

The Reverend Dr. Harold James Cobb, Jr.
Questions Posed By the Diocese of Southern Virginia to the Bishop Candidates

1. **Jeremiah 9:24 says “But let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord.” Tell us about who you understand and know God to be and tell us how as Bishop you would call us to boast in him.**

Jeremiah is one of my favorite Old Testament prophets. The rest of that verse says, “I act with steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight says the Lord.” In the Book of Common Prayer, In the Great Thanksgiving we say, “Holy and gracious Father in your infinite love you made us for yourself.” God is my Creator, Father, provider, deliverer, redeemer, friend and more. The way we get to know God is to spend time with God in prayer, reading God’s word and listening. Someone asked Joan of Arc, “Why did God only speak to her?” She replied, “It is not that God does not speak to others, I just happen to listen.” God is real. God is a powerful, spiritual being that loves us and wants us to know and love him. God created us out of love and wants us to be like him. We are to be persons of love, justice and righteousness, just like God. It is the Holy Spirit that gives us the power to do this. This is how we boast, when we are this type of people. As Bishop I would call all of the people of Southern Virginia to walk with me as we live out our Baptismal Vows and journey together as people who seek to be loving, stand up for justice for all God’s Children and to live lives that model righteousness. This is how we boast in God; this is how we please and delight God.

2. **It could be said that each order of ministry has been given gifts for the exercise of that ministry. Looking at your current priestly ministry, do you believe there are gifts you have been given that would continue to be useful to the diocese and do you see yourself as possessing a few episcopal gifts that have not yet been manifested.**

I believe that being effective in ministry starts with three principles. First you have to love people, all people. Second, you have to meet the needs of people, all people. Lastly you have to be able to preach and teach about God in innovative and effective ways. I believe I possess these gifts and they are universally effective in all the orders of ministry. When I was ordained a deacon someone told me, “once a deacon always a deacon.” Deacons serve the people of God. There is a learning curve in each order of ministry.

I believe that the gifts of God are manifested when they are needed or called for. It has been said that God calls people to ministry and the Church calls people to the Episcopacy. I have had experience inside and outside the walls of the church dealing with large institutional governance and administration. The Episcopacy is a very complex job that requires extraordinary gifts and abilities to do it well. I have the skills and experiences to deal with and solve complex issues and situations. I do believe that at a Bishop's Consecration that the Holy Spirit bestows certain needed gifts. There is a difference between being busy and being effective. I am good with time management, and dealing with multiple unresolved situations. I have a good sense of humor and don't take myself too seriously. I have been called a Barnabas, because I love and encourage people. I believe as a Bishop I could inspire the Diocese of Southern Virginia to develop a culture of love, effectiveness and excellence.

3. How have you experienced the creative influence of the Holy Spirit in your ministry?

When I open a vestry meeting, bible study or any other gathering with prayer I always begin with these words; "Come Holy Spirit, Come Holy Spirit, Come Holy Spirit Come." When I pray silently before I preach I ask the Holy Spirit to anoint me, enable me, empower me to preach the Word of God to God's people with power. The Holy Spirit is the real super natural power that Jesus Christ told his disciples to wait on. It's what Pentecost is really all about.

This is what I have come to believe it looks like when the creative power of the Holy Spirit is working. You pray for a solution, provision, direction and things begin to happen. The right person shows up. The answer becomes obvious. That is not luck, coincidence, happen stance, or being at the right place at the right time. It is the Holy Spirit moving.

The Holy Spirit has to be invited, welcomed, invoked, and involved. There is no church program, plan, strategy or agenda that is going to be significantly effective without the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the mind of God, leading us in the right direction, the right time and the right way.

4. Many are describing the world as post- Christian. How have you responded to this new context creatively in your ministry?

Dr. Stanley Hauerwas, long time Duke Divinity School and Duke University Professor wrote a book entitled *Resident Aliens*. There is a passage in that book where Hauerwas implies that the Christian world changed with the ending of the Blue Laws. It is hard to believe but there was a time in much of the United States when almost everything was closed on Sunday. When the movie theatres, grocery stores, and other activities became available on Sunday, people had other options, instead of church, to attract them.

