

Responses to Diocese of Olympia Bishop Search Questions — Phil LaBelle

Introduction

During my undergrad studies, I came across a quote from Mark Twain. He writes, “I am saying these things in this frank way because I am dead person speaking from the grave. Even I would be too modest to say them in life. I think we never become really and genuinely our entire and honest selves until we are dead—and not then until we have been dead years and years. People ought to start dead and then they would be honest so much earlier.” I’m not dead yet, but I want to be. Or at least to be more fully honest.

I’ve been a priest long enough to know that profiles from both clergy and congregations tend toward the aspirational and presenting the best side of things. Even when we get to challenges, we limit them or try to turn them into potential strengths. If I were more honest, I’d say we tend to put on masks during our search processes in the hopes that the other party will find it more desirable than the real thing. But since I’m still on this side of the ground, I’ll say this: my desire in these responses is to be really and genuinely my entire and honest self as much as I can be, and I trust that you will do the same.¹

QUESTION 1

What does Becoming Beloved Community mean to you?

When I consider Becoming Beloved Community, I immediately turn to Isaiah’s description of the Peaceable Kingdom. Jesus ushered in that new kingdom in a here-but-not-yet reality. He calls us as his disciples to live into this new era and to pursue it with our very lives. I cannot help but think of Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, John Lewis, and—more recently—Thich Nhat Hahn in their calls for peace and non-violence, and the community they worked toward.

Becoming the Beloved Community involves seeking reconciliation across difference and growing in relationships with each other. In living Jesus’ teaching about the first and the last, and then reorganizing ourselves to match it. It means believing that each of us has been given unique gifts from God that the rest of us need so together we can all move toward that kingdom. We become the Beloved Community when we truly and fully live into our Baptismal Covenant, no matter the cost.

¹ I recognize that sliding in an introduction without including it in the specified word count would be a real flaunting of privilege, which some might chalk up as par for the course for a straight, white, cis-gendered man. As such, the 222 words above will be deducted from the overall count. These 56, however, will not.

What experiences do you have walking with people on the road toward racial reconciliation, healing, and justice? How have you encouraged ministries of reconciliation in your own vocation and career?

After the 2015 shooting in San Bernardino, CA, I asked Safdar Medina, a Muslim neighbor I didn't know well, to meet over coffee. What grew out of that time was our co-founding Southborough Neighbors for Peace, community members dedicated to pray and work for justice. Since then we've invited others to join us and have held candlelight vigils, an annual Thanksgiving service, and community-wide Iftar dinners.

We were asked to join Central Mass Connections in Faith, a group representing twenty-eight different religions—and none—seeking to learn across difference. Quarterly events involve a meal and facilitated questions. Listening to a Jewish woman describe the slurs she experienced as a teen from a Christian man, or how a Muslim friend was told he was bound for hell unnerved me. I expressed my own regret.

The outgrowth in my parish was sponsoring a racial justice film series following George Floyd's murder. We also established a Sacred Ground class to continue confronting our prejudice. It's been hard and life-changing work. I've incorporated the stories of BIPOC people into sermons and shared perspectives of minority theologians. In my predominately white congregation, these voices help spur us on toward further reconciliation and acknowledging our sin of racism.

What are the most important things you've learned along the way?

Chief Inspector Armand Gamache—Louise Penny's protagonist from her "Three Pines" series—insists that four statements lead to wisdom. They are: "I don't know." "I need help." "I'm sorry." "I was wrong."

I've learned as a person with a lot of privilege that the best thing I can do is lift up and listen to the stories of people who are marginalized in our culture. I need to admit that I don't know everything—and certainly not the experiences of BIPOC or LGBTQIA+ people. To seek help in recognizing my own inherent bias. And, when faced with harsh truths about myself or the institutions I represent, to confess wrongdoing and seek reconciliation.

When this happens, not only is wisdom something that might be found, we also draw closer to becoming the Beloved Community.

QUESTION 2

Why this Diocese? Explain what excites you about the Diocese of Olympia.

In reading your profile, there is a lot that excites me about your Diocese. First, your love of Jesus. You are not ashamed to admit it, and you desire to bring his love to the world.

Next, a whole slew of things, including:

- Your ethnic, demographic, generational, and geographic diversity that point to the makeup of Christ's kingdom.
- Your imperfect yet perfect Holy Box. Ask me sometime about my tattoo.
- Your willingness to do the hard work of racial reconciliation and to deal with your past among Indigenous communities.
- The joy of your clergy seen throughout your website.
- The magnificent rugged beauty of your landscape and your commitment to environmental justice.
- Your context of the religiously unaffiliated. It allows you to take risks in sharing the good news.
- Your call to locally centered congregations rather than a "top-down" approach, recognizing that what works in Seattle won't necessarily fly in Forks.

Much of what you seek aligns with aspects of my life and ministry. It's thrilling to see how our paths might potentially intersect.

Why Now?

The people of St. Mark's and I have faithfully worked alongside one another for thirteen fulfilling years. The post-pandemic projects we set out to do—reorganizing Sunday morning, creating a new children's service, hiring a musician, restoring our tower—are nearly complete. It's a good transition point in the parish and in our family, so I'm open to discerning a possible new call.

