

Cathleen Chittenden Bascom
Application for the Tenth Bishop of Kansas
Essay questions

1. How do you share your joy of being a Child of God with others?

Some people might accuse me of being wired for joy. Exuberance and enthusiasm are important colors in my palette. However, such personality traits can dry up quickly. Beneath them, like the Ogallala aquifer coursing beneath the plains, is the relational offer of a life with God. Prayer, time spent in the natural world, the Eucharist, and creating sermons are irrigation lines that open me to God's flowing love. Through such things, even in difficult times, I have found the joy of being companioned by God, especially in the person of Jesus.

How do I share it? Verbal encouragement of others is a primary way. When rooted in God's love, I am often illuminated and able to see clearly that all around me are Children of God. I share *my* joy by reflecting the gifts and talents I see in *them*. In Paul's *Letter to the Philippians* there is this amazing sentence, particularly spectacular in the Greek:

1:9 And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more...

It is harder to see in the English, but there is a combo of active verbs in this phrase that capture the dynamic, flowing, movement of love that begins with God. When we tap it, both as individuals and as communities, it fills us up and tends to overflow.

Studying the Biblical narratives, and sacred texts even of other faith traditions, also opens me to this relationship with the Divine. Then, the opportunity to preach – as Barbara Lundblad says, connecting the Biblical text to the community text – is like turning on the tap. Preaching and writing are central ways I try to share this joy.

At first, I wondered if I like “Child of God” or prefer “Beloved of God”...but, then I realized how so often one of the greatest gifts we can offer the Church is to retain a sense of humor! Like children, laughing and crying together are great means of expressing the joy we gain from God.

Lastly, I ask: who *is* a Child of God? I believe that the time is ripe for Jesus' followers to engage whole-heartedly in this question. In this century, we must commence with the complex task of inter-faith understanding and cooperation. To take it even further, we must be clear that the earth and its waters, and plants, and creatures are all children of God along with humanity. Our actions in these two areas must reveal our joy.

May Jesus' followers in Kansas grow in the spiritual practices that open us to God's presence and may the joy from it percolate, bubble up, and overflow in surprising ways.

2. How and why is the Holy Spirit calling you to lead the Diocese of Kansas?

The Episcopate

A shift occurred, not unlike my unlikely call to the priesthood 25-years ago. I had served in four different parish contexts and was in a harmonious, fruitful period as cathedral dean. I will confess that I was tired and that seven to eight years is often my ministry “shelf life.” But this was different. Staying in a hermitage at a Franciscan center, I experienced a spiritual change. Back at the cathedral, celebrating the Eucharist, it presented almost like the “absence of something”, and I knew it was time to move on. During my retreat, I had asked myself “Who is priest of the prairie grasses? Who is giving voice to the goldfinch?” Since then I have read English liberation theologian Mary Grey who writes that “the earth and its creatures are the new poor” and I have come to embrace a calling on behalf of the earth

A position on the religion faculty of a small liberal arts college came my way and I was accepted into a creative-writing and environment MFA. The Bishop also asked me to assist a very small parish and support their emerging Ministry Development Team. As I have driven across hundreds of miles these last four years – past green, green cornfields and Siberian-like snow piles – as well as a creation calling I have come to sense a regional calling. My focus has expanded and I have become aware that the new call might be episcopal.

Kansas

I was driving through the Loess Hills of Iowa – reminiscent of Northeast Kansas -- when I learned that Kansas would be searching for a new bishop. My heart took flight and I sensed that I would probably apply. However, when the first round came for applications, for various reasons the timing was just not right. Being approached as a petition candidate, things are better aligned for me to now explore!

If the episcopacy is my new calling, Kansas appeals for numerous reasons. I actually grew up in Denver, Colorado but my mother’s people were citizens of Kansas City since the 1860’s and my father’s people followed the wheat from where they had farmed in Connecticut since 1639 to Kansas by 1871.

The size of this diocese and the mix of its parish contexts appeal to me. With my love of prairies, to be bishop of the Flint Hills would be a privilege. In the Profile, elements from the Listening Sessions resonate: a spirituality, energy, and sense of connectivity as strengths, and the desire to evangelize, learn healthy conflict, and increase diversity.

The prayer at the front of the Profile articulates a Bishop I might be suited and strive to be: *“...the faithful pastor who will nurture your people and cultivate the myriad gifts that abide in the people of this diocese.”*

3. “Chief Pastor” what does this mean?

Chief. While I was staring at the picture of the Diocese of Kansas’ four convocations, the image of a jigsaw puzzle came to mind. With each town and Episcopal shield exists a different piece of what our loving God wants to do in Kansas. These small pieces fit together into larger regional pieces.

There is no hiding the fact that our task is challenging! The Christendom of the 20th-century is ephemeral if not vanishing. We are not quite sure what God will make of us! It is hard to put the pieces together when the image is new and unfamiliar. But the life of faith is like that sometimes. We must remind ourselves that the very first followers of Jesus had the same experience -- exponentially! The Spirit of the Risen One was making them into something unrecognizable to both Jewish and Greek people of their time.

The Bishop is charged with oversight – quite literally taking an aerial view in space and a long view in terms of time. I have always enjoyed the visionary and problem-solving side of leadership. Chief means to me collaborative oversight of the whole. In my 27-years as a priest, I have served almost every shape and size of parish in the Midwest context: North Shore Chicago suburban (ASA 400-500); renewing/planting campus ministry (Kansas State University) and peer ministry Wichita State and Washburn; mid-size town, mid-size parish (ASA 80); downtown cathedral (ASA 150); very small mission-team-led church (ASA 15). I believe that this varied experience can help me to understand the unique parishes and places engaged in mission in Kansas. I also believe that by stepping slightly aside to teach at the college for the last four years, I have some new perspective on the Church, see it from some new angles. I understand better how less-churched people and those of other traditions view us. I pray that perspective can help me guide mission.

