

The Rev. Canon Alissa Newton

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

The profile you present of your diocese is full of exciting strengths. I see in the Diocese of Maryland a place where church can learn to build bridges across culturally established divides for the sake of Jesus. It is evident that you are engaged in creative work around racial reconciliation and justice that is an example to the broader church. I perceive in you a community that is ready for new life, and a place in the world that is truly like no other place – a microcosm of cultures, geographies, and deep histories that cannot be found anywhere else. I see these strengths and find them deeply compelling.

I want you to know that while I am hopeful, impressed, and excited by your strengths, it is your challenges I am drawn to most. In my current canon role working with congregational profile and search committees, I encourage them to both present their best selves and to write honestly of their challenges, because it is the challenges that will let their candidates know whether or not they are a fit. I see in your challenges a fit with the gifts and skills I bring, and the parts of myself as a leader that I feel called to develop. I want to participate with you in the challenge of continuing the good work you have begun around race and reconciliation, bringing to you what I have learned as a strategist in this work in the Diocese of Olympia, as a qualified administrator for the Intercultural Competency Inventory, as a human being with a particular interest in anti-racist theology, and as a priest who has spent the past eight years working on multicultural relationship building in a congregation. I want to work with you on the puzzle of marshaling diocesan resources for the purpose of equipping congregations to grow in faith and in numbers, bringing to you my experience in congregational development as a diocesan Canon, as a development consultant, as a trainer and director of The College for Congregational Development, and as a congregational developer priest.

I am ready to join you in the work of pandemic recovery, in trust building and truth telling, and in discovering together the new horizon to which God is beckoning the Diocese of Maryland. To these challenges I bring you some of my most costly experiences as a leader and as a human from these recent years – the experience of leading a congregation through lockdown while also parenting school age children alongside a spouse on the front lines of health care. The experience of working with others in the Diocese of Olympia to begin a difficult truth telling process around our own history of racial injustice in order to honestly face the ways in which racism is baked into our diocesan institution. I also bring to you the expectation that we will learn together and teach each other. I can bring you fresh eyes and ideas from a part of our country that is already post-Christendom in its culture, and a part of the church where we are learning to find the blessing in this reality. I expect you will teach me who you are today, and what it means to be a follower of Jesus in Maryland. I want to listen to the stories you and your congregations hold of trauma, survival, blessing and revelation, as I learn how to be the bishop you need in this moment and in the years to come.

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?

The capacity to notice my own mistakes and apologize for them is an essential part of adulthood, for me, and a skill that is not optional in my life as a clergyperson, spouse, mother,

friend, or citizen. I believe one of the essential skills of leadership is to model graceful and honest imperfection: the ability to try and fail, apologize, and try again with a clear view toward how I can do better. I have apologized when I have misunderstood people, when I have misjudged situations, and when I have been in a role that has participated in structural or institutional harm, whether or not that harm was perpetrated directly by me. Also I have done my best to learn from my mistakes. Continual learning is a core value for me, which means that I will at times be in error – new ideas, skills, and ways of being in relationship are rarely birthed without risk or without needing to be reshaped when the parts that are not working surface.

Shortly into COVID, I was asked to preach on zoom for the South Sudanese community that shares space with the congregation I serve, on a weekend when I was also up to preach for the main Sunday morning community. I preached the same sermon in both places and realized shortly after finishing my sermon to the South Sudanese congregants I had made a mistake. The sermon was challenging, and that was a word that the majority white Sunday morning congregation needed. The South Sudanese community needed something different. They were experiencing both Covid and the racial unrest beginning to ripple across the country very differently than the dominant culture congregants. My sermon did not give them the comfort and hope they needed to hear from God's word that day. When I realized I had messed up, I reached out to the elders of the community and apologized. For immediacy I apologized over text first, then reinforced my apology when we were next together. I told them that I failed to do the necessary work to preach to their experience and context that I should have done, that I was sorry, and that I hoped to do better in the future. They were immensely kind to me about it and affirmed that my sermon had not been the word they needed. They offered me some coaching for how to improve. My mistake opened up new space for intercultural conversation between us and laid the groundwork for deepened trust.

No priest or bishop is perfect, and most people called to the episcopate are first timers. I expect that if I am called to as your Bishop, I will remain human, and continue to learn by trying and at times messing up. I commit to being open to feedback about the impact of my actions, to noticing my mistakes, being honest about them, and to apologizing when needed. I commit to doing this for personal errors as well as to step up and apologize from my role as bishop for whatever institutional harm surfaces as we do the hard work of increasing transparency and trust together. This is difficult work, full of trial and error. It is also holy work, necessary in order to love Jesus, our world, and each other in ways that are ever more transparent, skilled, and transformational.

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.

