

**The Rev. Simon Charles Justice  
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**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?**

My vision for a bishop is one that is a pastor, a leader who is able and *willing* to genuinely stand alongside and actively support the lay and ordained leaders of the diocese. I believe that a bishop in this present time needs to be approachable, authentic and unafraid to be real, her or himself. I believe too that the bishop is in a unique position to articulate a *shared* vision for the Diocese and to foster meaningful relationships across the Diocese and the wider community. The bishop's ministry is primarily one of empowering others to realize *their* calling.

I believe that you need a bishop who is experienced and mature, someone who is grounded in parish ministry as well as being knowledgeable about diocesan life and governance. The clergy and leaders of the diocese deserve a bishop who will love and pray for them and with them. A compassionate, servant leader who will encourage your own vision and ministries, a person whom you can trust. You need a bishop who will celebrate your successes and be there with you through the challenges. Above all I believe that the Diocese needs to focus all of its talent and resources to encourage and support ministry at the grass roots – in each and every one of its congregations. The bishop is a key person in helping to make this so.

I believe that one of my strengths is that I don't feel the need to always be in control. I am most energized in ministry when I can help, support and encourage other people to work on and fulfill their own vision for ministry. I am more than happy to delegate and to see others succeed in their work. I am also completely committed to open, democratic decision-making. I believe in transparency in all decisions concerning the Church, especially financial ones.

- 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?**

Jesus shows us the face of God.

Jesus reveals the Kingdom of God.

Jesus teaches us how to live as human beings, made in the image of God.

Jesus' death demonstrates God's unconditional love for us.

The fact of Jesus' resurrection proves that love is stronger than anything – hate, fear, violence, cruelty, indifference, bigotry, racism, selfishness – even stronger than death itself.

With God there isn't death, only life. The life and ministry of Jesus is the proof and promise of this.

**3. A bishop is called to “guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church.” (BCP p517) 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.**

We pride ourselves in the Episcopal Church for living under a large tent. We recognize that one size doesn't fit all. We strive to extend hospitality and radical welcome to whomever comes through the doors of our Church. That said, we have a deep and ancient tradition, a certain way of doing things and ordering our life together.

In all of this the bishop has a unique role in upholding the received faith and traditions of our Church, while at the same time being pastorally sensitive to the differing practices and customs of each individual congregation. These two poles are always held in some tension.

The bishop also has to distinguish between their own personal opinions on the one hand and the policies and discipline of the Diocese and the wider Church on the other. While I believe that it is right for a bishop to express her or his own views, as long as they are presented as such, if there is a conflict between the bishop's opinions and the agreed polity and teaching of the Diocese and National Church then I believe that the bishop is called to uphold the latter.

I have served on the Diocesan Standing Committee for two terms, one of which was when the Diocese was without a Bishop for two years. I have also served on Diocesan Council, the Diocesan Commission on Ministry, Diocesan and Province II Stewardship Commissions. I have been Convocation/Area Dean twice and served on the Cathedral Chapter in the Diocese of Albany. In addition to these I have served on a number of boards of directors: Bethany Center Soup Kitchen, Troy, NY; Canterbury House Retirement House, Troy, NY; Downtown Troy Neighborhood Association, Troy, NY; Ecumenical Clergy Association (chair), Tigard, OR; Good Samaritan School, Corvallis, OR; Samaritan Retirement Village, Corvallis, OR; Benton Hospice Service, Corvallis, OR; City Homeless Collaborative, Corvallis, OR; Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center (secretary), Corvallis, OR.

The clergy and people of the Diocese look to their bishop to set the tone for how conversations are conducted, how the life of the Church is ordered and how difficult matters addressed. I believe that the bishop can and should generate “gracious space”

where different opinions can be heard and honored. Decision making in the Church should always be communal. This is the Biblical imperative.

**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 have had the privilege of serving in a variety of settings: downtown, urban, suburban and small town. I am also an immigrant, albeit a very privileged one.

I have spent my entire ministry encouraging and supporting the ministry of others. This is my calling and role as an ordained person in the Church. I have also been actively involved in diocesan ministries – governance, teaching, strategic planning, stewardship – for most of my ordained ministry.

Clearly the Bishop cannot be everywhere, the size of the Diocese precludes this. What the Bishop can do, however, is to help to create and support a Diocesan infrastructure that has a direct impact on the life and ministry of each local congregation. This can be fostered in several ways:

- Communication especially through the use of social media.
- Encouraging deaneries to be collegial and collaborative.
- Honoring the gift of people's time when they travel to Diocesan gatherings such as Convention, clergy retreats, trainings etc. by making them the best that they can possibly be.
- Having the bishop spend extended periods in various parts of the Diocese.
- Identifying key areas of parish life – such as liturgy and music, education/spiritual formation, family and children's ministries, stewardship etc. and training consultants in each deanery that would be proactive in providing help and support for congregations.
- Encouraging children and families to make maximum use of the Diocesan Camp.

The Diocese exists as a legacy of our tradition but also because there are many things that we can only do together and other things we can do more effectively if we collaborate with each other. Because the Diocese is so large it cannot rely on one person. In some senses this is an opportunity. It forces the bishop and the Diocesan staff to reach out and to work collaboratively with other leaders in the Diocese. It also means that the work and ministry of the Diocese needs to be widely distributed which naturally encourages grass roots innovation, *if* it is cultivated.

**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?**

Many things excite me about the Diocese of the Rio Grande!

You have some outstanding resources: A dedicated and competent Diocesan staff team, the Bishop's Ridge, dedicated lay and clergy leaders throughout the Diocese, the Bosque Conference and Retreat Center for example. I am impressed with the creative relationship that has been established with the Diocese of Navajoland. The greatest asset that you have, of course, are the fifty eight congregations that make up the Diocese of the Rio Grande.

One of the most pressing challenges is that over half the congregations of the Diocese are small, with an average attendance of under forty. Linked to this is the decline in church membership that has taken place over the last twenty five to thirty years, as well as the aging of your congregations.

That said, I believe that there are exciting opportunities here:

- Increased mission and ministry with members of the Hispanic majority population.
- Smaller congregations that are willing could be helped to undertake transformative discernment – there are some really good tools out there for this type of process. The Diocese could provide trained and sensitive consultants to work alongside congregations through such a process.
- Some Episcopal Dioceses have created programs that enable newly ordained clergy to minister in congregations that are not able to afford a full-time clergy person. The Diocese of Lexington has a long established program.

My sense is that a great deal of healing has taken place during Bishop Vono's episcopacy. The Diocese has worked hard at re-envisioning its collective life and ministry. A great deal seems to have flowed from the Matthew 25 Conference held in 2008.

Now is the time to build on these foundations, and to face the challenges of the present time honestly and with courage and faith. Perhaps the most important work for the people of the Diocese will be to discern a clear and compelling identity: Who are we as the Diocese of the Rio Grande? Why do we exist? What is God's call to us now? It would be a privilege and an exciting challenge to work alongside you and help you in this.