What do you find daunting/challenging and why?

As I perused the ECWW website, I found a picture of clergy standing in front of a Tsunami warning sign. It's an apt metaphor for anyone in a bishop search process!

One daunting aspect of your profile is the quantity of things you are looking for in a bishop. I counted some seventy characteristics included with the phrases, "We seek applicants for Bishop who:" and "We look for a bishop...." I know it's aspirational, but I wonder how such a person could find time to nurture their own spiritual lives, delight in a regular sabbath, and engage with their families.

There are also the other realities not mentioned. Like the heartache of dealing with Title IV allegations. Or your ongoing work researching Indigenous Boarding Schools and

what might be uncovered. Or the siren call to focus on institutional longevity more than mission.

Still I am persuaded by the prompting of the Spirit to enter this process with you. I simply hold the last verse of the hymn “They cast their nets in Galilee” as my intention. “The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod. Yet let us pray for just one thing—the marvelous peace of God.”

QUESTION 3

Why do you think that there are declining numbers in the Episcopal Church and what is your vision for supporting Episcopal communities to find new vitality? What are some examples of how you have addressed this in other settings?

In her clarion call to the Church, modern-day prophet Verna Dozier describes where we’ve gone wrong. She declares that Jesus is indeed the Messiah and is also “he whom the institutional church, from the resurrection community to the present day, has rejected... [for] something more reasonable, more controlled and controllable, more human.” She concludes, “I believe Christianity has journeyed far from what Jesus of Nazareth was about.” I agree.

Why are we declining? Because we’ve not spent enough time building disciples of Jesus. When church growth conversations center on getting more people in our doors—and especially young families—so they can pledge and help out with the Christmas Bazaar, then we’ve lost our way. Our mission is not to maintain our cherished projects, but to bring people to the One who has the words of eternal life.

Yet the truth is that we’re scared. Scared about keeping our churches open. About paying the bills. About looking good for the bishop when it comes to attendance and giving. Because in the church, that’s what it usually comes down to: are things numerically trending up? Seldom are we asked if lives are being transformed by Jesus.

In the Diocese of Massachusetts, I co-chaired the team tasked with crafting our mission strategy. We listened and prayed and surveyed and prayed some more. We heard a deep yearning to become the people God calls us to be. Disciples of Jesus. Seekers of justice. Protectors of creation.

Changing a system is slow work. It means taking risks. Often we turn back to the safe and comfortable, the way we’ve always done things. But then I see how our vision is spurring our Diocese on toward racial reconciliation and the need for reparations. I hear people sharing their stories of faith at Convention and how they’ve been transformed. I read about the many steps being taken by our parishes to combat climate change, and their desire to become carbon neutral.

When we begin to shift our focus from mere survival to living into the dream of God—as Dozier puts it—we become risk-takers committed to ministry. Each of us engaged in the dream where all can experience justice and love. Where the good earth is cared for and sustained. Where we push back against systems in this world—and in our Church—that keep things at the *status quo*.

How do we find vitality? We embrace God’s dream for us and then chase after it as if our life depends on it. Because it does.

QUESTION 4

We are a geographically large and diverse Diocese. How will you engage in relationship building and getting to know the Diocese?

One of the most gut-wrenching things I hear as a priest is this: “I know you’re busy, but...” I often wonder if the person has waited to come speak to me until things have gotten dire. Or if, when they’ve encountered me, I’ve looked overly frenetic just trying to get things done. I wonder if I’ve closed off relationships because I didn’t have enough space in my life.

When pondering the creation of the universe *ex nihilo*, Jürgen Moltmann faced a theological conundrum. If the nothingness existed with God from the beginning, then God could neither be omnipotent nor omnipresent. The *nihil* would have been co-equal with God, and God would not have been everywhere all at once. So Moltmann turned to the Jewish mystical concept of *zimzum*, which describes God’s first act as being one of self-withdrawal. Before God created, God withdrew within God’s very being to open up a space in which the nothingness could emerge. God limited Godself, forming a type of womb into which God spoke forth the universe.

As those who bear God’s image, we are called to embody *zimzum* too. To be those who make space in our own lives for our relationships with God, others, and this majestic world of ours.

Engaging in relationships takes intentionality. It won’t happen simply by good will. You need to make the space in which to nurture them. And that won’t happen if I’m centered on administrivia. So that’s first: intentionality. Blocking time in my calendar to build those relationships across the Diocese.

What to do with that time? In the past with parishioners and clergy colleagues I’ve gone hiking, paddling on quiet water, and backpacking in the White Mountains. I’ve cooked meals, recognizing that when we share food together relationships grow. Each

Sunday our church gives thanks for specific parish households; I contact those members earlier in the week to see if there's anything I might remember in my own prayers for them.

Fostering relationships takes time. More than a Sunday visitation every couple of years. I commit to building those relationships with you on a regular basis. Being present in the further outposts of the Diocese more frequently. Connecting with clergy at clericus gatherings, while also giving space. (All clergy will want time to vent about their bishop occasionally.) Offering diocesan-wide film discussions or Bible studies or praying together on Zoom. Inviting folks over for dinner, or a beverage, or to do a Habitat build.

In short, I'd embrace *zimzum*. And I'd encourage you to do the same.