

The Rev. Suzanne E. Watson—Response to Essay Questions

Diocese of Alaska

Bishop Search

Almighty and everliving God, you have called me to minister in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour. Fill me now, I pray, with such a measure of your Holy Spirit that I may faithfully offer to your Church the gifts you have given to me for this ministry. Save me alike from false pride and false modesty, that your name alone may be glorified before your Holy People. This I ask for the sake of the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.¹

- 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?*

¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’ (Matthew 28:19-20, NRSV)

Evangelism is the heart and soul of my ministry. I know that the only reason that my family and I enjoy the abundance of life we do today is because of the transformative power of Christ’s love as we have experienced it through the Episcopal Church. And, I love my neighbor enough that I long for him or her to also be transformed by Christ’s love. It is this commitment that fuels my service and is the motivation behind my willingness to be considered for the 8th Bishop of Alaska. In fact, the first sense I had of God’s gentle call in this process was when I saw that the Diocese had listed evangelism as **the** top priority on the profile.

Possessing a spiritual, theological, and heartfelt commitment to evangelism is one thing, creating the strategy for a place as diverse as the Diocese of Alaska is another. It is abundantly clear that the next Bishop of Alaska will need to listen and learn, and any strategy will need to be developed collaboratively. It is potentially disastrous for someone to step in thinking that he or she knows all the answers.

At this point, I can propose a broad strategy that is built around the Anglican five marks of mission, that the **Mission of the Church is the mission of Christ which is:**

To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
To respond to human need by loving service
To seek to transform unjust structures of society

¹ <http://cdo1.dfms.org/prayer.asp>

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To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth
(*Bonds of Affection-1984 ACC-6 p49, Mission in a Broken World-1990 ACC-8 p101*)

The Anglican Communion web site explains that, “The first mark of mission, identified at ACC-6 with personal evangelism, is really a summary of what *all* mission is about, because it is based on Jesus' own summary of his mission (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:14-15, Luke 4:18, Luke 7:22; cf. John 3:14-17). Instead of being just one (albeit the first) of five distinct activities, this should be the key statement about *everything* we do in mission.”²

Therefore, an effective evangelism strategy would be built on the core message that all we do as the body of Christ is to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. Regardless of context and differences, focusing on the proclamation of the Good News can prove the unifying principle. (The parish I served in in New Zealand was divided in many ways yet they moved from fighting and focusing on what separated them to come together over this unifying principle—reference Archbishop David Moxon can speak to my role in facilitating this process).

My ministry experience does include the development of strategy at a church wide level, including the creation of a plan with goals, objectives, timelines, and action items. My hope would be for an inspired, diverse, and interested team to come together to develop a comprehensive evangelism plan—a plan that takes into consideration the unique strengths and opportunities of the Arctic Coast, Interior, South Central and Southeast deaneries—and build this plan based on the Five Marks of Mission.

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.*

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22 NRSV)

My earliest experience of God’s love came from my grandmother. During my youth my parents could be described as agnostic at best (although, joyfully, my mother has since been baptized and confirmed in the Episcopal Church) and I had no real church involvement as a child or youth. However, I distinctly remember one day when I was about ten years old, sitting with my grandmother on the porch swing on her patio. She was an ample woman, and I recall snuggling into her warmth and softness as she sang the hymn *Amazing Grace* in her beautiful soprano voice. It was a special moment of pure love, and she simply said, “Remember that God is love, and that God loves you more than you can ever imagine.” My grandmother’s incarnational love was my first experience of the scriptural definition of God as love (1 John 4:8). Clearly, **elders**

² <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm>

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whose lives show the fruits of the Spirit that only faithful maturity can bring are key to transmitting the message of Christ’s love from one generation to the next.

Throughout my vocational life my service has actively involved ministry with older adults. During my training and parish work regular visits to older parishioners were a large part of my ministry. I am incredibly grateful for the wisdom gained from these visits. I also worked at a housing project for formerly homeless older adults as part of my CPE training. Here too, there was great wisdom to be gained from listening and learning. As has been the case with most of my ministry contexts, I am always amazed at how much I receive when my sole intent is to simply serve without any expectation of gain.

