



The Rev'd Paul A. Elliott

Rector, St. Michael and All Angels Church in Stone Mountain, Georgia

Family: Married to Beverley

Hometown: Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Seminary: St. Francis Theological College, Brisbane

Pre-Collar Career: Bank officer

Tenure as a priest: 22 years

Favorite Movie: *Life of Brian*, *A Man for All Seasons*, and *A Night at the Opera*

Most Recently Read: *Martha Quest* by Doris Lessing

Nominated by: Deacon Ormonde Plater (Trinity, New Orleans); Deacon P. Quin Bates (St. Mark's, Harvey); Jan Asch (Grace, New Orleans); and Margaret Goodman (All Saints, River Ridge)

What has led you to respond to this process for nomination to be the 11th Bishop of Louisiana?

Recently I received an email from a friend in Australia asking me if I knew of the search process in Louisiana. Archdeacon Heather Toon received an email from Arch-Deacon Ormonde Plater asking for names for nomination. I did not know about it, so

I went to the web site and started reading, thinking and praying if this is where God wants me to be. I then emailed Heather back and gave my consent to have my name go forward for nomination.

I met Heather when I joined an Education for Ministry group in the fall of 1979, which was about four weeks after I had a conversion/mystical experience and joined St. Barnabas Anglican Church. Over the next two years as a member of the EfM group I learned the importance of being-in-community, and the work and theology of mutual ministry. I discovered the centrality of community in providing healing, hope and encouragement, the discernment of gifts, and the call to serve in ministry.

It was in community I began to address the hard questions of meaning and purpose, such as, "Who am I", what are my gifts and talents?" "What am I going to do, in the name of God". To be honest, before I started going to church as a 27-year-old student, I thought my purpose in life was to use my talents, experience and education to serve me — create a career, make lots of money and have a nice life.

But life in my EfM group changed me. The relationships formed in EfM changed me. I discovered a new purpose and a new way of being in the world. And, along the way I discovered a different and dangerous question, namely, "How can God best use my gifts, experience, education, and my self, so God (and God's Kingdom) can get the best return?"

Since then this question has been the template for my life in Christ and the direction of my ministry. I am open to the Spirit, and God's call and promise to lead faith communities in the discernment of ministries of its members.

So now, I suddenly find myself deep in prayer, asking God yet again to show the way. It is a time of prayer that I find deeply comforting. It is kind of funny, as I look back on my life in Christ, that I have never known any other way of living my faith journey. It has been, and is normative for me to trust the Holy Spirit to lead communities to discern and call those persons who are gifted and spiritually ready to fulfill positions, whether the positions are as followers or leaders. It is my prayer that our God will lead us all in this process of discerning who is to be the next bishop of Louisiana.

Tell us about your relationship with God. What in your own spiritual practice feeds your life with God and Christ's church?

I would describe my relationship with the Triune God as comfortable, content, and graced. I am comfortable with our time together, and the work we do together. It is an intimate relationship wherein I trust God's call on my life. I think because of my initial conversion experience, I feel the constant nearness and love of God for me. It is a strong dimension; perhaps foundation is a better word, to my on-going relationship with God. I know God loves me, I know God wants me, and I know God delights in me (in all my quirkiness). This deep abiding love of God for me allows me to continually say yes to God, to love God, and serve God. This abiding love of God for me allows me to love me, and to accept me. And, God's abiding, unconditional love for me allows me to love others, just as they are. I can do no less than what I have been graced with. This in turn sustains and informs all my relationships: with my wife, with friends, with parishioners, with students, with all "others".

I know the importance of honesty in "our" relationship. I know I need to tell God when I am upset, when I am confused and angry, when I am in pain. I know the grace of confession - my "tell all" times to God. I know the healing power of compunction when I speak my truth (my story) in love. It is the ongoing presence and power of God's redeeming, and sustaining love that makes me who I am today.

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I practice a dynamic rule of life in the Benedictine tradition. This rule has several elements:

Prayer: Each morning I say the daily office and meditate for at least 15 minutes. At lunchtime I read from the lives of the saints, and meditate for 15 minutes. At night I say compline before sleep. I make an annual retreat (at least 5 days).

Study: I mentor an Education for Ministry (EfM) group. Since completing my doctor of theology degree from Emory, I continue to read, think, and teach in my area of expertise.

Lectio Divina: I practice lectio daily, as well as teach it as a method of reading sacred texts, both printed and not printed.

Work: Manual labor is a regular part of my week, both in the home and out of it. I do my regular chores — yard work, cleaning, and washing the dishes by hand.

Stability: I am consistent and intentional in my commitment and relationships.

Hospitality: With my wife's active support we regularly offer hospitality in our home. When I'm doing the shopping, set up and cooking, I pray for those who will be guests at our table.

Tithing: It our practice to give 10% of our gross (pre-tax) income to the operating budget of the local church. In addition we budget for additional food and beverages to offer hospitality in our home, and support local charities. In 2004 we amended our will to give 50% of our estate to our parish.

If elected, what would your “I have a dream” speech for the diocese of Louisiana consist of?

In early 2000 I was interviewing for the position of rector of St. Michael and All Angels Church. We had come to the end of the allotted time and to the last question. One person asked, “Fr. Paul, if we call you as our next rector, how will you stop us from sinning?” I burst into anxious laughter and replied, “I have enough trouble stopping me from sinning, let alone anyone else!” I noticed some others laughing along. But then I noticed the gentleman who asked the question looked mortified. I promptly apologized for my lack of respect for his question and asked his forgiveness. I then spoke briefly on my theology of human beings: we are all sinners, and we all fall short of the glory of God, and that is impossible for all human beings to “not” sin. I asked if I could offer a substitute question, if I am called as rector — what would I do when you sin (as a person or community)? He accepted the substitute question.

