

Bishop Coadjutor Search Essay Responses – The Rev. Gregg Morris

1. What in our profile sparks excitement in your becoming the next Bishop of Maryland? What skills, gifts, and possibilities do you bring to meet us where we are?

When I was first invited to take a look at your profile, I did not expect to become excited. I have seen many parish profiles and several diocesan ones, and they all seem to have a sameness and predictability to them.

Then I started reading your profile. I got as far as Page 1 before I was hooked – “someone in love with Jesus Christ... new vision of what the Church can be.... generates energy and creativity.... move our congregations toward vitality and health.... inspires, motivates and expands....” These are the *exact* things around which my heart for ministry beats. These are the exact things I have come to believe the larger church is in desperate need of. And these are (some of) the exact skills, gifts and passions I bring with me into any ministry context. I have come to know and embrace these capabilities in myself, had them affirmed by others, and have seen them bear fruit in the lives of the congregations I have served. There seems to be a good fit between what you are looking for in your next bishop and what I bring to the table, and that is very exciting to me. Fit is key.

A few years ago, my (then) bishop suggested I might have a call to the episcopate. “I don’t know,” I said. “I love the Church, but I love Jesus more.” He just smiled and replied, “And that’s what we need, and why I think you should look at it.” I am an Episcopalian who has no problem articulating both a personal faith in Jesus and the necessity of community, the Church, in being a Christian. Personal followership and corporate living are integrally intertwined. And I have the ability to talk about Jesus and the life of faith without using “churchy” jargon, which helps seekers and newcomers feel welcome and not “outsiders” to an exclusive group.

Congregational development and clergy leader development are two places that I have discovered my heart beats around most deeply. I’ve spent five years as a Fresh Start small group leader for first-time rectors in my current diocese. I’ve been a diocesan mentor to several new clergy as well. I’ve also had the privilege of serving as a congregational development consultant to rectors, wardens, and vestries over the past five years. I have found this to be deeply rewarding work through which I learn a lot, continue to hone my skills, and feel like I can make a contribution to the larger church.

I’ve also been a trainer with the College for Congregational Development (CCD) – which I am *thrilled* the Diocese of Maryland has launched! – since 2016. I can honestly say that my involvement in CCD has been a game-changer for me as a parish leader. I use the concepts, models and theories we explore in CCD every day in my ministry, and that’s not an overstatement. I come away from each CCD week-long or weekend event more energized than I went in.

As you can see, I have pretty heavy diocesan commitments, and I genuinely wish I could do even more. I love the work! But I also lead a medium-to-large transition-size parish as a

solo priest with part-time staff. I've learned to juggle these commitments by helping the parish discern and articulate a vision of what God is doing in us, and how we might share that with others; by inspiring, equipping and motivating the amazing lay people of my parish to do the work God has given us to do; by effectively delegating and building an atmosphere of trust in which people can do their ministries; and by not over-functioning, which allows people to do the ministries God has called them to.

I could go on and on, but there are five other questions to answer. More of the particular skills, gifts and passions I bring are woven throughout the remaining answers, so be on the lookout for those as you read on.

2. In the OTM, you discussed your experience with conflict. Has there been an experience where you have felt the need to apologize? If so, how did you apologize?

I will set the context for my answer to this question by saying that I have been a sober member of Alcoholic Anonymous for 22 years of continuous sobriety. The spiritual practices bound up in the 12 Steps are an integral part of my spiritual life as a follower of Jesus' Way of Love. Step 10 says, *"Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it."* Apologizing can be painful and difficult, but I have found it to be a pathway to freedom and peace.

A few months ago, I got crossways with a vestry member by something I said, and it nearly resulted in her and her husband leaving the church. This person is a very bright, fine-grain detail, systematic thinker. She had taken on a vestry project to rewrite the Sunday morning lock-up procedure to be more clear and helpful. She had sent out a draft of the new lock-up procedure to the vestry for comment the week before our interaction – and I hadn't looked at it.

My previous experience with her had given me the impression that she could have a tendency to over-engineer things. She caught me on a busy Sunday morning after services and asked what I thought of the new procedure. I was pulled in several directions when she caught me, and with my perception of her in mind, I said, "Just be sure not to over-complicate this."

The message I intended to send and the message she received were two wildly different things. She was very hurt and upset, but didn't let me know that at the time. The next Sunday we didn't really see or talk to each other. Then I left for a week away. She sent an email asking for us to meet, which I didn't read until I returned.

She called the week I returned to the office, and she really let me have it. She was very angry. "You judged my work before you even saw it! And you just preached a sermon where you talked about not being judgmental! How can you be so hypocritical? We've been so inspired by you and your sermons – and now this!"