Most recently, I was responsible for the establishment of an Older Adult Formation and Ministries area at the Episcopal Church Center. As Director, oversight of Christian Formation/Education was included in my portfolio. As I examined this spectrum of ministries, the emphasis was primarily on youth and young adults (very important). I saw a need to strengthen formation and ministries across the entire life span, and expanded the department to include children, youth, (young adults are with in another area), adults, and older adults. I am pleased that despite the huge budget cuts of the 76th General Convention, this commitment to lifelong formation and ministry remains funded and intact.

In reviewing the information on the Diocese of Alaska, two possibilities for work with elders immediately emerge. First, it is clear that a Bishop that leads collaboratively will need a strong counsel of advice to successfully serve the diverse context. One option could be to form a counsel of advice of elders representative of the many peoples that make the Diocese what it is. This would be especially important for a candidate who is “keenly committed to becoming an Alaskan.”

A second possible opportunity relates to evangelism. In 2008, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) reported that the number of people reporting their religious affiliation as “none” had grown in every state in the US,. In fact, the number of “none”s now exceed the number of people who self-identify as mainline Christians (Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal/Anglican and United Church of Christ combined). Mainline denomination affiliation self-reports shrank from 18.7 percent in 1990 to just 12.9 percent in 2008.³ Clearly, mainline Christian denominations such as the Episcopal Church face a challenging task, and being more intentional and creative in our evangelism efforts is mandatory.

The issues faced by older adults create a prime opportunity for the message of Christ’s love to break through barriers that had previously proved impenetrable. Older adults who are spiritual but not religious represent a prime evangelical opportunity. How gratifying it would be to be part of a team to design and implement a strategy to reach this group.

³ <http://www.americanreligionssurvey-aris.org>.

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At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’² He called a child, whom he put among them,³ and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

⁴Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (*Matthew 18:1-5*)

My ministry with youth follows a similar path as my ministry with elders. During my training and parish service my ministry included working with youth groups, confirmation classes (including exposure to Confirm not Conform), camping ministry, mission activities, children’s sermons (I love to preach a children’s sermon during a church service, linking it to what will be expanded upon for the adults) and daily chapel services as a school chaplain.

My work at the Church Center also included oversight of the Episcopal Youth Event, the Official Youth Presence, Faith in 3D, Episcopal Mission Exchange, and work with the Provincial Youth Coordinators. Expanding the staff to include a specialized Children’s ministry area was vital to the comprehensive lifelong formation approach.

But perhaps the most relevant knowledge comes from my experience as a mother of four children—now three teens and a tween. From my own children I have learned that there is not one path to Christian faith—one of my children is growing on her spiritual journey through traditional liturgy and her youth group, while another had remained almost untouched by the same activities until she attended General Convention as part of the Youth Presence. Another sees the church as irrelevant and somewhat inauthentic, and questions why one needs church to be close to God. Another, a Boy Scout, finds closeness with God both in church and when enjoying nature (hiking, mountain biking, camping, and skiing).

It is being part of my own children’s faith journey that led me to begin to explore the emergent church. I organized a trip for diocesan congregational development officers to observe the emergent movement in Minneapolis, produced a DVD to initiate conversation, and am keenly interested in the development of emergent communities within the Episcopal Church. While not **the** answer, the emergent movement is one option as there is a relevance and authenticity that some youth (and others, including myself) find appealing. Working with existing networks (such as Anglimergent in the US and Fresh Expressions in the UK) to identify contexts where emergent characteristics could develop/be strengthened would be an exciting prospect.

There is no simple answer to the daunting yet foundational question of how the Episcopal Church is to continue to reach youth in today’s rapidly changing social context. What is clear is that their voice, passions, and spirituality will be what shapes the ministry as we move into the future, and that they may challenge some (many?) of the assumptions about church and church structures of their parents and grandparents. As Bishop, making room for the voice of Alaska’s youth to shape the church, both within and beyond the Diocese, would be a priority.