The way that I have responded to this context is to acknowledge that people do have multiple choices and that if you are going to do ministry, it needs to be excellent and effective. When people come to our Church they are loved, welcomed and quite literally thanked for their presence. I often say, "Thanks for coming to Grace Church," because I know they could be somewhere else. I try in everything we do from worship, Christian Education, Preaching and music to strive for excellence. I have also found that some persons come to church less and so we often post on social media and our website the sermon notes and brief visual moments of the day. If people are going to social media, the church has to go where they are. I have also intensified my own sense of the mission of the church and we should never become satisfied with the decline of the church. We also are not afraid of innovations that might fail or be time sensitive. In other words, there may be programs or even worship services that work well for a season, but need to be changed, tweaked, service times moved, eliminated, updated, or re-engineered. I think that understanding how times have changed and adapting when change is needed is essential to staying relevant and present. We must never give up or give in and say it is too late or too far gone. We must march on with God's help.

5. What does social justice mean to you? In the Examination of the bishop-elect the last question asked is this, "Will you be merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper?" How might you demonstrate in your episcopate your willingness to fulfill this promise "for the sake of Jesus Christ?"

The title in the now classic movie to some, *Do The Right Thing* by director Spike Lee says it all. Let me answer and say that I will continue showing compassion to the poor and strangers and defend those who have no helper. This means looking out and paying special attention to the least, the last and the lost of our society. Saint Philips Episcopal Church, Durham, North Carolina is where I did my year long internship before going to Virginia Theological Seminary. They had a dynamic rector, now my long time friend, The Reverend Dr. C. Thomas Midyette. They were a Jubilee Ministries Parish. Tom told me that as soon as you can get to a parish, get it designated a Jubilee Ministries Parish. I arrived at Grace Church in 1995, and by 1997 we were designated a Jubilee Ministries Center. As a Bishop, I would work to increase the number of Jubilee Parishes. It is not for the grants you can receive, but more importantly, it is the culture it creates.

Jubilee Ministry is based on Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.."

This scripture will change the culture of any parish that believes and adopts it. The Jubilee Ministries culture at Grace Church has caused us to develop significant outreach programs for the poor, to build affordable housing and other programs that help the least, the last and the lost. If I, as Bishop, could encourage and assist more parishes in the Diocese of Southern Virginia to embrace the Jubilee Ministries program I believe it would truly have a lasting sustainable impact.

6. What do you see to be the greatest needs of today's youth? How do you think the church must adapt in order to better meet these needs?

I believe that today's youth need safe, organized activities for fellowship with adult leadership that is wholesome and fun. We have met these needs at Grace Church by doing a myriad of programs. I think the church today has to be both an a la carte and cafeteria-style place for youth. Youth today are not all the same. We renewed and re-chartered our scouting programs. From the get-go we set as a goal for our Boy Scout Troop to make it probable and possible for each Cub Scout to make Eagle Scout. We have become one of the largest producers of African American Eagle Scouts in the United States. Youth want organized, exciting, interesting and excellent programs. Our Boy Scout Director has carried

this troop all over the world. He is a physician, with a deep relationship with Jesus Christ. The by-product that the youth in the troop experience is beyond camping. They are developing an appreciation for the environment, God's creation, and healthy relationships. Today's youth need all these experiences, and meeting their needs in present day whether it is through contemporary worship, Camp Chanco, youth groups or small groups is important in being consistently a part of their lives in ways that extend within and outside the church walls.

7. Likewise what do you see to be the greatest needs of an aging population. For example, dementia, depression, failing health, Alzheimer's and the needs of the caregivers?

Loneliness and being alone are the greatest challenges of an aging population. Straight out of Seminary as a newly ordained Deacon, The Right Reverend Robert W. Estill, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, appointed me to The Commission on Aging. It was a standing committee of the Diocese of North Carolina. I still refer to it's notebook: *A Resource Manual on Aging*. It was a valuable experience and a mandate ministry for our parish family.

There are many already existing, organized programs that can be used as supplemental or stand alone for aging elders. Our church collaborated with the national Alzheimer's Association and we now have bi-monthly meetings that are held at the church. They have resources to provide respites for family and non-family caregivers. The root meaning of respite is from the same root as respect. We must always respect our elders and also those who care for them. Respite is a break that caregivers desperately need, so that they can best be present for those they help.