I believe that one of the most influential powers of a bishop is the power to convene the diocese. In my work as Canon for Congregational Development in the Diocese of Olympia, our Bishop's office leveraged this capacity for more than the requisite annual Diocesan Convention, which is vitally important but not the only way to connect members of a diocese to each other. I am a founding trainer for The College for Congregational Development, which means I had the privilege of being part of its original creation, alongside Bishop Melissa Skelton and Bishop Greg Rickel. There were many reasons this program was created, and one of the core purposes was to provide a convening space for leaders from diverse congregations, lay and ordained, to

come together and connect over the many issues common to all Episcopal faith communities as well as to learn from the differences between them. Congregations within a diocese need common language in order to problem solve, develop, network, and resource each other. One of the most gratifying parts of training and directing College sessions, for me, has always been seeing lightbulbs come on as folks from very different places – rural and urban, large and small, Anglo-Catholic, emergent, broad church, etc. – realize that they have something to offer each other in the work of being church in diverse local contexts. I have taken this lesson to heart, and over time in Olympia I have planned, designed, and spearheaded multiple ways to convene the diverse membership of that diocese around what absolutely unites them: love for their churches and the desire to follow Jesus.

When I am working on bridge building efforts between groups that are very different from each other, I often begin with relationship opportunities and intentional learning. The chance to see the humanity in people who are different than “us,” however that “us” is defined, is often where hearts begin to soften, and the Holy Spirit gets in to nudge us toward love. So, for example, when building bridges between dominant culture folks and the South Sudanese community in the congregation I currently serve, I began with opportunities to eat together, sing together, and play together. These grew into opportunities for other kinds of relationships, and over time the us/them dynamics softened into something more open and connected, despite real theological, cultural, and political differences between the two groups. For bridges over more charged waters, like racial reconciliation, or other realities that can be difficult to face, such as unequal or unearned privilege, sometimes intentional learning and development work needs to precede relationship building work. These might look like reading books by diverse authors, or intentional skill building around how to talk about race and privilege, before bringing people together in diverse groups to build relationship and share conversation. Much of this depends on the precise issue and the particular humans involved. Whatever the situation, I am convinced that being able to connect, converse, and care across difference is a skillset that is needed in our world, desperately. And I believe that church can be a place where people learn this skillset. Can you imagine our churches as the place where we learn to have tough conversations about difference? Can you imagine our churches as the place people go to learn how to be with and love people they do not feel similar to? I can. I know some churches already are working to embody this imagining, and more of us could be.

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

When big world issues come up, I use my voice in the place where I think it can affect the most positive change. In my life as a priest this has most often been in personal conversation with congregants, and in preaching from God’s word. In certain situations, letters directly to the congregation are the most appropriate means of communication. In my work as a diocesan canon, my voice on big issues has been most effective in executive level discussions about diocesan policy, action, and decision making. Much of this happens out of public view. In both situations my role as Canon and priest comes before my reaction as an individual to whatever is happening in the world. The first question I ask is will my voice move this person/congregation/system toward hope, love, and justice? Often, I find it necessary to moderate how I say what I believe to meet the need of the moment, person, or decision at hand.

I hold deep personal beliefs, political positions, and causes that are very close to my heart. I do not hide these from anyone, but I do take care to acknowledge my location whenever I speak about big issues in the world, so that people can understand why I speak from where I do, and feel clear about whether or not it is my intention to speak for the church or for myself. I am careful to be honest about why I am moved to speak. For example, I am passionately interested in racial justice for our church, our country, and our world. When I speak about this I can clearly point to scripture and theology and faith reasons for this to be on the top of the list. I also freely acknowledge that I am a mother of Black children, and so the work of creating a world that is safe for all children, and especially Black children, as soon as we possibly can is one that feels particularly urgent for me.

Social media is a place I choose to use my voice sparingly on big issues. Social media has some excellent uses, and I think it is rare for hearts and minds to change because of Facebook posts or Twitter feeds. I enjoy social media as a place for self-expression, some information sharing, and connection with other humans. You will find many pictures of my family, travel, dog and chickens, and reflections on life and ministry from me, if you peruse my Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok accounts. If you dig deeper you will also find posts where I use my voice on big issues. I hope that the impact is increased because of their rarity. Most of the time I consider my potential impact to be greater in other media.

As your Bishop, I will always take the entire spectrum of our community into consideration before using my voice. I will speak out on big issues that occur in our world, and strive to be a voice that advocates for justice, hope, and love. I will do my best to assess where you, the people I serve, are on the issues, and use my voice to call us together for action that unites. I do not want my voice to be a divisive one, and I believe there are ways to speak of, and call for, justice that include diverse viewpoints and call us from wherever we are located to join Jesus in the way of love.

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?

I am a big believer in the power of shared discernment, and have a love hate relationship with this question. I love being asked it. I hate being limited to only one book! I am a big reader and lover of books. Believe me when I tell you I agonized over this particular question.

