

The Rev. Jeremiah Williamson
Bishop Candidate Essay Questions

1. Please elaborate your understanding of the following

Holy Trinity:

Trinity talk can be dangerous business. Throughout the centuries, countless Christians have attempted to speak coherently about the Holy Trinity. As it turns out, many of those Christians were declared heretics. Some were even killed for their theological meanderings.

This shaky theological ground is perhaps one of the reasons the Book of Common Prayer keeps it very simple. The Catechism describes the Holy Trinity in a single sentence: “One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” The statement is, of course, sound and true enough. And also an economical way to avoid a history of heresy.

But another reason for the limited language could be because it is extraordinarily difficult to explain the ineffable. The Holy Trinity is deeply mysterious. Not a mystery of numbers – though the math is difficult – but a mystery into which we are called. The Trinity is a mystery meant to grasp us, rather than to be grasped by us.

The doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that relationship is at the very heart of God: one God, in three persons, bound together in a dynamic, loving relationship. And it is a relationship intended to draw us in, so that we might dwell in the God who lives in us.

This divine relationship is generative: the source of all things and the ground of being. The Love that called the world into existence, that called chaos into order, that called the Church to spread the Gospel, that called your name in the waters of baptism, continues to create. The dynamic divine community that we call God, the Holy Trinity, is still calling new life and new possibilities into being.

Christ’s Resurrection:

What I find so compelling about the resurrection story is that no one in the Gospels expected it. In Mark’s Gospel, the women come to the tomb to anoint the dead body, find it missing, and then flee without saying anything to anyone because of fear. In John’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene confuses the resurrected Jesus for a gardener, whom she is pretty sure stole the corpse. In Luke’s Gospel, two of Jesus’ followers meet Jesus on the road out of town, to Emmaus, and precede to explain to Jesus what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem; they don’t recognize him until dinner. In the Easter world, the disciples are afraid; Thomas is skeptical; everybody doubts. Those who encountered the Risen Christ had no idea what to make of it or him.

There are not adequate words to make sense of the Easter miracle, but the earliest followers of Jesus spread the word anyway. They shared these impossible stories. The women who find the tomb empty, who flee the graveyard in terror, tell their story. The disciples, whose doubt and shame and fear confines them to a secret hideout, they tell their story. And the disciples on the

road to Emmaus, the ones who walked with Jesus and failed to recognize him, tell their story. They tell impossible stories. Stories that many in the ancient world, and throughout history, have placed on a scale of foolishness to blasphemy.

The truth is: those earliest believers had options after Easter. The followers of Jesus could have gone back to the lives they left, cut their losses, and moved on – talked about the Jesus’ years at reunions. They could have told stories of spirits and visions – disembodied revelations. They could have claimed to have witnessed a temporary resuscitation. All of those stories were to some degree more believable, more expected, and definitely more socially acceptable than the one they told.

But they preached resurrection. They believed in resurrection. They staked their lives on resurrection. And there is really no way to make sense of that...unless it is the Truth.

The Gospel:

In Romans, chapter 8, Paul writes, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

It is a beautiful articulation of the Gospel. This is our Good News – a Gospel message drenched in impossible grace. Because it is the Gospel, it sounds too good to be true: love that defies explanation, love well beyond what we could ever deserve, love that stakes an unbreakable claim. Too good to be true, but also it is. It is true. Like Paul, I am convinced.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is this passage that gives me the strength to walk into this world as a minister of the Gospel – to sit and speak hope into the life of another grieving spouse or another heart-broken child of God, to shout my alleluias at the grave, and preach resurrection into the face of despair. Because I am convinced that nothing – not even death – can separate us from the love of God.

It is this passage that comforts me when my troubled mind keeps me up at night – unable to sleep because I cannot stop thinking about that day's failures or all of the things I am anxious about tomorrow or the weight of mortality. I am convinced that no matter what happens, nothing will separate us from the love of God.

It is this passage that allows me to stare down the cloudy future, fully aware that sorrow and sadness and pain and death are out there waiting for me – an unavoidable part of this earthly journey. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is our Gospel. This is our Good News. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And nothing means nothing. No exceptions. God loves each and every one of us.

Our world is filled with people who feel unloved and unwanted; this world is filled with people desperate to hear that they are loved with a truly unconditional love. And that is our message. I am convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God. That is the Good News that we are called to live for and die for. That is the Good News that we are called to share. It is so simple, but it is so powerful. It is the Gospel.

