

Rector's Corner

Finding a successor to Bishop Howard

Dear Friends in Christ,

The process of finding a successor to Bishop Howard, who, by our Church's canons, will reach mandatory retirement on December 8, reminds me of what one of my Old Testament professors said: "Scripture is messy because life is messy." Scripture, reflecting our God who inspired it, meets us where we are, but ultimately is a love story, a powerful story of transformation, liberation, and redemption that should give us profound hope.

So while I am very sorry that our diocese's efforts toward securing the succession of its bishop have produced so much confusion, conflict, and pain, I remain confident that, as our Bishop and Standing Committee have pointed out, God is with us, and will see us through to the end of this messy time in the life of our diocese. Therefore, I am hopeful, and committed to doing whatever I can to support reconciliation and progress.

While I don't have any inside information, it appears to me that the most likely way forward will be for our diocese to call a provisional bishop. Like an interim rector, such a bishop would lead our diocese until we elect a new permanent bishop, perhaps 2-3 years from now. It is also possible that our diocese will move straight to a third bishop election. A decision might be made at diocesan convention on September 30. While I am not aware of any canonical bar to Charlie Holt standing for election a third time in our diocese, it seems unlikely that he would do so, given that he has already been refused consent by the rest of the Episcopal Church; I interpret his statement to mean that he does not wish to stand for election again. In any case, until we have a bishop in place, the Standing Committee will function as the "ecclesiastical authority" of the diocese, doing all of the things that a bishop does except for sacramental acts. When people need to be confirmed or ordained, they will invite a bishop to celebrate those sacraments, possibly Bishop Lambert, the retired bishop of Eau Claire who is currently assisting in our diocese.

This raises the question of why the Episcopal Church requires churchwide consent for the consecration of a bishop. The simple answer is that since bishops are consecrated for the whole church, the whole church gets to weigh in. In practical terms, bishops have to work with each other on matters of doctrine, discipline, and worship that affect the whole church, such as in meetings of the House of Bishops and bishop-to-bishop conversations that take place when a priest who is canonically resident in one diocese has been called to serve a church in another

diocese. Having the public affirmation of the whole church is essential to the functioning of our Episcopal polity.

Another question is why consent was withheld. Bishops and standing committees are not required to disclose the reasons why they choose to grant or to withhold consent. They are not even required to disclose their decisions to anyone but the office of the Presiding Bishop. The high-profile nature of this decision, however, has led to some bishops and standing committees to publish their reasons for granting or withholding consent, and those who chose to withhold consent cited a variety of reasons for doing so. Some have cited disagreement with Fr. Holt's conservative personal view on same-sex marriage (despite his assurances that he would obey the Episcopal Church canon requiring bishops to permit same-sex marriage if their civil jurisdiction allows it -- remember that the Episcopal Church has dioceses in eight foreign countries). Others have cited problematic statements Fr. Holt had made, although he has since provided clarification. But the most common reasons cited were the procedural objections that were upheld in the decision of the Court of Review.

Yet another question is what will happen to Fr. Holt now? Some have asked if the Standing Committee will dismiss him from the diocesan staff after Bishop Howard retires. That seems extremely unlikely to me, since the Standing Committee has consistently championed him. More likely, he will eventually be called to a suitable position, like a rectorship, seminary appointment, or a position on a different bishop's staff. But he has made it clear that he will remain in his current role for the time being, which seems right to me. Also right is our standing committee's decision to invite an outside consultant to lead our diocese through a process of listening and reconciliation; I'll send out information on that when I receive it.

As I said in church, all this has provoked many feelings, and all of those feelings are valid. If you are feeling any kind of distress surrounding these matters, or any others, please, be in touch with me right away. Bishops are the successors of the Apostles, who like Jesus himself are, by nature, servants. They and the processes surrounding them should therefore be building us up, not dividing us or making us feel bad. While God does not always give us what we want, when we want it, as Bishop Howard pointed out, God will not fail us. The rest of the Episcopal Church is holding us in prayer, and I believe that the saints are praying for us too. God has brought God's people through worse situations than this, so I encourage all parties to live in patient hope, loving one another as Christ loves us.

Yours in Christ,
The Rev. Bret B. Hays+

A Letter from Bishop John Howard

Standing Committee Letter to Diocese: Bishop Consent Results

A Letter from the Rev. Charlie Holt Following Consent Results