My response was, “if I am called to be your next rector, I promise that when you sin, I will continue to love you and not abandon you.” He liked my response. But I then added, that should I be called as next rector, it was my hope that when I sin, the vestry (and community) would continue to love me, and not abandon me.”

Over the last nine years I have learned, over and over the importance of: a) staying in relationship, and not abandoning others (giving up and getting out); and b) loving the other, constantly (not withholding affection). We have a God who is always there for us — God is constant and steadfast. We have a God who loves us — always. We have a God who does not abandon us. We have a God who promises to be “with us” even to the end of the ages.

My dream for the diocese of Louisiana is to be a place where all of us work together, to create and nurture healing, loving communities wherein our relationships mediate the creating, redeeming and sustaining love of God.

I believe this is God's dream, a dream given to us, to lead us into the beloved community. My hope for all the family of the diocese of Louisiana is to build friendships, heal and nurture pastoral relationships, create parish programs, and administrative process, that are mutual, interdependent, and intimate.

I believe our capacity to love and serve others is either restricted or enhanced by our relationships — be they wrong or right.

God has a big dream for Louisiana: It is a dream that not all will find easy, or comforting. Intimacy is a powerful thing. Falling in love with God is a risky business. I pray and trust that God will give us all the courage and commitment to build, and be the beloved community.

What are the three most significant issues facing the Episcopal Church today? How do you see your leadership as it pertains to these issues?

First, let's look at what I call “inter-Anglican” identity and relations. Writing in 1948, Kluckhohn and Murray made the observation that “every person [in their identity] is in certain respects (a) like all others, (b) like some others, and (c) like no others (quoted by David Augsburg, in *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures*, 1986, p. 49). Therefore we can say, “Every Episcopalian is in certain respects, (a) like all other Episcopalians, (b) like some other Episcopalians, and (c) like no other Episcopalian.”

This seems to get at the promises and pitfalls of inter-Episcopal identity, wherein we encounter difference and otherness in all its manifestations: liturgy, language, culture, race, sexual orientation, economic capacity, educational resources, community resources and infrastructure to name a few. The pitfall, as I understand it, is the over-focus on difference in “inter-Anglican” identity, which in turn is dictating inter-Anglican relations where difference is dangerous, and thus, needs to be banished.

I believe we are more alike than different. There is much to be done to claim the common ground of our Episcopal identity, and to be intentional in establishing and nurturing our relations (mission and ministry) with one another. Since 2006 I have taught each year at Msalato Theological College, in Diocese of Central Tanganyika, Tanzania. In addition I collected and shipped 6,000

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books for the college library. Our parish feels connected to our brothers and sisters in Tanzania: we pray for them, they pray for us. We are in relationship — we lead by doing.

Second, I am convinced there exists an urgent need to re-vision mission and ministry as an inter-cultural adventure. From this perspective, the activity of being in mission and ministry does not privilege the dominant culture (might is right thinking) of the person(s) or group engaging in mission and ministry. Ministry in the parish can, if unchecked, become an excluding and exclusive chaplaincy to those on the parish roll (a kind of de facto Episcopal “ghetto”). The parish is not the end goal of mission and ministry: our goal(s) are all those who are outside the parish buildings and relationships, irrespective of difference, in all its manifestations.

Lastly, there is a glaring gap between what we believe and what we are doing where money is concerned. I believe there is urgent need to have conversations in our families, parishes, vestries, and diocesan teams about our current practices of getting and keeping/giving our economic strength. We need to engage our practices with sacred scripture, and the needs of the world.

Dr. King pointed out the legacy of economic discrimination in his “I have a dream speech” in Washington on August 28, 1963. He said it was time to “cash the check”. He argued the promissory note was (for people of color) a bad check, “a check which came back marked “insufficient funds.”

I think God is waiting to cash our checks, checks we have not been written. It is not the case we have insufficient funds. Rather, we are unwilling to write the checks. It is time to “write the check”.

How would you facilitate a renewal of the Great Commission in this diocese?

In order to facilitate a “renewal” of the Great Commission in the diocese of Louisiana, I am most interested in getting to hear first hand, the current “state of play” in every parish, mission and committee. I am interested in hearing your stories of what you have been doing, in the name God. I am interested in hearing your stories, past and present, of joy and pain as you have joined God in this work. I want to learn from you: what worked, and what didn’t work. And, most importantly: “Why do you think it worked? What were you doing? What was God up to? What was the devil up to”? I hope we can learn from each other: lay leaders and vestries learning from each other; deacons learning from each other; and priests learning from each other.

I believe learning is a collaborative effort. I believe developing healthy faith communities is a collaborate effort. I believe the review of ministry and mission practices, policies and funding is a collaborate effort. I believe setting new goals, such as evangelism is best done as a collaborative effort.

Each congregation and mission in the diocese of Louisiana is both like and not like another congregation and mission. Each congregation has similar and different needs with regard to the work evangelism. Each congregation has members with unique gifts and graces. I am interested in discovering what these gifts and graces are, who has them, and what you are doing (or not doing) with them.

So, I would propose an initial period of “spiritual stocktaking”. I envision a time where every Episcopalian who is able, be encouraged and invited to join with others in their respective parish or mission to engage in a spiritual stock take and ministry review. Some might say “our stocks are low”, and we need to “restock”. I don’t know what you will say. I do not have the gift of mindreading, so I cannot tell you what you should do.

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Paul and Beverley

Fact:

In the early 70s, Paul was an on-stage bouncer at a rock concert featuring Joe Cocker.