



The Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner

[Watch her video interview here.](#)

Born in Pueblo, Colorado at the same hospital as her mother and grandmother, Elizabeth received a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science with an emphasis in Public Policy from the University of California Santa Barbara. She received a Master of Divinity, cum laude, from Virginia Theological Seminary.

After moving to Washington D.C. to “save the world,” she instead worked in business (a buyer for Nordstrom Inc.), politics (Rep. Barbara Vucanovich, R-NV), and started her own successful consulting firm before beginning ordained ministry.

“As a cradle Episcopalian, I am committed to not just surviving this pandemic, but helping our branch of the Jesus Movement thrive. At the same time, I know well the pull from the secular

world. Our neighbors seek engagement and relationship from those places that fill their heads today but do nothing for their souls tomorrow. This is a crucial time.”

Presently Rector of St. Mark’s in Alexandria, Va., she founded Potomac Episcopal in collaboration with three small nearby churches that has become a new Episcopal community offering multiple worship services, formation, outreach, justice work and more. St. Mark’s has a seven-acre campus with a local cooperative school while also being a hub for community activities. Should the collaboration continue, it is likely one of the churches will be sold to pay reparations to the families of the enslaved people who built it, while another will be repurposed for a ministry center and affordable housing.

Elizabeth previously served in the Diocese of Washington DC, focusing on church growth, leadership, young adults and campus ministry. She helped start a 20 & 30s ministry at St. John’s Lafayette Square, where she met her husband Chris, a church-sponsored nursing home administrator. They have two daughters – one graduating from college and one from high school – and two dogs, one is a Covid puppy they call Naughty Dottie.

One of Elizabeth’s favorite scripture passages is *Acts 15:19* – “*It is my judgement, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.*”

ESSAYS

Essay Question 1: What is it about the Diocese of Nevada that excites you, challenges you, and draws you to accept our invitation? (500 word maximum)

I watched both videos of the Nevada state song. Of course The Killers are always wonderful (especially their new 2020 album), but the official video moved me to tears. As a fourth (possibly fifth?!) generation Coloradoan, I love the West; as a former political scientist, I worked in most of the Western states, including Nevada, and appreciate the challenges a complicated, gorgeous, expansive state presents. But what an opportunity! The diversity of people and perspectives offers a unique landscape spiritually, culturally, and professionally. There is no “one size fits all” formula for a diocese like this. And yet, I can’t imagine a more wonderful place to share God’s unconditional love - whether with gaming workers or ranchers, speaking English or Spanish, outside in the desert or inside the cathedral. All five Mission Districts have something special to offer their parishes, their neighbors, and the diocese. It would be an honor to learn those gifts and share them with the world.

The challenges for Nevada are similar to those we face elsewhere in the church. Barna Research published a study in 2020 stating one third of people who consider themselves Christian, say faith is important to them, and went to church at least once a month pre-pandemic are not attending any service at all right now. (<https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>) Church attendance in America, at least for Mainline Protestants, was little more than a

habit for many. Yet, congregations talk about “going back.” In truth, there is only going forward. That will look and feel different for every church but particularly for Episcopal churches. I believe the Episcopal Church offers an extraordinary progressive sacramental presence in a sea of religious choices. We read the gospel in an open, loving way and offer real connection with our risen Savior. Our challenge is to make sure the mission is not confused with the method. Engagement spurs attendance. We need to do a better job of engaging our congregations and neighbors through mission and ministry. Full stop! Getting that message to believers and non-believers alike is how the Episcopal Church moves forward.

I am drawn to the Episcopal Diocese of Nevada because it feels familiar in many ways. It is warm and comfortable with people I know even though we’ve never met. Being in Nevada would be like putting on a favorite sweater or an old, worn pair of jeans. It is also brimming with new possibilities in a way only the West could offer. Nevadans, in my experience, don’t shy away from hard work and that is what it will take to grow our part of the Jesus Movement. Clearly people from Nevada read the landscape and make necessary adjustments to not just survive but thrive. I would be honored to be a part of what God is doing in the Episcopal Church in and through the parishes, camp and retreat center, and outreach ministries. “Deep in the heart of the Golden West, home means Nevada to me.”

