

Discernment Questions for the Selection of a Bishop

The Rev. Neil Lebhar's Answers

1) As bishop, you will probably be challenged by conflict. What are the general principles that will govern how you handle conflict within a local congregation? Between a local congregation and the diocese? Please share with us a specific situation of conflict that you consider successful and the specific situation that was not successful. What was your role in the conflict? What would you do differently, if you had the chance?

Conflict in congregations has existed in churches from the day the Church began. For example, Paul wrote, "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord." (Philippians 4:2) The first general principle is that we really are sinners, and therefore conflict should never surprise us. We often act like the presence of conflict proves that something is abnormally wrong, and people may head for the doors to find a conflict-free church. Instead we should expect conflict, and view it as an opportunity for the Lord bring clarity, direction and healing. One pastor has said that if there is no conflict then no one is attempting anything significant.

The second principle is to discover the source of the conflict. If the conflict is theological, strategic or programmatic, then the discussions should proceed along those lines, with an understanding that there is unlikely to be total agreement. There is no biblical answer to what music should be played, or when youth group should meet, or how large a vestry should be. No congregation is likely to agree unanimously on how best to reach the lost, how much to spend on missions, or how to exercise spiritual gifts. Of course the danger is that such discussions may become personal and divisive.

Relational conflicts on the other hand should be handled along the lines of Matthew 18, keeping the number of people involved as small as possible, and warning those not directly involved to stay away. I appreciate the wisdom of Proverbs 26:17: "Like one who seizes a dog by the ears is a passer-by who meddles in a quarrel not his own."

Clergy conflicts with the parish are also normal. Paul's tense relationship with the Corinthian leadership is an early case in point. The direction in Ephesians 5:21 generally applies: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Both clergy and laity must remember that relational disunity is a block to Kingdom accomplishment.

Generally the sooner a third party is brought in to help, the more likely it is that the conflict will be resolved (see 1 Corinthians 6:5). Clergy and parish leaders often allow gossip and grumbling to escalate instead of getting outside advice early on. The bishop's role should be to provide someone to mediate. If he becomes directly involved, he can actually prevent reconciliation. Too often the clergy and parish leaders just want him to step in and declare the winner.

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Finally, clergy and parish leaders need to understand that there may be people in congregations who are more committed to winning and holding power than they are to resolution. Kenneth Haugk, the founder of Stephen Ministry, calls them "antagonists in the Church." In his book of that title, he recommends tough love to deal with such people. Otherwise they often destroy effective ministry because their goal is personal victory at the expense of parish health.

Concerning parish conflict with the diocese, I have only been involved in one significant conflict. This came after General Convention 2003 when Redeemer separated from our former diocese. I am not sure that the situation we went through is analogous to anything that this new diocese may face in the future.

My primary concern throughout that painful struggle was not to make it personal. I tried to help us all act without public recrimination or disrespect toward the bishop or his leadership. By God's grace, I think we generally succeeded.

When there is a conflict between a parish and the diocese in the future, I would encourage all to focus on the issues, not the personalities. Otherwise, I would try to apply the same principles for dealing with conflicts within a parish.

My biggest conflict within the parish came a few years ago when a small number of significant leaders covertly decided that I had been rector long enough and that I was no longer effective. They chose an inappropriate course of action to force the issue. I realized that for the parish's sake I needed to hold my ground even though I was tempted to leave.

At the same time, I tried to discern the grains of truth in my critics' concerns. I had just lost my father, we had some staff turnover, and I was definitely emotionally drained. I took part of my planned sabbatical and during it asked the Lord for wisdom in moving ahead. I studied biblical leadership and reviewed my personal strengths and weaknesses. I began to receive pastoral counseling.

When I returned, the vestry and I renegotiated my responsibilities and added much needed administrative help. These were positive steps toward a healthy outcome. In these ways the conflict was successfully handled.

But looking back, I also see my failures. I had allowed administration to remain second-rate. I mishandled a job description change for key leader and that person resigned and then lobbied for my removal. I had become somewhat complacent about our vision for the future. Because of these failures, I helped to create an unnecessary conflict.

What would I do differently? I wished I had been in a process of regular annual reviews. I have since discovered the value of such reviews. It is one primary way to preempt potential conflicts. I have proposed a review of the bishop in our new canons as a result.

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2) As bishop you will be the chief pastor for our clergy. How do you propose to keep our clergy healthy- spiritually, physically, and relationally?

I am deeply concerned about clergy health in all the areas mentioned. I am not an expert on the subject of clergy wellness, but I have been cultivating working relationships with both a counselor and a former pastor to learn more. At my request, these two men are already working with some clergy in the diocese. I hope to have them teach our clergy about what one of them calls "soul care."

