

Timothy W. Sexton Essay Questions

1. Alaska has a rich history of evangelism. Yet even while new ministries spring to life, we struggle to attract new people to our churches. What would you propose as an evangelism strategy for Alaska?

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, has given us what might be the classic definition of evangelism – the presentation of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit so that seekers are led to put their trust in God, accept Christ as their Savior, and serve Him as Lord in the fellowship of the Church. Within this definition there are four assumptions that will drive any plan:

1. Evangelism is a process not a onetime event. It is the process of making disciples.
2. Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit. Evangelists carry the Good News, empowered by the Holy Spirit.
3. Evangelism is one person being so excited, impressed, and/or amazed with the Good News in their own experience that they can do nothing but tell another.
4. The Good News is told in word and deed.

Recently I read a blog by Diana Butler Bass called “The Real Decline of Churches”. In it she poses the question, “What is causing the erosion of Christianity in North America?” She goes on to answer, “I suspect that Christianity is in decline because it appears both hypocritical and boring...And, sadly, many churches simply lack the imagination and passion that many spiritual people are searching for. Folks aren’t looking for answers nearly as much as they are trying to clarify their questions and are hungry for accepting communities in which to ask them.”

I think there is much truth to her statements and my biggest fear for our church is and has been that we will allow it to remain in its complacency and continue to be distracted (sex) and insulated (who’s in, who’s out). I am somewhat encouraged by the emphasis, if not all of the actions, of this General Convention. I believe we do need to turn our attention to our/the mission. I believe we do need to become passionate, imaginative, open, justice seeking, inclusive, and loving communities of faith that actually live as if we believed our baptismal promises were important. I think we need to grapple with competing values and changing attitudes. We need to encourage new learning and develop new behaviors. We need to love God, our neighbors and ourselves. We need to once again be motivated by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

I believe there is much to be learned from others in this area of evangelism, especially if we look for principles and not just quick fixes. The Diocese of Texas has done phenomenal work in transforming its congregations into “places of community, spiritual growth, miraculous expectation, and of personal transformation.” This is a rich resource that can be used to begin conversation.

My proposed plan, in a nut shell, would be to use the eight steps from that work as a guide:

1. Continually bring the problem (declining numbers, destructive polarizations, people looking for communities of acceptance, lack of joy) and opportunity (making disciples, creating community, being places of refuge and new life for young and old alike) to the conversation
2. Enlist a group of people to be a guiding partnership for this plan
3. Develop a vision of where we are going and the plans necessary to get there
4. Communicate! Communicate! Communicate!
5. Empower people to implement the vision by removing obstacles to its implementation
6. Create short term wins
7. Persistently move forward
8. Continue to articulate, affirm, and support the vision in everything said and done

I believe the way in which we begin is to focus on making and becoming disciples. To borrow from author Sharon Daloz Parks, “there are three key provisions that must be considered: the formation of a seeing heart, an informed mind, and a little courage.” I think fleshing that out with others is an exciting prospect. The work is not about the application of a model, it is about the conversations necessary to address the toughest issues that need to be faced.

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2. Alaska is a young state in that its median age is fairly low. Alaska also has a heritage of honoring its elders. Describe your work with youth and elders.

As a young man in my early 20's I found that I had a real love for and desire to help teenagers. As I began to reengage with the church my first taste of ministry was leading youth groups in two different parishes. I also took a job as a permanent substitute teacher in a Junior High School to see if teaching might be my vocation. This led me to a teaching degree and a position at Trinity Episcopal School in Winter Park, Florida.

As all of this was unfolding I was also engaged in diaconal studies and volunteering with the Diocese of Central Florida Youth Commission. My main contribution to the Youth Commission was, after much research of many youth programs from various denominations, to recommend that the Happening program become the focus for the diocese. I was also involved in the development and implementation of the position of Youth Coordinator for the diocese. After I was ordained a Deacon my work with developing youth programs in congregations continued.

About this time I was asked to be involved in the design of a national church youth event, which would become the Episcopal Youth Event. I have participated in numerous EYE design teams over the years.

In 1983, after being ordained priest, I worked as Youth Coordinator for the Diocese of Milwaukee with oversight and development responsibilities for the diocesan youth and camp programs. In 1989 I took the position of Youth Coordinator and Executive Director of Camp Tuttle in Utah. It was during this time that the emphasis of my ministry began to shift from direct involvement with young people to the training of others to work with young people. Along with a good friend we developed a program called YouthVision that was aimed at providing the opportunity for adults who work with youth to receive training and support. My diocesan position changed to Canon for Program which meant I was overseeing the Youth Coordinator and Camp Director rather than being it.