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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?*

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (*Acts 2:1-4, NRSV*)

What I see as the greatest challenges are also what excites me most about the role.

Clearly there are financial challenges, and the fact that 39% of the budget comes from the Church Center is a red flag. However, financial struggles can spark greater creativity.

The cultural, socioeconomic, geographical, congregational size/structure/theological complexity is another a challenge, but this diversity can also be the Diocese's greatest strength/opportunity. Together finding innovative ways to build upon the diversity for the Kingdom of God would be incredibly exciting.

But perhaps the greatest challenge is the growing secularism and diminishing role of mainline denominations. As previously mentioned, the American Religious Identification Survey reports that there are now more people who report "none" than who claim identification to one of the mainline denominations. This suggests that what we have always done is no longer working, and that we must together find new and relevant ways to reach out with the message of Christ's love, while also upholding and strengthening our traditional practices. The financial challenges and the diverse nature of the Diocese add complexity, but also suggest that the Diocese could be nimble and unique enough to do so in a way that can not only change the Diocese but inform the greater church for the glory of God. What a gift it would be to be part of this process.

I see this happening in several ways, including:

1. A commitment to leadership development, Christian formation/education, and congregational development while creatively working with the financial and geographic challenges. **A first step in a comprehensive strategy for leadership would be connecting all congregations and gathered communities electronically. I would suggest an application to a trust called the Roanridge fund which is for the "training of town and country clergy and rural Christian workers of PECUSA."** The request could be written for 2010 to cover a laptop, printer, and internet access for two years for each location that is not already connected. A request of approximately \$75,000 for the 48 congregations would not be unreasonable. However, the deadline for 2010 funds is September 1, 2009, and a brief application as well as signature by the Standing Committee in the absence of a Bishop will be necessary. Although I am no longer involved in the administration of this fund, my

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guess is that this is going to be a light year for applications so it would have a good chance of being funded. Go to

http://www.episcopalchurch.org/smallchurch_51593_ENG_HTML.htm?menupage=51387 for more information.

2. Commitment to the ministry of all the baptized. I am deeply committed to the principles of local collaborative ministry. I have attended Living Stones, Domestic Missionary Partnership, a visitor's weekend in Northern Michigan, and have engaged in many in depth conversations with many of the leaders. The principles are foundational to a vital church. As Bishop I would very much like to continue to listen, learn, and further the work in this area, and in time, would hope to contribute a new voice as total ministry continues to evolve. (The Rev. Steve Kelsey is listed as a reference and can speak to my commitment to the ministry of all the baptized.)
3. Continuing to develop diverse and unique communities of Christ whose structure is determined by their local context. Roland Allen's work around financially sustainable communities that are developed from their unique context and not simply imitations of other models/structures from Western Christendom is still relevant. As Bishop I would be committed to both the best of our tradition AND to developing new structures that work in new contexts. I would like to gently work within the church wide structures so that the Episcopal Church is more nimble and able to proclaim the Gospel in a variety of settings and contexts.
4. Working diligently to secure continued funding. Within the church, my many strong relationships and knowledge of the structures provide a good foundation on which to build. However, funds from the Church Center should not be viewed as a permanent source. Becoming financially sustainable through a variety of sources is preferred. The establishment of the Rt. Rev. Mark MacDonald Major Gifts Campaign was a critical step in this process and I would be committed to further development (I do have familiarity with the Mission Funding initiative at the Church Center). Grant writing will also be important, as will creative, outside the box alternatives for the generation of income (I've included some ideas under my response to question #5).
5. Commitment to alternative models for the office of Bishop. In New Zealand I served in a Diocese with two co-equal Bishops. They have a beautiful image of a catamaran boat with two equal pontoons as their working model. I saw the strength of this model when they together made their first presentation to the Diocese on human sexuality. At one point a question was asked, and the two Bishops stepped from the lectern and discussed their response quietly. They then returned to the lectern and answered that they could not speak as one so would wait until they had more clarity on their position. Since that time, one of the Bishops has been elected Archbishop, and serves with both a Maori and a Polynesian Archbishop—the three together fill the role of one Primate. I am so struck by the strength of this non-hierarchical model of mutuality that I have shared the foundational documents from New Zealand with Bishop Clay Matthews.