Pastor

While engaged in oversight, a Bishop also needs to spend real time on the ground with all the congregations of the Diocese. A bishop can only figure out how the pieces fit together if he/she comes close enough to learn the needs and resources of each place and its people.

Tapping that moving, overflowing love named in *Philippians*, a bishop should care for diocesan leaders – clergy and lay – for the love and care of leaders radiates outward into each parish.

4. How have you led the people of God in speaking out about and taking action on social justice issues?

“Who cares.”

We are seminarians exiting an ethics class in Chicago circa 1985, “What do you mean who cares?” I say.

“Who cares.” my friend responds.

“...if we load the Great Lakes with chemicals so nothing lives but the lampreys? Pollute the air so no one can see the mountains? Trash everything held sacred in Genesis 1? Maybe God cares!”

“God cares more about the poor. *Love your neighbor as yourself*. I don’t hear *Love the trees* in Jesus’ top two, or even Moses’ big ten.”

“No trees. and people can’t breathe.” We turn up our collars and ascend toward the El train. Lonnie is from the Rust Belt and I’m from the Rockies.

“In Youngstown, 1,400 people lost their jobs in one day. Environmental regs were a factor. 14% unemployment. Depression. Alcoholism. God cares about *them*.” He flicks his cigarette as the train comes. “Enviro-types ...white, wealthy...don’t give a damn about the people in the margins.”

We get on the train but choose different sides of the aisle. No common ground.

By 2008, working with flood victims in Des Moines, the aisle had closed. At the General Convention which followed, discussing climate disasters with people from around the globe, it became clear that those who care about the earth and those who stand with people in the margins are now on common ground.

In my “Urban Ministry” training we spoke of “upstream” and “downstream” social ministry. During Iowa flood events, those who suffered most were of modest means, with homes and jobs in vulnerable areas. Members of the cathedral (well-placed on “High Street.”) helped to rebuild homes. We offered legal and insurance counsel. I was a member of our COAD – civic leaders devoted to disaster relief. One gentleman, whose home we helped to rebuild, died of flood-related breathing complications. In both local Episcopal News Service publications I asked the uncomfortable question of how the same levee could remain weak ever since the 1993 Des Moines flood?! Appalled that it might have served as an escape hatch for greater assets downtown. Downstream ministry.

Prairie and wetland restoration is upstream ministry. One reason those living in the flood plains are vulnerable is that Iowa has lost all but 1/1000 of its original landscape. Short-rooted corn and soy beans, and impermeable cement and asphalt replace the deep-rooted plants that once soaked up our abundant water and held earth in place. The cathedral tore off its parking lot and installed a system of rain gardens and permeable pavers that capture twelve swimming pools of water a year. I now direct Iowa Creation Stewards and am happy to report that Iowa now has six Postage Stamp Prairies with three more in the exploratory stage. We also discuss local and state partnerships and legislative efforts. I have completed an autobiographical novel *Of Green Stuff Woven* which I hope to publish. While being a good read, I hope the book may raise awareness of disappearing prairie species and expose some of the power dynamics around floods.

5. Tell us about an experience where you, and those you have led, demonstrated adaptability in order to pursue the mission of the church?

The Bishop of Iowa sat in my living room. He had traveled two hours north both to see my new environs and to ask me a question. The last part was what was making me nervous.

“I’m wondering if you’ll companion Trinity, Emmetsburg? The congregation is quite small but lively. They are forming a new Ministry Development Team. I know you are teaching full-time but you could celebrate and preach a Sunday or two a month and be their coach.”

I had to get out a map to find Emmetsburg and to visit first. But I said yes. It’s hard to say no to a bishop in your living room.

I was on the threshold of trying something new. Although I had been in Episcopal churches of many shapes and sizes, I had never worked with a church of less than 50 members nor been directly part of the innovative MDT work Iowa has helped to pilot. After planning and presiding at cathedral liturgies with acolytes, organ, and choir, I found myself celebrating with eight to twelve folks most Sundays. Although intrigued by the proposition and convinced of the 21st-century need of new models, massaging my paradigm of how Church might be ordered and shared has been an intellectual, ecclesiastical challenge.

Of course, the six lovely people whom the parish asked to join this team were also on the threshold of trying something new! While, with part-time priests for many years, they had always done much and done it well, their paradigm was also the older model of clergy who ran things. While willing, they have had to grow in comfort with assuming roles they once perceived as the province of those ordained.

Engagement with the diocese can be a bit confusing as well. While I do “meat and potatoes” courses with them like scripture and prayer book study, they have another coach from the bishop’s staff whom they connect with through zoom meetings. We two coaches try to be on the same page, but undoubtedly pull the team in different directions at times. Moreover, as we edge toward the possible ordination of at least one member, it seems to me that this new ministry model is like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole because the ordination process springs from and serves long-standing models of ministry.

Sometimes it can feel like the Team and I are on God’s “Tilt-a-Whirl” at an amusement park! We are having fun and then it gets all dizzying and confusing ...almost to the point of nausea. But I see new life springing forth at Trinity, Emmetsburg: last year there were four baptisms and three of the four are in worship every Sunday. This MDT approach needs refining, but I am sure it has great applicability for faithful communities of our era.