Over the years of my ministry I have learned much from working with young people and I am as committed as I have ever been to helping them take their place in the church. Being a teen is hard and without the support of family, friends, and the church can be all but impossible.

One of my discoveries early on was that it was ministry "with" not just "for" young people. One of the challenges for many in the church is learning the difference.

Hawaii too has a rich heritage of honoring its elders. In my work with the Hawaiian congregation I have experienced the deep reverence for the opinions of the elders and have tried to ensure that they are heard by all. The Hawaiian Committee is a group of elders that meet regularly to give advice and suggestions for the Hawaiian language service and other programs. In developing a discernment committee for a person entering the ordination process we drew upon the elders (kupuna) to be that group.

Throughout my ministry I have been blest with those who are "older and wiser" or at least have more experience than myself. Sometimes it has been a clergy person; most often it has been a lay person. In one instance it was a non-church person with whom I developed a relationship. Most have been older than me, some not by much, and a couple have been younger. Sometimes I have sought them out and other times they have come to me. In each case I have cherished their wisdom and insight. I think it is important and necessary to encourage and listen to these "elders" in our life.

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One of the pieces of the YouthVision program we developed was to help leaders develop relationships between the young people and their elders, drawing on them as valuable resources in the life development of the youth.

3. Based on your reading of the diocesan profile: What do you see as your greatest challenge as the Bishop of Alaska? What excites you most about the role?

I read somewhere that David Gergen, political analyst and advisor to presidents, said that, "A president should see himself at the center of the web." I was struck by how appropriate that metaphor is for the role of a Bishop. I believe my greatest challenge and consequently what excites me most about being the Bishop of Alaska is the management of the vast and diverse net of relationships. Those relationships include other clergy, diocesan staff, leaders from within the congregations, other institutions, the community at large, the broader church and personal relationships.

In reading the profile I noticed that the responses to the question about what people thought was their greatest challenge were so varied that what got printed was, "Most deaneries agreed on several core issues that challenge us all:" It then listed evangelism; volunteer burn-out; geographical isolation; challenging weather; depression, substance abuse and related problems; economic insecurity; and leadership, discernment and formation. While those are certainly important issues and will need to be addressed, it appears that perhaps each deanery, if not each congregation has its own set of priorities and needs. Even the clergy's one word response, "money," doesn't address the issue of what the money would be used for. I am sure that each clergy would perhaps have a different identified need.

So I see the challenge for the Bishop will be to mobilize people to make progress on their hardest problems. This will require grappling with competing values and changing attitudes, while encouraging new learning and developing new behavior. I believe that as Bishop I will be responsible for knowing when there is movement on that web and will be called upon to respond in ways that strengthen and when necessary rebuild those strands that hold us together.

You can only push a metaphor so far and as I push on this being the center idea I know that my first thought is that Christ is the center. As Bishop my role is to be a connector and resource, and my joy will be "to follow him who came, not to be served, but to serve... (BCP p. 517). This is where my excitement comes in.

A number of years ago, while in the Diocese of Olympia, Bishop Warner shared a set of Values of Servant Leadership with the clergy. These were based on the work of Bennett Sims. I have carried a copy with me since then and continue to use them as my guide for developing how I live and the ministry I do. They remind me that it's not about me or what I want. Rather it is about Jesus, his call to follow and command to make disciples.

My role is to be a follower of Jesus by being a servant leader based on these values:

- Collaboration is more important than competition - interdependence
- To feel with true compassion means moving to the other side
- Accountability without blaming offers the possibility of growth
- Compromise when appropriate – best is win-win
- Joy and cheer come from not always having to do it right
- Enhancement of the individual or community is to be desired over productivity
- Power is for participation not domination – power with, not over
- Systems (local church/diocese) succeed because they value their members and tell the truth.

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- Risk of self is a given – done with humility and clarity is cruciformity
4. The Bishop of Alaska serves the largest area of any bishop in the United States. How do you currently maintain a healthy mind, body and spirit, while balancing the demands of your vocation with relational and personal needs?

Last September I had, as part of my continuing education plan, the opportunity to attend a CREDO II conference, having attended my first CREDO in 1998. CREDO offers the opportunity to spend eight days of self focus to review and develop a plan to maintain overall wellness. The plan covers the four areas, spiritual, vocational, health, and financial. In each of the four areas we identify the three most important insights and how we can respond, what changes we want to make, and how they will affect our life.

In practical terms implementing my plan includes:

Praying – After a period of being away from the habit of Prayer Book Morning Prayer I have once again discovered its value in my spiritual life. Renewing my commitment to the rule of St. Benedict and taking time to listen rounds out my daily focus.

Reading – I have always loved to read and do so for inspiration, enjoyment, and learning, with a wide range of authors and themes.

