

What questions do you ask Bishop candidates during a search process, about their experience with and plans for deacons?

In April, this question was asked via the Facebook groups for Young Deacons, Archdeacons and AED. Responses have been edited for length and clarity.

(1) What is your vision for deacon formation? (2) How will you ensure that deacon formation is accessible -- both financially and logistically -- to people at different ages and phases of life? (3) How will you support bivocational ministry for both deacons and priests? (4) Why is an active diaconate critical to the future of the Episcopal Church?

If I recall correctly, we avoided direct questions, instead listened for the candidates experience with deacons and how and when they mention the diaconate. I'm sure we asked one or two questions but I think the candidates, when asked direct questions, may give you an answer that you want hear.

Describe experiences when you have worked with deacons. In what directions do you see the diaconate evolving? Talk about a time when you were on a team that included deacons; what did you observe that encouraged you, concerned you?

Avoid questions such as what do you think about deacons? Because they will all say they love deacons. I was impressed by the degree to which our nominees had thought about this question. And I would encourage deacons to contact people they know in the nominees' diocese to find out more about the nominees. For ours, I contacted four people (deacons, priests, and lay people) of 3 of the nominees to ask how well they worked with other people (**are they collaborative? inclusive?**), in what ways they thought the person would be a good bishop, and where might some areas of growth be. I received lots of great responses (confidential) and knew each of them would do fine. *[This option requires the person actually works with the nominee in some capacity.]*

I would add that it is imperative to hear the vision of deacons (and deacon formation) from the nominee. It may or may not be the same as the diocese. For example, in the diocese where our bishop spent the past few years, deacons were not allowed to preach. That has not been her view, but I am not sure if she knew what would happen. Since our deacons do preach and receive training, she was fine with that.

We had an interim Bishop who didn't know much about deacons or use them much. By the time he left he had a much better appreciation. Those of us who were deacon postulants at the time were quite worried at first.

Where have you seen deacons in leadership positions?

Ask what their most significant influences have been as they form their vision of the diaconate. That may reveal if they've actually kept up with the waves of the diaconate or if they're still relying on opinions from seminary professors.



Ask them about their visions, hopes, etc. for the future of the church and follow up with a question about what roles/functions/ministries do they see for deacons in their visions and hopes.

Very timely for us. I will use this and suggest ideas from it to our deacon community (all 25 of us active, another 15 or so retired)

We gathered our deacons, as well as postulants and candidates, a couple of times (via Zoom) prior to the diocesan conversations (also via Zoom) with the finalists. We brainstormed questions we wanted to ask and many were actually asked. We also gathered again after those diocesan conversations to share our impressions and thoughts. It was very helpful and, I think, generated strong interest in the election process.

I like: **“Tell us about your last experience working with a deacon in ministry,”** and **“How do you think the pandemic has affected diaconal ministry?”** I like questions that reveal the bishop's assumptions about what deacons are for.

They all “want more deacons” and “younger deacons” and more “deacons of color.” But the question is “why?” This is of particular importance now - there are many bishops out there who are looking for “two deacons in every parish,” because they desperately need help in a post-COVID cash-strapped parish. That could be fine, but it could also reveal that The Episcopal Church is invested in maintaining “business as usual” (for free with deacons) when the church needs to take seriously the need to restructure itself for the “new normal.”

I don't want to see our prophetic work undermined by efforts to save a paradigm of church that was already under threat before COVID and is even more shaky today. Deacons are evangelism stealth weapons, especially with the young. We incarnate what the young want the church to be, and I would hate to see that charism squandered. I want to care for the people in the parishes, but I want the church to creatively reinvent itself, too.



Questions asked during a Bishop search

Compiled from a survey sent to the Diocese of Arizona's Deacon Community, and used in their 2018 search process. Deacons at the various walkabouts asked different questions from this list.

Submitted by Deacon Dr. Robin Hollis, Director Deacon Formation Academy, Diocese of Arizona

- The bishop has oversight of the deacons. What is your vision of the diaconate under your episcopate?
- There are many stereotypes of those who live in Arizona. How do you plan to learn the reality of what IS Arizona?
- What are your gifts and talents? How will they be used in your leadership as bishop of the Diocese of Arizona?
- Share with us a time when you failed in your call as an ordained minister. How did you handle it and what did you learn from it?
- What is your experience serving the marginalized?
- What is your experience sharing leadership and delegating to others. Share how you have demonstrated this.
- What is your position in regard to the the language of the BCP and whether it needs revision?
- We have a strong vocational diaconate in the diocese of Arizona. How do you plan to carry on the good work begun?
- As bishop, what top three justice issues is God calling you to respond to?
- Describe a typical day in your spiritual life, including two practices that give you strength in adversity and comfort in grief.
- Episcopalians are a diverse group with differing and sometimes opposing visions and goals. As bishop, describe your approach to mediating in those situations.
- Fifty years from now what will be the relevance of the Episcopal Church?
- What have you learned about the indigenous communities in the state of Arizona?
- As Bishop, how will you work with the deacon community to sustain and grow the diaconate in Arizona?
- How do you plan to lead the diocese on the subjects of immigration, border issues, sanctuary churches and sanctuary cities?
- What is your passion - that gives you purpose day to day?
- Bishop Smith authored and issued a Pastoral Letter in June 2014 entitled "*The Diaconate in the Diocese of Arizona for the 21st Century.*" It addresses four primary elements: Prophetic voice; Mutual sharing; Leading all believers to serving ministry; Advocating for the most vulnerable in our communities. How have you engaged one or more of these elements in your ministry situations?
- Diaconal ministry in Arizona seeks to empower and lead others to live more fully into their baptismal covenant. Please share with us a time in your ministry that reflects this commitment.
 - a. What did it teach you about yourself?
 - b. What did it teach you about leadership in the church?
- How will you make yourself aware of the diversity of deacons, their ministries, and their culture including rural, urban and indigenous diversity?
- As an order, Arizona deacons model Bishop Smith's leadership of defining clergy as being inclusive of deacons and presbyters. Share with us how, through education and collaboration, you have demonstrated 'clergy' as inclusive?



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