Clergy care must be one of a bishop's highest priorities. Clergy need to meet regularly with each other in regional and diocesan gatherings. Those meetings need to be focused on a clergyperson's walk with Christ in the midst of the stresses of ordained ministry. Clergy burnout is the precursor to behaviors that can end a person's ordained ministry and devastate a parish. Preventing burnout and strengthening clergy for more effective ministry are essential if our parishes are to grow in Christ.

What you do personally to stay healthy and grounded?

Honestly, this question is awkward for me to answer. I am afraid of sounding like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable who said, "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." I survive by the mercy of God, and the following are life-nourishing paths he has led me to take. I have not arrived and am still trying to become grounded.

I have a daily quiet time of Scripture reading and prayer. Marcia and I pray daily. I am part of a weekly men's Bible study where I share prayer concerns in a small group. I am also in a weekly Bible Study with my two sons-in-law which has been a great encouragement.

I have been greatly influenced by Mark Buchanan's book The Rest of God, reminding me of the importance of observing elements of a Sabbath rest in the midst of life's busyness. I also read devotional literature, and regularly re-read the books that have been foundational to my faith, such as J. I. Packer's Knowing God.

Relationally I meet weekly with another priest to share what is going on in my life. I meet weekly with a non-stipendiary inner-city pastor who is becoming a great friend. We also have a wonderful family time weekly with my children, their spouses and my grandchildren.

I try hard to exercise regularly, at least three times a week, and I watch my weight and diet. I am in a truce in what has been called the battle of the bulge, and cannot yet declare victory. I get regular checkups.

3) As bishop you will have disciplinary powers over the clergy. Please share with us how you approach issues concerning clergy discipline. For example, if there is an

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accusation of sexual misconduct, what would be the appropriate steps that you would take?

This is perhaps the toughest issue a bishop and a congregation ever face. I have been directly involved in helping priests and parishes in several such cases.

After a careful investigation of the charges and the clergyperson is disciplined, the clergy and their families need immediate and long-term professional care. The clergyperson should be inhibited until the situation is fully diagnosed and a plan for future action is developed. However he or she should not resign until the vestry has made sure that the clergy family has some provision for their immediate future. It is crucial to remember that the family members are innocent victims too. Of course any other victims need significant care as well. Within the limits of confidentiality and pastoral sensitivity, the parish should be kept as well-informed as possible.

When a clergyperson falls, the parish often unfortunately divides into two somewhat opposing camps. There are those who want to put it all behind them as quickly as possible. Others are deeply concerned that the clergyperson and the clergy family are helped, not abandoned. In reality, the parish needs to understand that both reactions are appropriate. The parish does need to move on, and it is not uncaring to look ahead. Yet the clergy family should not be cut off from the vital relationships they have with close friends in the parish. The book Betrayal of Trust (Grenz and Bell) is helpful in dealing with these issues.

There should also be a mandatory grief process offered to allow parishioners an appropriate means to deal with emotions. Parishes that ignore this step have hell to pay when a new priest is called. If the people fail to grieve, to forgive and to learn to trust again, they are unable to commit sufficiently to following their next leader. I speak from the experience of taking over a parish that did not deal at all with my predecessor's fall.

4) How would you facilitate a church joining our diocese, and offer healing for a Church that may have left the Episcopal Church?

For a newly formed parish joining our diocese, we need to let the regional dean work with the parish and perhaps create a small "admissions" committee. Someone would look at the history, needs and theology of those wishing to join, and then recommend them to the Standing Committee and the bishop.

In the case of a parish that has left TEC, I think we need to make it as easy as possible for them to join us. They have already been through painful hardship and conflict in the leaving process. I would recommend that in most cases they simply be grandfathered in. I would be very surprised if many more parishes in our area leave TEC now. We have no agenda to recruit them. For any who nevertheless decide to join us, they will certainly find understanding and support. Becoming part of the

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Anglican Church in North America will bring them the prospect of an orthodox and fruitful future which is tremendously hopeful and healing.

5) What is your vision for growing the body of Christ in our new diocese?

As a young Christian, I served in a parachurch ministry to evangelize and disciple students in Christ. Ever since then, my heart has been in student and children's ministries. The studies are clear. We cannot grow the diocese long-term without effective children's and youth ministries at the parish and diocesan levels.

For the past three years my wife Marcia and I have had the joy of leading and hosting a large weekly fellowship group of college students and those starting their careers. Many of those members are now becoming leaders in the parish. We are now turning our attention to creating a fellowship group that accommodates the needs of parents with young children.

While church planting is critically important, I also believe that every existing parish already has similar growing edges that can be identified and supported. Each parish has a calling to have an impact for the Kingdom of God and can grow.

We also need to have an entrepreneurial approach to planting new parishes. While church planting is difficult, expensive and risky, it is still one of the most effective ways to reach the unchurched. Even when such churches fail (and many do), they have still succeeded in bringing new members into the Kingdom of God. Church planting is essential.