Of the many books to impact me over the past few years I would ask Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer to be read by those in discernment around Christian vocation. The author is an indigenous person and a botanist. Her book is both a primer on indigenous North American spirituality and a work of integration as she observes the wisdom that indigenous knowledge and spirituality has to offer when put into conversation with western scientific ways of knowing. The book offers the discerning Christian reader many opportunities to learn and reflect while also being in an active conversation with sacred difference. Kimmerer is not a Christian, and she is not writing or operating from a dominant culture paradigm for understanding the world. Her methods of knowledge sharing are indirect – she uses storytelling and her conclusions are suggested rather than firmly stated.

I first read this book because I wanted more indigenous voices in my life and learning. I was enchanted, and at times found myself weeping while reading it, and I didn't always know why. Since then I have used the book in several groups of dominant culture folks, and the reactions are varied – some people find it frustrating because Kimmerer doesn't get to the point directly, others are quite taken with the practices she describes and wish they could participate in them too, and still others see immediate connections with Christian traditions such as Celtic Christianity that have similar close relationships with land and earth. This is an exceptional book for the discerning Christian because it is a cross cultural experience that will provoke holy envy and hopefully some helpful critique of the ways in which Western Christianity has participated in harmful relationships and systems on this continent. The author is incredibly inviting and gracious, so the reader is never shamed. Instead she gently invites the reader to expand their heart and imagination through its pages. I would love to discuss this book and all it has to teach us with the Diocese of Maryland!

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?

Openness, transparency, and communication are vital to trust and effectiveness in any healthy diocese (or church or other human organization). They are connected to each other, yet are distinct, in my opinion, each worth discussing on its own. Openness, to me, is about the ability of a system to incorporate new people without activating threat responses or retreating into silos. The question to ask is – how easy is it for people to find a place in our organization where they belong, and how do we assist in this process for newcomers and longtime folks alike? Transparency is about the visibility of organizational process. Questions to ask here may include – how easy or hard is it for people to identify the “way we do things” in this organization? Is information about finances, hiring and firing processes, access to grant funding, and other ways the organization works easy to find and available to all? And communication is about the methods and means through which the people who need access to information are able to get it. All three of these goals are moving targets for any diocese, as the context within which we are functioning is one of rapid change. For example, just three years ago the ability to attend governing body (Standing Committee, Diocesan Council, etc) meetings in person was considered a requisite for participation for most dioceses. Now, after the advent of Zoom, I wager that is much less the case. Our parameters for openness in terms of who can serve on diocesan governing bodies has changed and is now more open to people who cannot travel regularly to a meeting in person. Transparency is when we make that shift very clear, stating in written role descriptions for members of governing bodies precisely how and when participation can take place remotely, and that this accommodation is available. Communication is having the mode for delivering this information in place so that people who are interested in running for a position on a governing body are able to access the role description and discern.

My work as a development consultant, canon, priest, and convener for the College for Congregational Development trainer network have all given me abundant opportunities to work on my skills in helping organizations develop in these three areas. My experience has taught me that the larger an organization gets, the more structure and intention are needed in all of these areas. For example, when I began my call at St. Columba's word of mouth was a very effective communication strategy for most things. Additionally, for openness and transparency to occur, I simply had to model open and transparent behavior. As the congregation grew, adding numbers of people, diverse cultures and age groups, so did the layers of complexity. This complexity

necessitated an increase in structure. Where word of mouth and direct invitation once were the most effective way to communicate, and continues to be with some folks, the need for more intentional and robust written communication and social media strategy has to occur if the whole congregation is to remain informed in the ways that best suit them. My presence and leadership continue to matter, and structural follow through and planning is needed to support the tone I set. This holds true, except with even more complexity, on the diocesan level. Openness begins with accessible leadership who sees their primary task as equipping and serving the congregations of the diocese, in service of the gospel. But it cannot end there. In a system as large as a diocese understanding why openness does not yet exist is the first goal, then transparent ways to talk about the emergent reasons comes next – both supported by communications that are reliable, accessible, and available on multiple platforms for the diverse groups who need to be part of the conversation to access.

Finally, I want to name what the willingness to work on all three of these capacities can, in my experience, offer a community. People need to know that their community can make room for their gifts (openness), how to be involved and informed about the processes of the community (transparency) and reliable sources of information (communication) in order to relax into who they are and trust that the community or organization they participate in is worthy of their time and emotional investment. In other words, this is a way to develop trust. Culture shifts on these issues can be difficult for a system as large as an episcopal diocese to pull off. This is especially true when there are histories of trauma, broken trust, or institutional harm at play, as there are in all systems as old and institutionalized as the Episcopal Church. Yet this challenging work is the work of our gospel, as the writer of Ephesians encouraged that church by “speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” As your Bishop, I will work with you on systemically and personally addressing the histories that need to be spoken aloud in Maryland. Together we can do the work in these areas that needs to be done in the years ahead so that we can build a diocese that is connected, open, and ever more worthy of its people’s trust.