The other ministries that can be launched from this are intergenerational activities. We have done this very loosely by having church events that bring the very young and senior adults together. Within our church there is a 98 years young member who brings mutual enjoyment to a five year old girl. The mobility of America many times results in many senior adults having children that live quite a far distance away. This woman's children live in Miami, Florida so this little girl is like a surrogate great grandchild. Adapting for the aging population and ensuring their needs are met, through prayers is a necessity. Community engagement within the parish is important for the church and for elders. As people are included and as we reach out to the aging population with small groups and meetings, it encourages not only physical activity but also

engagement, which has been shown to decrease depression and feelings of loneliness.

8. Have you seen successful efforts in any diocese which promote a common vision for the work of that diocese as a whole entity? Have these efforts been effective in coordinating the ministries of the laity, the deacons, and the priests?

There are several dioceses in the Episcopal Church that have vision statements and mission statements that resonate with me. They call for unity and for living out our Baptismal Vows and living together in love and harmony, all the while being careful with all God's creation.

There has to be a vision and mission statement that is jointly owned by the Bishop, Laity and Clergy of the Diocese. The Bishop needs to be resilient in promoting this vision and the vision needs to be large enough that it produces a buy in by the entire diocese.

The Book of Common Prayer, page 855 states:

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Q. How does the Church pursue its mission?

A. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.

Q. Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?

A. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.

The vision is how you do your mission. The way you evaluate your mission is to see how many people in your Diocese know what the mission is.

It really is all about the vision. Vision is everything. Proverbs 29:18

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.” KJV

Leadership Author Ken Blanchard says vision begins with knowing who you are, where you are going and how you are going to get there.

The vision is about the future and the yet unseen possibilities that exist.

There are dioceses that have a shared vision but not a shared buy-in

A buy-in that is not agreed upon will fail eventually. Significant time,

resources and energy may have been spent for this vision but because the vision did not takeoff overnight, the vision is discarded, forgotten and eventually abandoned. You have to keep casting the vision until everyone is on board.

We must remember when the twelve spies came back from the promised land it was only Joshua and Caleb who believed they could succeed in possessing the land.

9. Tell us how you think meaningful change occurs. How have you helped facilitate changes in the church? What principles helped guide your leadership?

First of all, meaningful change is change for the better. Change that will improve the life of the institution and the constituents, should be assessed by the true stakeholders of the church: are clergy and laity. Facilitating change in the church usually means changing the culture. We have to be change agents. Change often means getting the church to step out of its comfort zone. Change can bring about conflict and that is why change often does not occur. I have learned over the years that meaningful change begins with prayer, deep prayer. It then requires a commitment to see it through to its fruition.

When I came to Grace Church, the Holy Eucharist was celebrated on first and third Sundays and only the confirmed received communion and it was deeply, strictly embedded in the culture of the church. I asked both the Interim Rector and the previous Rector why they did not change this. They both had the same reply, "I left this for you to deal with." I believed then, as now, that this parish needed to be centered on the Holy Eucharist. I called one of my mentors and he told me he had encountered a similar situation at another parish. They were having Holy Eucharist once a quarter, every three months, and thought more than that was too much. He advised much prayer and then to explain, explain, explain and then do it. This is exactly what I did. There was some grumbling of course, but it did what I hope and expected; it changed the entire culture. It made the church more welcoming of others, to both visitors and each other.

What guided my leadership then and now was love. I also realized that this was a meaningful change, that had to eventually be done and was worth the cost. Some change is not meaningful. Arguably, if it is not meaningful it probably should not be changed. There needs to be an overwhelming benefit.

10. What are the most essential elements of the church's evangelistic witness? How have you modeled this witness in your own life? How would you encourage the church to engage in evangelism in new ways?

