

What is a Bishop?

Transition Committee – Search for the 11th Bishop

Bishops as we know them in the Episcopal Church emerged in New Testament times. They were called by the title “episkopos”, A Greek word that means “overseer.” The Anglican Communion to today teaches that we can trace a direct line from these earliest overseers of the church today’s bishops. The original overseers in the church were the Apostles chosen by Jesus, whom he called to follow him, to whom he taught his message, and whom he prepared for leadership.

As we know, the earliest followers of Jesus were his fellow Jews. But as the gospel message quickly began to touch more and more lives, especially through the ministry of St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, people from a variety of backgrounds and expanding geographical areas became attracted to the new faith. This growth not only added organization problems and theological complexity, it also expanded the responsibility of the Christian community and created a need for more leadership. Persons deemed worthy of leadership positions were chosen to assist the Apostles and their successors in passing on the faith to new generations.

The church has taught from the beginning that the Apostles and those leaders who come after them are to serve as the chief shepherds of the Christian community, the church’s chief teachers, and the guardians of the unity of the church. We have bishops in the Episcopal Church today because we believe it is important to govern and administer our affairs as a church according to the norms and traditions inaugurated by Christ himself.

Today the office of bishop carries with it a wide range of responsibilities, including:

- defending the integrity of the faith,
- confirming and receiving new members into the church, ordaining and providing pastoral care for priest and deacons in their charge,
- providing community leadership,
- administering the business affairs of their diocese, and participating in the affairs of the Anglican communion, both nationally and worldwide.

Learn more about our search process by visiting www.svabishopsearch.org.

What is the role of Bishops today?

THE BISHOP IS AN APOSTLE. The word “apostle” literally means “one who is sent forth.” Jesus created the first Apostles by sending forth his disciples to preach the Kingdom and enact his ministry of compassion and justice. As the leader of the diocesan community, the bishop functions as an apostolic teacher whose job is to bring his people to maturity in their Christian faith.

THE BISHOP HAS A PROPHETIC ROLE. The role and office of prophet go back to ancient Israel, when God called people to speak out on God's behalf, to stand for the poor, and to decry injustice. In this same vein, our new Bishop will commit to "enlighten the minds and stir the conscience of [God's] people" (BCP, 518) and "to show all compassion to the poor and stranger and defend those who have no helper" (BCP, 518).

THE BISHOP IS THE CHIEF PRIEST. A priest is one called to mediate the grace of God to the people in word, sacrament, and service. As Chief Priest, the bishop is called to safeguard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church, to celebrate and provide for the ministry of the sacraments, to ordain priests and deacons.

THE BISHOP IS THE CHIEF ADMINISTRATOR OF THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF SOUTHERN VIRGINIA. To understand this part of the Bishop's duties, we need only to look at where Bishop Hollerith spent much of his time. In addition to the tasks that fall to him or her by the Bishop's office and its history, he had extensive responsibilities in seeing to the business of the diocese. Bishop Hollerith chaired, sat on, or served ex officio on several boards, committees, task forces, and other bodies. For example, he served in numerous leadership roles during his tenure, including as a member of the board of the College for Bishops; a member of the House of Bishops Committee on Pastoral Development; a member of the Disciplinary Board for Bishops; and a member of the board of the Berkeley Divinity School, the Episcopal Seminary at Yale University.

In addition, Bishops, and by the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church perform such administrative duties as keeping a record of all official acts for transmission to the bishop's successor. Bishops visit each congregation in our Diocese at least once every three years and also examine their records. Examining the life and mission of all congregations and clergy and making a report on the State of the Diocese at each Annual Meeting are other duties of elected Bishops.

What kind of person should we be looking for in our new Bishop?

Responses to this question given at the Listening Events conducted by the Nominating Committee in locations around the Diocese are predictably varied. Some seek a pastoral bishop. Some seek a Bishop who is present and visible, a relationship builder, and an unapologetic preacher of the Gospel. Some want a bishop to be able to cast a vision and be a supporter of youth ministries. Whatever the individual preferences, however, few would disagree with the model for a bishop outlined in Scripture itself. The model of Christian faithfulness set out for an episkopos (bishop) in I Timothy 3:1ff is paralleled in the vows taken at the ordination of a bishop, as set forth in the Book of Common Prayer (pp. 518ff). The qualities called for by Scripture are the following. The bishop should be:

- Above reproach
- Faithful to his or her spouse (I Tim. Says "the husband of one wife")
- Temperate

- Sensible
- Respectable
- An apt teacher
- Not a drunkard
- Not violent but gentle
- Not quarrelsome
- Not a lover of money
- A disciplined parent
- Well thought of by outsiders

The Book of Common Prayer asks that the bishop be:

- Faithful in prayer
- Faithful in the study and application of Scripture
- Bold in proclaiming the gospel • One who both enlightens the minds and stirs up the conscience of the people
- Someone capable of nourishing Christians from “the riches of God’s grace”
- Someone prepared to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the church
- Someone merciful to all, compassionate to the poor and strangers, and a defender of those who have no helper.

Finally, the bishop should be someone who understands himself or herself to be called and equipped by God for the task of the episcopate.