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This background could well inform the working relationship between the Diocesan Bishop and Indigenous Suffragan in the Diocese of Alaska. Working to develop a model for mutual ministry between Bishops could be very beneficial to the Diocese, and possibly to the wider church.

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?*

20 Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21 NRSV)

I am a widowed mother of four healthy, thriving children, and have been raising them on my own for seven years. During this time I have served in California, Connecticut, New York, and New Zealand, holding positions of increasing complexity and demand across the church. (The most recent required a 2.5 hour commute each day plus a great deal of travel.) The one comment that I most often hear is, “how do you do it?!” I know that it is only by the grace of God that I am able. I begin each day with prayer, often times on my knees when I first awake, and ask God to use me that day to God’s will. Turning over the frenetic pace of what the day may hold to God allows me to clearly focus on the task at hand—whatever that task may be—throughout the day. To be able to focus 100% of my energy to the vocational, relational, or personal task while I am engaged, and then moving on in thought and action when the time is up, is key to living a balanced and healthy life.

And a healthy life is defined by total health in mind, body and spirit. No one area can be neglected.

For me, **close relationships** are necessary for a **healthy mind**. My **children** are the absolute light of my life. Seeing them grow into healthy, productive, spiritual young adults is my top priority. I remain connected to **friends**, both old and new. I am blessed to have a large network of friends, from my best friend since kindergarten to a core group of college pals, to the friends from the many places we have lived. Social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn) have helped increase the connectedness, and I touch base regularly. One of the things I enjoy most about moving is the opportunity to connect with new people, and would look forward to those future friendships yet to be made in Alaska. My **family of origin** also helps keep me mentally healthy. I am blessed to still have both my parents living and healthy, and I speak with both of them often. I recently thanked my dad for being a rock of stability—his ability to put things in perspective and keep an eye on the big picture is to be emulated. Pursuing a **vocation** about which I am passionate and that I believe is making a difference in some way also contributes to a **healthy mind**. I have a great deal of energy and, quite simply, I love the Gospel,

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the Church Universal, and the Episcopal Church. And finally, **humor** is essential to a healthy mind. Being able to laugh at life's subtle (and not so subtle) ironies and at one's self (and for me there is much fodder there!) is key.

Exercise is mandatory for a **healthy body**. I work out in some way every day—vigorous hiking, skiing, biking, running, walking with our Bernese Mountain dog, taking a class at the gym, swimming, or using our home treadmill and weights. Exercise is much more than simply burning calories—for me it is a time for prayer. It is one of the times that I am closest and most open to God, and I am diligent about making time for a good work out. I've already thought about Alaska and the challenges--perhaps a Bishop's yoga or other fitness class could be offered through the diocesan offices?

For **spiritual health**, regular prayer, study of scripture (including Gospel Based Discipleship), and worship—personal and corporate--are key. Spiritual direction is also important, and I seem to gravitate towards Roman Catholic sisters and priests. (Most transforming was a Jesuit professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley who introduced me to prayer practices that I still engage in today.)

Continuing to balance my time to ensure mental, physical and spiritual well-being while each day placing God at the forefront of all I do would be the means to being a healthy Bishop able to serve the Diocese of Alaska with vigor, passion, and love for many years.

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?*

53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed. (Mark 6:53-56, NRSV)

The abundance of life that my family and I enjoy today is only because of Jesus' power to heal. We know the healing love of Christ through the stories of Jesus' healing ministry in scripture and through the experience of the healing care selflessly provided through both lay and ordained ministers. Jesus' own healing ministry and my personal experience of that ministry makes caring for others compulsory.