Essay Question 2: Describe how you orient your attitudes, beliefs and actions toward social justice and provide a story that illustrates your experience. (500 word maximum)

Being in Washington, DC, as a priest and as a lay person, afforded me the opportunity to see injustice in ways few others have. As the interim rector at the Church of the Epiphany just four blocks from the White House, I worked alongside people with every imaginable disadvantage the world could throw at them: homelessness, mental illness, addiction, a broken prison system, poverty, racism, systemic discrimination of all forms. And yet, that congregation (for they were a congregation of the church even if their Sunday attendance was sporadic) taught me so much about how to see every individual person as a beloved child of God. It also revealed the truth about white privilege and the damage done by well-meaning but poorly informed suburban Christians. I was struck by the difference between words and actions when it came to living out our call to bring justice.

While I was at Epiphany I chose to treat all members of the congregation equally. That meant everyone was entitled to a cup of coffee at Coffee Hour. It also meant leaving when it was time to leave. On Sunday mornings, the church had a program called The Welcome Table offering early morning formation groups like Bible Study, Choir practice, 12-Step programs, and Gospel Art. We would have 250 people (men, women and children) eventually make their way to us each week for these groups as well as worship, and a free hot breakfast. When breakfast was over church volunteers put everything away. Even one of the priests who ran Gospel Art hid paintings in closets away from the rest of the church. That didn’t seem right.

Despite an enormous amount of resistance, I framed (well, my husband framed) and hung the Gospel Art around the church. In the hallways were complex and, often, chaotic depictions of what it was like to be part of the most vulnerable population living in downtown Washington. Even the untrained eye could easily see the pain and despair people were experiencing. And yet, through it all, was a thread of hope. One artist liberally applied glitter. Another leaned toward bright colors. One used thick layers of paint as if to say, "it just happens over and over and over again and I'm still here."

On page one of the Bible, God sets humans apart to live in the world differently and throughout the Hebrew Scriptures the Bible addresses how we fail at this (over and over again...). As followers of Jesus, Christians are called to be better. We are to seek out the vulnerable, advocate for those in need, and restore Biblical justice. We are to be courageous in making other people's problems our problems. I find the best way to start that work is by seeing each person in the image of God and welcoming what they have to offer. It is loving without shame and judgement. It is clearing out that closet and hanging the pictures.

Essay Question 3: The ministry of all the baptized (MOAB) is a vital, active part of our diocesan and congregational life. What is your understanding of MOAB? Please share one or two stories from your experiences of MOAB and tell us how you would encourage these ministries in Nevada. (500 word maximum)

When I worked at Nordstrom, we had a belief that the further away one was from the customer, the less valuable one became to the company. The Nordstrom culture was illustrated with an upside-down triangle showing the customer at the top supported by the sales staff, then managers, buyers and merchandise managers, store managers, and so on. As a buyer I was keenly aware my role was to lift up the salespeople and department managers to better serve the customer because the customer always came first. That is my understanding of how the church should work. Our mission has been (and always will be!) to seek the lost and share with them the unconditional love that comes from knowing God through the person of Jesus Christ. In my upside-down triangle image of the church, the lost are at the top with the baptized as our "sales force." The baptized are the single most important part of the ecclesiastical culture and structure. It is with, in, and through the baptized the orphan finds a home, the prisoner is set free, and the sinner experiences forgiveness.

Supporting the baptized is best done by deacons and parish priests facilitating engaging and compelling experiences for both the baptized and their neighbors to know God. That will and should look different for each parish. The depth and breadth of our Book of Common Prayer and related worship materials makes every celebrant (lay or ordained) capable of offering a service that draws people in without the presumption it is, "...for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal." (Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 3722)

I best demonstrate my MOTB in a couple of different ways: I do not tell people what to do in my sermons; I believe deeply in servant leadership; and, I want the mission to be more

important than the method. Basically this looks like taking risks, believing in others, and trying new things. As an associate pastor I supported new ideas and mission work that bubbled up from the congregation. As a young adult missionary I allowed the college chaplains to partner with interfaith leaders to bring students together for justice work. As a rector I am able to offer opportunities for engagement with local leaders in racial reconciliation for systemic change. I don't do the work for them but facilitate the opportunities. It looks a lot like holding up an upside-down triangle.

Essay Question 4: Describe your vision of the ministry of bishop. Tell us about your ministerial experiences, and the spiritual gifts that equip you to fulfill this vision and meet the needs of our unique Diocese? (500 word maximum)

I was called to ministry, but before that I started my own consulting firm and worked for a large national retail company. The juxtaposition of these very different roles means my vision of the ministry of bishop might look very different than other candidates. Chief among the ministries of a bishop is to be the pastor to parish leaders. I know a bishop is to tend to the priests and deacons but I've seen bishops also be called to support and love lay leaders including vestries, wardens, and committee members. Being authentic, available, and vulnerable to the very foundation of the diocese seems the first among equals when it comes to roles and responsibilities.