I was once told that when Mormons go on their required two year evangelistic mission, they reach one convert out of a thousand encounters. However if you live next door to a Mormon, they convert one out of every two of their neighbors. What can we learn from this? This is lifestyle evangelism. People are always watching and learning from your practices; many times when we least realize it. Remember the protesters' chant; "The whole world's watching." Frequently, when I am out in the community and happen to be wearing my clerical collar individuals tend to approach me, and engage in conversation. After listening and talking with people, even those I know, I will say in an almost apologetic manner, "Listen, it's an occupational hazard, may I pray with you?" I have rarely, if ever, been refused. In fact, some of those persons joined our parish family.

The essential elements of the church's evangelistic witness is to model the love of Christ by being a welcoming community. We encourage our parishioners to invite their friends and family to church. It is the number one church growth tool. Word of mouth. I personally invite people to church, and then I leave it all up to the Holy Spirit. My role is to be an agent, but it is God who does the conversion. I think we also as Episcopalians are often introverted Christians, we think religion, is very private and personal. However, lest we not forget how many hurting people need to have an encounter with our loving God.

11. As Bishop how would you nourish and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries to encourage diocesan outreach efforts.

I have been privilege to sponsor four persons for the ordination to the Priesthood in the Diocese of Southern Virginia since coming to Grace Church: The Reverend Howard Purvis, The Reverend Charles Miller, The Reverend Dennis Patterson and The Reverend Terry Edwards. Each of these persons had a call on their lives and needed spiritual direction to get them where God intended for them to be.

We had another wonderful young woman intern at Grace Church. She is gifted, smart, talented and a good preacher, but to my dismay did not pursue the Ordained ministry. She went on to become a member of the Virginia Legislature's House of Delegates, Delegate Marcia Price, and she is doing a marvelous job and is a member of The Reverend Terry Edwards parish in Newport News, Virginia. As Bishop I would help to create and sustain a culture and environment that would welcome people to live out and use their gifts as God is calling them. The Book of Common Prayer, page 855 states:

The Ministry

Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?

A. The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.

I will say through my service as a Trustee of Virginia Theological Seminary that we need to be raising up vocations because there is a huge forthcoming need for priests that will reach critical numbers. So we need a Church that no only spiritually nurtures all persons, but also encourages persons to discern God's call to service in the ordained ministry.

12. Why should the church struggle to be more diverse? What equips you to help the church effectively deal with the challenges of becoming more diverse?

The United States of America is becoming more diverse and the church needs to accept the fact that to live out its mission, and to continue to be a relevant institution it has to become more diverse. This millennial generation does not tolerate exclusivity of any person for any reason: race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality or any other difference. This generation of which I am hopeful and proud to have a daughter in this age group may be a best yet source for a magnificent future.

I am equipped to help the church deal with the challenge of becoming more diverse because I am an African American man, born and reared in the segregated south. I was blessed to have two parents who shielded and sheltered me from some of the pain, while instilling in me that I am somebody and with God I could achieve anything. I have been blessed to live the American Dream and know that all people benefit from learning from each other. I strive to ensure that all people are not only welcome in the tent, but that they are also welcomed to sit down at the table and eat.

13. As you have been discerning God's call in this process, have you received any insight into what you might like to focus your attention upon during the first few months of your episcopate in the Diocese of Southern Virginia.

I want the clergy and clergy families to be closer in their relationships with each other. I will bring back the Nags Head Clergy Family Gathering that met in Nags Head, North Carolina. That was one of my favorite gatherings of clergy because of the deep relationships that were built between clergy families during those conferences. We grew (and will grow) to know each other and our families more deeply.

I also want the culture of this Diocese to be able to not only recruit a more diverse group of people to attend Seminary, but also be able to recruit and retain a diverse group of talented clergy to serve in and remain in this diocese during the critical upcoming clergy shortage. This is not something that can be solved in the short term, but we need to begin the cultural change.

I am fortunate to have been in the Diocese of Southern Virginia for a long time. I want to grow the relationships with the laity and clergy that I have been fortunate to know all these years and to set a foundation to get to know newer clergy and laity better. Furthermore, I want people to know that as your Bishop I will be available to all people and will work hard to get more people involved in the life of this great Diocese of Southern Virginia. I will be a colleague in ministry that walks this journey with all the people of the Diocese of Southern Virginia lovingly and faithfully, with God's help. Our help is in the Name of the Lord, maker of Heaven and Earth!