Personal Health – I regularly see my doctor, a practice which has served me well over the past 20 years. Because of early intervention I am a prostate cancer survivor with 4 years of being cancer free. Consequently I am also an advocate for early screening. My two big struggles with health are eating properly and getting more exercise. I love the out of doors and each place we have been has offered an opportunity to explore. I just need to do it more often and continue to strive to accomplish that.

Relationships – Family is my most important relationship after God. Barbara, my wife, and I are keenly aware that we really like to do things together. We maintain a weekly “date night/day.” Sometimes we go out and sometimes we just stay home. We have had to make major adjustments in being with our children and grandchildren since coming to Hawaii and leaving them on the mainland. While we still miss them we are finding that by taking the time to visit them and them us, talking on the phone and most recently with video calling it’s okay.

Time Off – I take at least one 24 hour time period away from the activities of my job every week. I use the full allotment of my vacation time.

Continuing Education – is an extremely important part of taking care of me. I enjoy and thrive being in a learning environment.

Planning day – One day each week I work some place other than the office, usually from home. I have worked with my staff and leadership to know that if it is important I will talk with them at any time on this day, but if it can wait then please do so. This is my day to think, allow myself to catch up on the thoughts and occurrences of the past week, and to “see” the bigger picture before us.

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5. Most of our clergy are non-stipendiary and work in isolation from other clergy. How would you provide pastoral care and support for these disciples?

I have served in six different dioceses, working with eight different Bishops, and regardless of the size this has been a concern. While I have experienced a couple of Bishop's deal with the issue fairly well, most have had a difficult time. In each instance the issue has come down to how well the relationship between the clergy person and the Bishop can be established and nourished.

I am a firm believer that in order to establish a relationship with anyone requires spending time together. The more time the better the relationship will be. This time needs to be both formal and informal. It is time to learn and reflect as well as play together. It is time of one on one and with others.

As Bishop of Alaska I would spend my time working with all of the clergy, full time, part time, non-stipendiary, priest and deacon to establish ways in which we could spend the necessary time together to build our relationships around our common vision and mission. My expectations would be that we would define and commit to regular times to be together, individually and as a group for study, sharing, reflection and play. I would expect that a good portion of my time would be spent with the clergy where they are and that as a group we would continually review my schedule to assure that was happening. I would expect other relationships between the clergy to develop as well.

Communication is an important key to nurturing relationships. I would want to explore the possibilities of how that could happen, using the latest technology available. My expectation would be for me to communicate with the clergy and for the clergy to communicate with me.

I think that a related issue will be developing, if there is not one, an ongoing funding source for support. This support should include travel costs, communication hardware, and other individually required resources.

One of the things that Barbara, my wife, and I have always yearned for as a clergy couple is support from the Bishop for us as a couple. While I recognize each clergy situation and need is different I think this would be an important piece of what I would want to implement as Bishop.

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6. Our Diocese is highly diverse in culture. Many of our heritages are unique to Alaska. What leadership experience do you have with diverse cultures?

My experience at the Cathedral of St. Andrew and the Episcopal Diocese of Hawaii has given me an opportunity to experience a culture more diverse than any I had previously encountered. The people of Hawaii and the members of St. Andrew's represent a broad range of cultural backgrounds. They come from all over the Pacific Islands, Asia, the mainland of the United States, and Hawaii itself.

Since its inception, 1862, the Cathedral has had a Hawaiian Congregation, using liturgy and music in the Hawaiian language. Since 1959 the Hawaiian Congregation has been an integral part of the Cathedral leadership and development. In my work I have learned the Hawaiian language used in the service and much about the culture. Together we have worked at incorporating more fully the heritage and traditions into the practice, mission and vision of the Cathedral. We have also made a reconnection with a number of the Hawaiian Societies through our days of honoring the King's and Queen's of Hawaii, many of whom had a direct connection with the Cathedral and The Episcopal Church in Hawaii.

The Cathedral has for the past 50 years shared space with St. Paul's congregation, which is primarily made up of people from the Philippines. This relationship has created the opportunity to focus on each group's individuality as well as our commonalities. The Bishop, Vicar of St. Paul's and I all share a vision for a more interdependent relationship, which we have just begun to work on.

Prior to coming to Hawaii, in my work in developing a cluster ministry in the Diocese of Olympia, I was intimately involved in the establishment of a Hispanic congregation. This began with mentoring a person to lead the congregation through the ordination process. It involved learning the language and because most of the targeted group came from a specific region in Mexico it meant learning their culture. A large portion of my work was about creating the support from the people of the congregations to make this a reality.

As Canon for Program in the Diocese of Utah I came in contact with the Native American congregations within the diocese. Most of my involvement was with the youth and integrating them into diocesan programs.