A bishop should be able to clearly and concisely communicate the mission and vision of the Episcopal Church particularly as it impacts Nevada and her residents. I've seen bishops confuse the church pulpit with a bully pulpit and that role is not for me. Often bishops (and priests) couch political speeches as sermons excusing their behavior as, "speaking truth to power." This assumes, of course, only one knows the truth and the other wields the power. In our great nation, this is not true. The American people, Christians and non-Christians alike, have both. Choosing wisely how and when to use power - always grounded in Biblical truth - moves one from being a bully to becoming an influencer. A bishop is called to be an instrument of change by representing God's children and the gospel of Jesus Christ. The next bishop of Nevada must be a compassionate voice for all.

Finally, I've always felt the role of a bishop is to be *in* the diocese, a part of the community. In a diocese like Nevada, there cannot be a cookie-cutter answer to parish questions. Each congregation is unique and demands thoughtful, careful leadership. This can only be accomplished by knowing not just the church (its building, vestry, and leader), but also by walking the neighborhood, visiting the matriarch who runs the Flower Guild, having coffee in the community with the high schoolers, and listening to their hearts. Spending time with people builds trust and relationships and that isn't possible during just a Sunday visitation. Maybe the next bishop spends long stretches of time in each of the five Mission Districts? If COVID has taught us anything it is that we do not need to be in our offices all the time! I believe being out in the world is the best way to hear the hearts of our churches doing the hard work. That is how to think creatively and best craft responsible and responsive solutions for churches that thrive.

Essay Question 5: Describe how the pandemic has informed and transformed your ministerial experience within the Episcopal Church. Describe how the pandemic has informed and transformed your vision of the ministry of a bishop. Tell us about how you would live into this vision within our Diocese. (500 word maximum)

When I attended the March Clericus meeting for the Potomac Region, I sat at a table with five other parish priests whose churches looked remarkably like mine but were located just a short distance from St. Mark's. In fact, there are four expressions of the Episcopal Church just three miles from each other. Because St. Mark's had an ASA of 100 and money in the bank, we seemed perfectly poised to look confidently into the future with little regard for what others might be doing. That meeting was March 12, 2020. Three short days later, six of the churches were worshipping together online as a stop-gap measure until everything would return to normal thinking that would be just a couple weeks away.

Today, four of the original six (St. Mark's, Olivet, All Saints Sharon Chapel, and Church of the Spirit) have banded together as Potomac Episcopal. We created a website (PotomacEpiscopa.org) and started a YouTube Channel. Using Zoom as our primary platform, we've held more than 500 weekday services of the Daily Office, continued Bible study and adult formation, created a justice team, and expanded our missional work in the community. Our collaboration did an outstanding Advent Lessons and Carols service, offered an adorable and moving online Christmas pageant, held two Services of Lament, baptized babies, buried our beloved lost to COVID, and established a virtual choir. We provide drive by activity bags each liturgical season, build relationships through a weekly Choir Connect group, and gather lay leadership in intentional conversation to see where the Holy Spirit might be leading us. While our individual church identities remain in tact (we have separate budgets and vestries, for example), it is clear we are #BetterTogether. In fact, I cannot imagine preaching to a sanctuary that doesn't include folks from the other churches. I just wouldn't feel right.

Looking toward the future, I spoke to one of my bishops just yesterday about our collaboration. While we are creating a New Episcopal Community (I use this term deliberately because I think that is what it is), the diocese does not recognize us outside the limited understanding of what a church should be. As the bishop of Nevada, I would look for new Episcopal communities without limiting expressions to old ways of thinking. Of course, church canons are not to be trifled with but we must be able to think and act creatively given the realities before us. Churches who are flexible and adaptable will be the ones to thrive in 2021 and beyond. What are new ways to give? How can we embrace sacramental realities in a way that is safe and sacred? Where can we share the good news of Jesus Christ that makes everyone feel welcome? Who is our neighbor? When will we be able to look at the world and say, "Do not be afraid!" Why can't the Episcopal Church be the progressive sacramental presence for all? These questions demand our attention particularly since COVID accelerated the conversation - in Nevada and across the globe.