I felt blindsided and attacked. I just listened, and worked on managing my own emotions and response. When I did speak, I said, “I can hear that you are deeply upset and really angry with me. I am grieved that the message I intended was not the message you heard, and I’m really sorry that I’ve hurt you. I want to do whatever it takes to repair and restore our relationship.” She ended the conversation by saying that we’d talk in a couple days.

I received a text from her the next day that said she and her husband had decided to leave the church. I was devastated. I texted back, “I would be so sad if you left the church – you are such valuable members of our community, and I care about you. I really want us to have the opportunity to work this out.” Then I called my leadership coach, who graciously agreed to meet with me on the spur of the moment. I don’t remember everything we talked about, but this stands out: she said, “Think about how hard this must be for her. Turn defensiveness to compassion.” It was then that I realized I had indeed been judgmental of her and her work, and that I was wrong.

She did agree to meet with me and we had an honest and emotional conversation. I admitted that I had been wrong to judge her. I asked her to forgive me. I told her that I valued our relationship and that I wanted an opportunity to make things right. We were able to salvage, repair and restore our relationship, and I am grateful for her willingness to do so. We will both say today that our trust in each other and our respect for one another increased because we were successfully able to do this hard work together.

3. The Diocese of Maryland has a broad diversity in its geography and membership. Many people expressed a desire to be more connected across the diocese. Describe your experience and leadership style in navigating systems across lines of difference.

Another bit of wisdom I have learned over the last few years is that people will not listen to you until they feel they have been heard and understood. This is especially true when attempting to navigate across any lines of difference. In my study and work as a Qualified Administrator with IDI, LLC (Intercultural Development Inventory), I’ve learned that there are ways to move people (or at least invite them to move – they have to choose) from judging difference, to seeing commonalities, to appreciating difference, to bridging difference. And you can’t do any of that until you’ve met them where they are and truly heard them. I think in the church, we often talk about bridging difference and ignore the hard work and the steps necessary to get us to a place where bridging is truly possible.

The most direct experience I have with navigating systems across lines of difference is in the political/ideological sphere. I have the blessing of pastoring a pretty “purple” parish. Politically speaking, there are some extremely conservative folks, some extremely liberal folks, and a lot of people on the scale in between. We may look pretty homogenous on the surface, but the differences are real and deep.

First and foremost, I consistently preach and teach, in a variety of ways, a message of what we’ve signed onto in following Jesus in his Way of Love, what we’ve agreed to in our baptismal covenant. We’ve promised to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to love our

neighbor as ourself, to strive for justice and peace, and to respect the dignity of every human being. Any time I preach or teach something that has a political edge or implication to it, it is grounded in these core commitments. I believe that it's part of what allows our rather "purple-ish" parish to hang together, to respect one another even when we disagree, and to be in relationship with one another.

This past year, we undertook a study as a parish of *"Dear White Peacemakers"* by Osheta Moore, which is an outstanding book. The most valuable part of the study was the small group sessions, in which we shared our experiences with folks who are different from us in terms of race. It was during these conversations when people's assumptions about those who differ from them came to the surface. The conversations were not without tension and discomfort. But the good news was that the assumptions, beliefs and prejudices (pre-judgments) were now on the surface. There was a lot of self-awareness learning going on. Once people can articulate their assumptions, beliefs and prejudices – in an atmosphere without shame or blame – they have the opportunity to change them.

Leading people into their own deep self-work and companioning them on the journey is critical. This is true regardless of what lines of difference we are talking about – race, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, religion, regional or broader culture. It's another reason I am passionately committed to clergy leadership development. We need clergy who are willing, knowledgeable and growing in skill-building around navigating lines of difference to lead these conversations in their congregations and communities.

4. Where is your voice when big issues come up in the world? How do you balance world issues with diocesan issues?

There doesn't seem to be a shortage of big issues that come up in the world. As followers of Jesus, we are called to "renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God" (BCP p. 302), and they are legion. I must and do name the spiritual forces of wickedness and the sinful desires that draw us from the love of God, which are really the heart of any social, political or justice issue. And I always return to the Gospel, to following Jesus, and to what it means to live in and toward Ultimate Reality (Richard Rohr's term), that is, the kingdom of God.

I have found that each of us, clergy and lay, have some issues we are passionate about more than others. I have also found that an over-focus on one issue by a leader can unintentionally invalidate or devalue the issues that others in the church or community care about. For example, I have noticed that in dioceses where there is a big urban center, a lot of attention can be focused on urban issues and involvement, leaving those who don't live in or around the urban center feeling overlooked. I know this is true in my current diocese, and I hear it frequently from my colleagues in rural and small-town settings.

