

Responses to Essay Questions
The Rev. Canon Lauren R. Holder
September 15, 2023

1. *Bishops are called to be one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ's resurrection. How would you describe your relationship with Christ, and where do you find abiding joy in the Gospel?*

Again and again, strangers and friends alike have told me that my way of being in the church is a mixture of gravitas and joy. I think that reflection is an accurate description of my relationship with the living Christ. Jesus is alive! That is a significant and weighty statement to proclaim. The transformation we are invited to be in the world cannot be taken lightly. And yet, Jesus is alive in you! You are the light of the world. How can we miss the joy and good news of God's loving presence among us? So we are called to responsibility and rejoicing. We are called to service and celebration. And when we hold these truths together, the church and her people are fully alive, and God is glorified and known more fully in the world around us.

2. *Bishops are called to a ministry of reconciliation. How have you facilitated healing through your ministry?*

Three things come to mind when facilitating healing through ministry: Prayer, Sacred Space and Listening. I love to pray the prayers of our Book of Common Prayer. At age 3, I started attending chapel services 5 days a week at an Episcopal school. The Book of Common Prayer is the language that I speak. And yet, as someone baptized in the Baptist tradition, I also love to pray spontaneous prayers as the Spirit moves me. Both forms of prayer have been integral to my own healing and the healing I hope to extend to others. Early on in ministry, I learned the value of creating a safe and sacred space for all to gather, and then to hold the space rather than fill it, so that the Holy Spirit might do the real work of healing and reconciliation. More recently I have practiced this in facilitating anti-racism training or a Lenten retreat. Neither prayer nor sacred space can be possible without first assuming a posture of listening. Listening to God, listening to the person(s) before me, and listening for the voices that may be missing has informed my ministry perhaps more than anything else in the world.

3. *Bishops are called to guard the unity of the church. What strategies would you use to build bridges across the identified divides in the diocese, particularly urban/rural, large/small, and red/blue?*

This question means so much to me. The churches that have raised me up and shaped my faith have been urban and rural, big and small, monolingual and bilingual, homogeneous and diverse, conservative and progressive, high church, low church, and broad church. I think I have grown the most in my current context of "red and blue" folks worshipping side by side. So few communities exist where we can genuinely pass the peace, learn from one another, grow together, and serve alongside people we disagree with. Church can be that place! It should be that place! We should be the shining example of how people who come from different walks of life and different points of view can be one Body transformed by the love of Christ. To build bridges across the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester, I would show up and I would listen. I would preach the Good News the same way I do anywhere—with confidence in the living Christ. I

would work to improve our communications across the diocese, sharing stories of the equally important work of small churches and large congregations. And to be honest, I would probably lean on the ancient ministry of breaking bread together through the shared hospitality of simple potluck meals. If it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for the church. I truly believe that it is easier to love each other when we know each other—when we see each other as people created in the image of God rather than the issues we may represent. I so look forward to knowing you.

4. *Bishops are called to follow him who came not to be served but to serve. How do you embody humility and service in your ministry?*

Every day I am reminded of what I have not yet learned, and each reminder is an opportunity to grow as a child of God and as a leader in the church. Recently, I took up an intentional practice of humility when I started taking ballet classes as an adult. I realized that the expectations were so very high in so many areas of my life: to be the best preacher, teacher, pastor, parent, partner, daughter and friend I could be. As an adult, it can be hard to find spaces where failure is expected and embraced as an opportunity for creativity and growth. Ballet class has been that space for me. And the lessons in humility and grace have carried over into my life in ministry. I am quicker to admit my faults, more eager to ask for help, more attentive to the needs and opportunities of others, and better able to assist others from a place of shared vulnerability. The other practice I observe is to get out of my office and into the world. A wise bishop once told me: if you ever start to forget why you're called, go visit folks at the hospital. That simple advice has served me again and again. When I start to get consumed by the meetings and the administrative side of ministry, I go to the hospital, or to the shelter, or to the school. The parts of my heart that can be hardened by emails and to-do lists are made soft again, and I remember the service Jesus models and extends.

5. *Bishops are called to “boldly proclaim and interpret the gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up of the conscious of their people.” How would you equip leaders to grow the church through evangelism, mission, liturgy, and advocacy?*

Back when I was just starting the process for ordination, a retired clergy peer said to me: “Lauren, you are bold with a capital B!” He said it with love. And so I remember his words when I am feeling less than bold. But on the best days, it is Christ that is bold in me. Proclaiming and interpreting the gospel of Christ is what we do when we preach well. And while not every sermon can be our best, every sermon can leave room for the Holy Spirit to show up and speak louder than the words written on a page. Bishops cannot be good at everything. But I think it's important for bishops to preach well. And I think a bishop should always be ready to preach—whether it is to celebrate a church milestone, step in for a priest who is exhausted, rev up a group of awkward teenagers, give thanks for a group of feisty elders, or offer comfort to a group of suffering souls. I think it's equally important for bishops to pay attention—to be thoughtful observers and effective listeners. To equip the leaders of the diocese, I would strive to know who the leaders are, and call up leaders who may not have been identified yet. I would work to know the gifts of the people you serve so that together we can cultivate those gifts in a way that lifts up the community as a whole. And I would tell the truth when I observe an area of decline or neglect, with love for what has been and hope for what could be.

6. *Bishops are expected to be stewards of our diocesan gifts and ministries. What have been your successes and challenges as you have prioritized objectives, marshaled limited resources, and implemented plans to further the mission of the Church?*

I think transparency goes hand-in-hand with fiduciary responsibility when it comes to stewarding diocesan gifts and ministries. Because people have so many good causes they can give to, the church must be a transparent and trustworthy organization if it is to sustain and grow a spirit of generosity in the diocese. When I was an outgoing priest for outreach at a church facing leadership challenges, I brought all the various ministries to the table for an honest conversation about the budget for the coming year. People spoke about their own priorities in ministry while listening to the priorities of the other ministries gathered. Together we talked about the needs we were seeing in the community and the best way to respond with the budget at hand. And then we prayerfully agreed upon which ministry would receive what resources based on the transparency and trust in the room. It was a beautiful thing to behold, and it served them even after my departure. As a former member of the diocesan Standing Committee, I have learned about the mix of pastoral care, creativity, and bravery needed when shepherding a parish on the brink of (or accepting) closure. And as Canon for Community, when new parish ministries emerge, I have learned to “do something with nothing” until the budget can catch up with the Holy Spirit. As your bishop I would strive for transparency, responsibility and creativity at every level. I would make a point of meeting with clergy and vestries when doing visitations to get the most accurate picture of where you stand as a parish, where we stand as a diocese, and how we can stand together.