From the profile, it is evident that Bishop William Gordon's commitment to the care of disciples across the Diocese is extraordinary. The profile also hints at the difficulty—clearly it is too much for any one person to do.

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Working with the Suffragan Bishop Task Force, named by Resolution 2007-02, to elect a Suffragan Bishop for pastoral and spiritual care for Indigenous Congregations (Resolution 2007-01) is an inspired solution. As Bishop I would be 100% committed to this process, and to intentionally developing a collaborative Bishop's team once the person is elected.

Additionally, the training and development of a strong pastoral care team could be initiated or furthered. In the past I've worked with the Order of St. Luke and think highly of the training materials. Perhaps a team of interested individuals across the Diocese could train together virtually as they go forth to heal in the name of Christ. Intentional connection over time between this team would be important.

The profile also speaks of the challenges of the long, dark winters, addiction, seasonal affect disorder, depression and suicide. This challenge is another reason that I feel called to the ministry of the 8th Bishop of Alaska. My spouse died as a result of depression. Over time I have grown to see God not in the tragic events that led to his death, but in the love that came from others in the aftermath of his death (the healing love of Jesus through others) and in the good that can be done for the Kingdom of God as a result. I am already involved with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and would love to further my work in this area. (I would like to partner with this group to facilitate an Out of the Darkness all night walk in Alaska for survivors of suicide—these are offered already in Seattle and New York but how much more poignant it would be to hold one in Alaska on the solstice.) Being able to speak about suicide, depression and faith as Bishop would be an overpowering experience of God's ability to bring about love and goodness from even the most dark and painful circumstances.

Finally, as Bishop, I would like to further develop partnerships with non-profits in areas that match the passions of those in the Diocese and identified need in the various communities. There are some models where clergy serve as the Executive Director of a 501c3 and receive government funding for their work, while also serving as priest at a congregation where the 501c3 rents space. This may be part of an overall strategy to meet the pastoral need and the financial challenges.

- 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?*

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and

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Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ (Acts 2:5-11 NRSV)

Some still use the outdated (and invalid) metaphor for the multiculturalism as a melting pot. Somewhat better is the image of the salad bowl. However, the image that I prefer is that of a stunning mixed bouquet of flowers—each flower is unique and beautiful on its own, but the bouquet is so much more when all the flowers are together and arranged in a vase. Each preserves its own identity, yet collectively they are so much more than any one could be on its own.

My first experience with multiculturalism occurred during graduate school when I was studying Education and Counseling. Like many from the dominant majority, I remember the uncomfortable feeling as I began to grow in my awareness. Experiential learnings continued through my parish work in New Zealand—I served with a Maori priest in my congregation, worked with first generation Chinese immigrants as parishioners, and, most profoundly, learned from the diocesan Bishop much more about the Maori culture and how New Zealand has developed into an authentic multicultural country and church. (One of the highlights of my time was attending the anniversary of the Maori queen’s coronation at her palace and being invited into her inner sanctuary.) I believe that New Zealand has much to teach us about how to effectively become the multicultural church about which we dream.

Over the past two years, my interest in the subject of multiculturalism has grown, and I have studied the subject (I especially like Yancy’s work). My position as Director included oversight of the multicultural ministries area (although not listed as a reference on my resume, you are welcome to contact Dr. Andrew Kronenwetter, the Multicultural Ministries staff person at the Church Center to discuss my understanding of the area. I am clear about the difference between multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural, and I am committed to a vision, like a bouquet of Arctic Lupine, Alpine Azalea, and Narcissus-flowered Anemone, of us as a church being so much more when the voices of all are at the center. Tremendous work has already been completed, and there is much much more to do. The proposed model of Diocesan and Indigenous Suffragan is a good start. I wonder how else the Diocese of Alaska can contribute? As Bishop, I would be devoted to furthering the process.