I suspect that some issues facing clergy and residents in Garrett County are different than those being faced in Baltimore City. And even if they are the same or similar issues, the context is different, and the approach to interventions and solutions may be different. I

imagine a conversation about guns would go differently in Allegany County than it would in Baltimore City, and yet, we all want our children, our schools, our communities and our churches to be safe.

And here's where I see a connection between this question and #3 above. As a bishop, I would seek to spend significant time in each part of this beautiful and diverse diocese. I believe presence is essential, deep listening and reflecting back what I've heard. I would seek to help clergy, lay people and communities surface and clarify needs, hopes and longings for their churches, and seek meaningful action contextually and locally. I want my voice to inspire, motivate and equip others' voices.

And I am aware that this would take a lot of time, focus and energy. In terms of balance, it may mean that some ancillary things that have traditionally fell to the role of bishop may need to be delegated or shared. It has been said of leadership, "Whatever you pay attention to grows," and I believe this is true. I desire for each and every congregation to be seen, noticed, valued and heard by their bishop, because I believe that the real work of any diocese gets done at the level of the local congregation.

5. In the Diocese of Maryland, a part of our discernment process for ministry includes a program known as Exploring Baptismal Ministry. In this program, those exploring their call, read books on a variety of topics. These books have included theological texts, memoirs, social justice and scriptural materials. If you were creating this program, which book would you want to ensure was read during this program?

"*The Great Emergence*" by Phyllis Tickle would be at the top of my list. While written in 2008, her observations have even more punch and relevance now than they did 15 years ago. She works with the premise, first articulated by the late (Episcopal) Bishop Mark Dyer, that "about every five hundred years, the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale.... the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at the time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur" (p.16). Tickle argues that, in order to understand what is currently happening in 21st century North American Christianity, we must understand our history and these 500-year cycles. It is relevant because we are in the midst of one of these Great Emergences right now.

Tickle does an articulate, thorough and masterful job of outlining these Emergences, providing a guide by which we can understand our current situation. It puts in perspective the current and well-publicized decline of institutionalized religion, the rise of the "none's," the Church's seeming irrelevance in the light of modern culture, and all the other things we worry and wring our hands about.

She goes on to say that these Emergences have had three typical results which follow: 1) a new, more vital form of Christianity emerges; 2) the organized expression of Christianity is "reconstituted" in a more pure and less rigid way; 3) the Christian faith spreads dramatically.

If we are going to lead the church faithfully and effectively, it is essential that we know what we're dealing with and where we find ourselves. Tickle gives us this gift, and offers us hope, though without easy answers.

6. Our people have identified that openness, transparency and communication are important issues in the diocese. What experience do you have to work on this with us?

Trust is the bedrock upon which any common organizational visioning, goal-setting, collaboration and meaningful action gets done. Openness, transparency and communication are vehicles through which trust is built (or repaired) and maintained.

I inherited a church system that was very used to a "Father knows best" mode of operating. The Rector made most of the key decisions, and tapped people on the shoulder for leadership positions. And it worked for a long, long time. After my predecessor, there followed a pretty bumpy interim period, and it was unclear who really had authority and how decisions were made. The system became anxious. There was a feeling that decisions were being made by a few self-authorized people behind closed doors, and were not aware of the rationale or processes behind decisions. Communication about decisions happened primarily through informal word-of-mouth channels and networks, and many people felt left out.

So we started working on establishing who does what (vestry, officers, committees, staff, etc.), who makes decisions about various things, and then giving permission and authority for those people to do their things. I wanted to make it known that the Rector didn't have to weigh in on everything. It was a bit raggedy at the start: "That's a question for the Treasurer. Talk to the Hospitality Committee. That's a great idea! Please talk to the Outreach Chair about that!" It took a lot of work, but it was effective.

One example – we started talking openly about money in all its manifestations in the life of the church, in matter-of-fact and non-anxious ways. We began to put the income and expense vs. budget-to-date figures – clearly and simply presented – in each monthly newsletter in a newly-created "Did You Know?" feature. We let the congregation know when we received an out-of-the-ordinary financial gift. We let them know when the Outreach fund was getting low, and what the funds were being used for.

I do my best to model openness and vulnerability in my leadership. It's why I am open about my 22 years of sobriety. I want people to know me. I seek to help organizations to become clear about who makes decisions, and design processes that are inclusive of diverse experiences and perspectives. I give authority to the people who need to make decisions, and I let the community know what the decision-making structure looks like. I also try always to communicate the rationale behind any decision as openly as I can, highlighting the benefits of the decision as well as the costs. It is my experience that even if people disagree with a decision you've made, if they know why you made it, they are more likely to be generally supportive and trust can be built.