

**The Rev. Canon Michael Buerkel Hunn
Canon to the Presiding Bishop
of The Episcopal Church**

Essay Questions

1. What are the most important attributes that a bishop brings to his/her calling and what special gifts underscore your call to the Diocese of the Rio Grande?

I could not agree more with the four attributes of a bishop's character named in your prayer: personal holiness, wisdom, compassion, and grace. We need bishops who lead by example and embody those characteristics. Here's how I understand them...

Personal holiness is rooted in prayerfulness. A bishop's life is full of travel and stress, only prayer keeps a bishop's leadership focused on God's will.

Wisdom is based in experience - a bishop needs to have "been there," to have seen the church top to bottom and collected an extensive toolkit as a result. A bishop's wisdom must constantly blend the spiritual and the practical.

Compassion is an attitude of the heart. A bishop's heart is open to people from all walks of life. A bishop listens with the heart, connecting to the deep, even unspoken needs and concerns of people.

Grace is a gift from God. My sense is that God's Grace is something we first experience and then enter into. The more we've experienced it, the more we're able to see God's grace moving towards healing, reconciliation, understanding, and joy.

Which gifts underscore my call to this particular diocese? I've been blessed to know our church in both New Mexico and Texas. I've had the gift of deep experience at all levels of our church working with Indigenous, Latino and Anglo people and cultures in many settings, with military chaplains, borderland ministries, congregations small and large. All I've been given I offer.

2. Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” How do you answer that question? How would you describe the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection?

I first came to know Jesus in the pews of a church in Los Alamos - well, under the pews. There, as a young child, while quietly playing at my parents’ feet, I felt the holiness that surrounded me. In elementary school I loved being an acolyte and to this day I am in touch with the silent presence of God whenever I am near an altar, whether celebrating the Eucharist or just sitting in quiet prayer.

The year I turned 13 we moved to Texas and my parents literally forced me to go to youth group - but once there I found a group of people focused on Bible Study and the practice of God’s love - a love which welcomed me as an awkward, overweight, pimpled teenager whose voice was changing. The study of Scripture, and my personal relationship with Jesus became real to me then. I quietly began trying to live my beliefs in my complicated multicultural school situation. I’ve been seeking holiness and trying to walk the talk ever since.

What is the talk I’m walking? God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, whose life, death and resurrection forever changed the reality of the universe. His death destroyed death, revealing the futility of violence and the power of God’s love to heal, reconcile and forgive.

So, I’m trying to walk forgiveness and healing and the love of God. For me, the teachings of Jesus are not metaphorical but practical - those who lose their life can find it - it is better to give than to receive - turning the other cheek is an act of power that can bring lasting peace - as we learn to forgive, we also find forgiveness.

3. A bishop is called to “guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church.” (BCP, p. 517) How do you understand this charge as it relates to the current challenges within the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion? Give examples of how you have exercised leadership in the Church?

In English we often use the word “guardian” to describe the care for living things, and the word “caretaker” to describe caring for, say, a piece of property. This implies that bishops by “guarding” are tending three living spiritual realities: faith, unity, and discipline. If one interpretation of our faith becomes more important than our unity - schism results. If unity is guarded at the expense of discipline then anything goes.

The recent controversy about marriage, like the question of the ordination of women before it, has seen the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion trying to faithfully live out our ancient faith in a modern world. By the grace of God, both the Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church itself have proven remarkably resilient.

As a Canon to the Ordinary, I led congregations through times of conflict over these contemporary and contentious issues. I helped congregations to rebuild, heal, and eventually grow. Each congregation eventually welcomed back many members who had left. And we reached out especially to traditionalists, making sure they knew they were welcome in a mostly liberal diocese, and called traditional clergy to serve our traditional congregations.

As Canon to the Presiding Bishop I work with dioceses who have suffered most in recent divisions. I understand the legal, financial, pastoral, and structural issues involved in the healing work which is now needed.

My leadership reflects God’s love for all people by guarding the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church.

4. The Diocese of the Rio Grande is a geographically massive and culturally diverse diocese, with a combination of urban and rural/frontier congregations. How might you apply your experience to the realities of our situation?

I've been blessed to serve the church in many different contexts. I grew up in New Mexico and Texas where my soul was shaped by orange dirt canyons and a vast changing sky amidst a Latino/Indigenous/Anglo blend of cultures. I've served urban and rural churches in many contexts: New Mexico, Texas, Vermont, England, Connecticut, Chicago, North Carolina, New York and now wherever the Presiding Bishop sends me.

Four things I've learned that I believe might apply:

- Every place is unique ... I don't assume I know what they need. When I go someplace new, I listen and I ask questions. Often the conversation creates one of those "two or three gathered together" situations when God shows up and suddenly we see new possibilities in the place of problems. I trust that.
- Our faith in Christ Jesus makes us one - for real. I say this having helped individuals and whole congregations through times of intense conflict. And I say this because I love and respect Episcopalians on all points of the "liberal-conservative" continuum.
- When we stay close to our Anglican roots - we can weather the storm. Anglicanism has always sought *common prayer* - prayer which is in the common language of and culture of the people. In Anglicanism we know we find our unity in our worship, particularly in the Eucharist.
- Lay people deserve our utmost respect and gratitude - we clergy exist to support and encourage their ministry and congregational leadership so they can change the world.

5. Based on your reading of our diocesan profile and any other knowledge that you have, what do you see as your greatest challenge as the bishop of the Diocese of the Rio Grande, and what excites you about becoming our bishop?

The diocese is geographically, ethnically, culturally, economically, and theologically diverse. In the comments in the profile people often passionately ask for exactly opposite things - How does one bishop not just hold all of that together but lead the diocese to work in harmony for the glory of God? - That's the greatest challenge I see.

So many things excite me about what you have written. I would love to come home and serve the only Diocese that includes both states which shaped my early Christian faith. As I read the profile, each different place speaks to part of my heart and I feel the excitement of wanting to learn more about the people of the Diocese - to learn anew, this time as an adult, the towns and villages, roads and trails our people inhabit.

But my excitement is not nostalgia - I'm a priest who seeks out challenging ministry. To think that my work might be to help a diocese simultaneously minister to high church and evangelical, Native American, Latino and Anglo, Republican and Democrat, Texan, New Mexican, the rich and poor, in a variety of languages is exciting indeed.

I want you to know I'm excited by your faithfulness, inspired by the possibilities ahead. I draw this time of writing to a close with hope in my heart and prayers of gratitude for the Diocese of the Rio Grande.

