liaison and mediate any matters of conflict or confusion, be they language or otherwise. Additionally, a wide-ranging group of clergy and laity from around the diocese served in this ministry and many congregations generously supported it.

I was raised on a farm and in a home that regularly—and seemingly inherently—practiced hospitality—from eclectic guests around the dinner table to impromptu gatherings both large and small, inside and out.

A few years ago, the okra soup suppers began in my home, but almost immediately, it became necessary to move them to the Cathedral parish hall in order to handle the numbers. I enjoy adventures and regard life and ministry and the mystery of faith as a grand adventure, and positively delight in inviting people along to participate for themselves—for them to make any journey by no means mine, but their own.

I would consider it a high priority to spend time with the people of God and work together with them to develop opportunities in which we could all grow in our relationships with one another and the Lord. A bishop of our diocese would need to know the people of the diocese, both clergy and laity. I would want to be sure the clergy were—and felt—supported. I would want to be present around the diocese. The diocese is the congregations.

I would seek to support our diverse worshipping communities. Our congregations need to know that they can rely on the bishop to work to find them the appropriate clergy for their context, as well as equip and empower—and value—the laity of each congregation. We need to become more creative and proactive and not passive in our dealings when it comes to raising up local

leadership. Proper process is always important and necessary, but it should be a means not of burdensome bureaucracy but rather of facilitating ministry and not hindering it. I can think of at least a few lay leaders in our diocese who need to be recognized and empowered for the ministries they are already exercising. I have met with several of them in just the last couple of months. These are they who are holding the church together in their own area and we need to support them in every way. As I have already written, in my own experience in the Diocese of SC, in a time of burgeoning growth, it was my pleasure to serve as lay vicar of a congregation in which I was fully supported and empowered because diocesan leadership recognized that God was up to something.

Our next bishop will need to recognize that God is actually up to something in the Diocese of SC.

I would advocate for congregations and regions in need. For example, I have been advocating for a priest for the Pee Dee for the entire last year. The search is now in process. When I first began advocating a year ago, I encountered resistance from a few not in the Pee Dee region of our diocese. Such a lack of generosity of spirit has no place among us. I pointed out that in late 2012, there were nine Episcopal churches in the entire Pee Dee, nine. All nine churches left our diocese. Now, we have a mission in Florence, St. Catherine's, and a worshipping community in Cheraw. Historically, the Pee Dee is the very breadbasket of the diocese. Just as the earth produces of itself, the Pee Dee produces of itself. Our very existence as a diocese is linked to the vitality of the Pee Dee, which leads me to another point:

We need to develop an exciting and expansive diocesan-wide means for generating funding for mission and ministry, a vision in which everyone can readily participate in order to grow our diocese: shoring up existing congregations and also planting congregations, as but a beginning.

Other areas where we need to be strategic in ministry include Myrtle Beach, West Ashley, and Mount Pleasant, just as a start, in addition to ensuring that our historically Black congregations are supported and built up and not neglected—and that they know they obviously have a vital role and a say and stake in developing plans for their own future. We also need to honor the various liturgical styles and practices present among us.

Additionally, it is important to remember that some of our stronger parishes today were dwindling in numbers and at risk of closing barely a generation ago. In some cases, it was a priest, or a group of lay people who stepped up and

challenged the bishop not to sell their property, but instead, to let them have another “go” at things. Thanks be to God.

You see, today I might need you. Tomorrow you might need me. Today the need might be in Sumter or Denmark or Allendale. Tomorrow it might be on Edisto or Pawleys Island or in Okatie. Every day, we need each other to be the people God is calling us to be. This is the very essence of the old term “interdependence.”

In a conversation just the other day, a lay leader from one of our mission congregations without a priest asked me if he could depend on “the diocese” for support. His question was practical, but it was also deeper, for he and others have been working tirelessly and at their own expense to build up their church. He needed to know that we are in this together with him and his congregation. My answer, while “yes,” was a somewhat tentative “yes,” as my mind contemplated all the various steps needed to procure funds. I regretted my hesitant tone right away, before even pronouncing the word. Even my tentative “yes” was also only possible knowing I could make a few phone calls and easily raise the funding needed, outside of any diocesan processes, in the event that those processes failed.

But this lay leader detected my hesitant tone and immediately took me to task, as well he should have!—doing so in that wonderful SC way that dares to test relationships while at the same time boldly counting on their strength—in order to speak truth—in order to move beyond self and into a greater and higher vision and purpose. I was most grateful for his faithfulness and directness and love for his church—and for reminding me of our need to be unhesitatingly supportive of the very people who are our very diocese.

We need a serious re-structuring of our support system for congregations so that congregations do not feel as if they are competing with one another for a pittance here and there. We need to be readily celebrating and supporting one another, not vying against one another for leaky lifeboats.

In another situation, about a year and a half ago, out of sheer neglect, we almost lost the Church of the Heavenly Rest in Estill. This was a property that had been deeded to Bishop Guerry with very specific stipulations. It has been my pleasure to work with the Chancellor and the Marshall family and a growing group from the Southern Deanery to begin to restore relationships and awaken this lovely church in its bucolic setting, poised to be a real jewel and place of refreshment for us all—from Morning and Evening Prayer to Quiet Days to Vestry

or Staff Retreats to Tea Room-style luncheons and Community gatherings, etc. A special Eucharist is planned for the Second Sunday of Easter in the afternoon.

5. The larger societal context of health and economic uncertainty, divisiveness and social change leaves many with a sense of pessimism, anxiety and even despair. How have you proclaimed a message of hope during these difficult times? As we struggle with these issues in the world, how have you gotten in the trenches with us and led others to do God's work?

My entire ministry has been lived out in the trenches—in fields and homes and churches of every size and rivers and creeks and bustling city streets—and across the highways, but more often, bi-ways, of our region, and yes, in recent years, even in courtrooms.

The fact that I love and live life in the trenches—in the arena—is the reason I struggled a bit in allowing my name to go forward as a possibility for bishop. But then I realized that our diocese needs a chief priest and pastor—a shepherd—who will be out and about among the people, and who will know and love and encourage and inspire and empower the wonderful people of our diocese—who come from places like Cheraw, where the Great Pee Dee River begins and on down the Waccamaw converging into Winyah Bay, and then all the way down the coast to Beaufort and Hilton Head and then inland over to Orangeburg and Wedgefield and the High Hills of the Santee, and every place in-between, and beyond.

Time and presence and the willingness to listen and get to know people is always my aim, sometimes lived out quite imperfectly, but always the prayer and desire of my heart in my many and varied relationships.

Each generation faces its own unique struggles, and for us in South Carolina, adversity is nothing new. We have been formed and forged through war, discrimination and oppression, earthquake, fire, hurricanes, pestilence and division—and now, pandemic and civil unrest.

Yet we have continued to be the people of God, believing with all our heart that God will make a way for us and for all and believing that we have a message of hope and grace and love and justice and peace to proclaim. Because our Lord lives, we, too, shall live, and we never cease to proclaim resurrection to those in need of new life, beginning often with ourselves. We point to signs of resurrection all around us.

One of the images from creation to which I return repeatedly is the Resurrection Fern, which grows, among other places, in the limbs of the great live oak.

Because we are both South Carolinians and Episcopalians, we know that *while we breathe, we hope*—and that even *at death, life is changed, not ended*.

So whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's—and our life and love will continue.

We know how lucky we are to be alive right now, living out our earthly pilgrimage—being placed at tasks which demand our best efforts—and also our very selves, our souls and bodies.

Our bishop will need to be willing to serve as Christ himself served.

The times require it.