Finally, most dramatic church growth takes place under younger clergy. Megachurch pastors Bill Hybels and Rick Warren both began their churches while in their early twenties. While we may or may not be called to create megachurches, we must have the dynamism, vision and dreams that younger clergy bring. While I believe in the value of second-career clergy, we must also discover and support those students and twenty-somethings for whom ordained ministry is their lifelong calling. They are the likeliest candidates to plant new churches successfully and to help existing parishes reach the next generation.

6) This question is for both you and your spouse. What role will your wife play in your ministry as Bishop?

Marcia and I have been married for thirty-eight years and have shared in ministry together all that time. I would hope that her Bible teaching and Christian Education gifts could be used in parishes and other venues as they have been in the past. We both have a heart for and experience in ministries to families and would hope to encourage clergy families in particular.

For almost three decades we both have been committed to bringing clergy and laity to Israel for the sake of their growth in Christ and their understanding of the Scriptures.

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To some degree, the strategic choice of Jerusalem as the site for the 2008 Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) can be tied to the Marcia's previous job as Shores Director. She brought many key global leaders to Israel during the years prior to that historic conference. Shores is a ministry reminding the Church of its Jewish roots and its responsibility to share the gospel with the Jewish people. It continues under the name CMJ/USA. Between us we have lead well over two dozen study trips to Israel. Our next trip is planned for June 2010.

[How do you see your role as the Bishop's wife?](#)

From Marcia P. Lebhar: I have several responses to this question. Only the last pertains directly to our diocese in formation. The first two are simply how I see my role as Neil's wife, regardless of our particular callings.

My first responsibility and privilege is to *trust and obey Jesus*. This is not a glib response. The roles that fall to me as a priest's wife, or, I imagine, as a bishop's wife, can sometimes seem to fit like a glove. Or not. They may also require sacrifice and courage. My job is to prayerfully embrace as God's will whatever the role requires.

My role will always be to *do whatever is at hand* to enable Neil to fulfill his calling from the Lord. I am deeply thankful that he has always played the same part in my life!

As the bishop's wife, I would have a particular concern to foster loving community in our diocese. I frequently counsel young parents that *creating an 'us'* – a strong sense of family identity – can be an important anchor to our kids. It also makes our families a place where others seek and find the Good News. Our new diocesan family needs the same sense of identity right now. I would joyfully contribute to that process.

A second concern is to help equip our clergy families to withstand the pressures of ministry and to raise the next generation to bear fruit themselves. While life in the ministry has been deeply challenging, God has shaped, blessed and encouraged us profoundly in it and through it. I am passionate about passing on that encouragement.

[7\) Tell us your vision of how the bishop will use his time between being a church priest and bishop?](#)

This new model of dual roles will feel very different than the TEC model most of us have left behind. But it is not a unique model. Bishops in the Reformed Episcopal Church (with whom we are now joined) have balanced parish and diocesan responsibilities for over a century.

First of all, I expect that the bishop will spend between two-thirds to three quarters of his time in his parish ministry. This keeps him grounded in the ministry that has always had the most impact for the Kingdom. In the new model, we are not trying to

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create a large hierarchy or extensive diocesan programs, or even pay a bishop's fulltime salary.

The bishop will call others, such as the regional deans, to share in the overall diocesan ministry, freeing him to concentrate on those things only he can do as bishop: confirm, ordain, and represent the diocese in the larger Province. I expect we will have area confirmations and ordinations, usually not on Sunday mornings, so that the bishop can worship with his parish most Sundays.

If the demands on the bishop's time increase, I believe it would be better to call a suffragan bishop to assist him than to have the bishop leave his parish responsibilities.

In some sense, as both rector of Redeemer and chair of the Anglican Alliance, I have already been living out to some degree the type of ministry balance necessary for the new bishop. It can be done if both the diocese and the parish understand it. I have also learned that delegating responsibilities to gifted servants makes the seemingly impossible possible. Along these lines, I appreciate all the hard work of Dean Jim McCaslin and Harris Willman along the way. I am now investigating with my vestry and staff what my somewhat smaller role at Redeemer might be if I am called to be bishop.

Having answered all of the above, let me close by saying that I love serving as a priest at Redeemer. While I feel the Lord is asking me to be open to a call to the episcopate, I will be very happy, probably even happier, to remain as I am. Parish ministry is crucial to the Kingdom. In the local churches we demonstrate the kind of loving community that Jesus uses to call the world to Himself (John 13:35). Throughout history the Kingdom has expanded by reaching people through churches, both churches with or without official bishops. The role of the bishop is ultimately to help parishes and parish leaders focus on this high calling. As I see it, the episcopate is therefore in a sense a step down rather than a step up, for the heart of all ministry remains in the parishes. Our unity is in Christ, not in a bishop or in a diocese. A bishop is called to guard the unity of the faith which we already have, by God's grace.

May Jesus alone be glorified as we seek to discern His will.

In Jesus the Messiah,

Neil

The Rev. Neil G. Lebhar