Christ's Sovereignty:

Jesus, immediately after their last supper together, just before his crucifixion, said to his disciples, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." This is Christ our King.

In a world that sees power as dominance, subjugation, and humiliation, God makes power a wooden cross, a broken body, and a declaration of forgiveness. It's likely not what many would choose; it's not what we expected. We've come to believe, in this world, that the destructive expressions of power by some distant, apathetic deity are "acts of God". But that's not it; it's not even close. If you want to see an act of God, look into the eyes of our Crucified King.

We don't need a Christ who reigns from a distant throne, far away somewhere in the remote corners of the cosmos. We need a Jesus who is willing to stay with us – through our suffering and through even our dying. Christ who is with us – in our pain, in our sorrow, in our death. That is the Jesus our world needs. And that is the Jesus our Gospel promises. Jesus: the precious victim who holds the precious victims, the healer who stays up all night with the wounded, the comforter who tenderly cares for the brokenhearted. Jesus: the one who weeps inconsolable tears that fall to the floor at our feet, to mix with our own big tears. The goal of our king was never the pursuit of power or wealth or fame – a pursuit that has left behind it a wake of destruction, death, and devastation. The goal of this king, and the grail of his kingdom, was to love us to death, and in death, and even when we just feel like we can't go on. And that he did. And to invite us into his kingdom. All of us. And that he does.

Faith, Unity, and Discipline:

Each Bishop stands in an ancient and precious tradition, inhabiting an office much bigger than one's self. Those called to the episcopate are entrusted with the past, present, and future of the Church. Bishops are stewards of a vast Tradition. It is a responsibility that should never be taken lightly.

It is the job of the Bishop to carefully and prayerfully discern between those customs that served the Church well in the past but no longer do and those Traditions that are at the heart of our Christian faith. The ordination rite symbolizes this role by having the bishop-elect lead the Nicene Creed moments before the consecration. It is the job of the Bishop to humbly defend the essentials and pass those treasures, the beliefs and practices that have formed and sustained

countless Christians, on to the next generation. And, at the same time, boldly lay a foundation for the Church of the future.

It is not only the duty of a Bishop to defend the unity of the Church, but to embody the unity of the Church. The historic episcopate, according to the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, is one of the four essential elements of Christian unity. A Bishop, therefore, should seek to promote reconciliation and fellowship, to help build up the Body of Christ, to be selfless enough to sacrifice one's ego for the greater good of the mission of God.

Faithful pastor and wholesome example:

“Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

This Great Commandment is the foundation for the life of every baptized Christian; the life of a bishop is no exception. In fact, because of the public nature of the ministry, a bishop should rightfully be held to a higher standard.

Being a faithful pastor proceeds naturally from a commitment to neighbor. Being a wholesome example of Christian living flows directly from a desire to love God with one's entire person. A faithful pastor is present to the people and clergy of the diocese. The Bishop should be a companion and supporter – of the clergy, the lay leaders, and of parishes as they navigate these complex times. When there is a crisis – personally or vocationally – the Bishop should be available, to listen, to provide counsel, and to offer guidance. A good shepherd must know the sheep.

All Christians are called to present a wholesome example, to live a life of mercy, goodness, and kindness, to be a person of peace, to be a minister of reconciliation. As the Rector of a large parish, I am very aware of my public witness. I preach not only with words, but with my actions and attitudes, in the ways in which I treat others, perhaps most especially my family. I strive to not only be a good priest, but a good husband/father/person, a person who leads with love.

2. Describe your relationship with Christ and tell us where you find abiding joy in the Gospel. How does that inform the way you live out the Gospel in your life and how you share your Christian faith with others?

Jesus has walked with me for as long as I can remember. Some of my earliest memories are of my grandmother telling me about Jesus. She told me the great Gospel stories from the Bible. But also she introduced me to a Jesus who lived, not just centuries ago, but in my heart. Jesus has always felt close: above, beneath, before, behind. In him we live, and move, and have our being. Every season of joy, every moment of sadness, takes place in the presence of the One who knows intimately the human experience.

Even as I live in Christ, so does Christ dwell in me. The same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead lives in me, animates me, fills me with life. It is powerful to know that I don't have to desperately search for an elusive, aloof Jesus; Jesus is always with me, inhabiting my heart. Jesus delights in me. He longs to spend time with me. He holds me tightly. In the baptismal waters, Christ marked me as his own, forever. And nothing in all of creation can ever loose me from his grip or separate me from his love.

That is amazingly good news. Christ's constant presence and eternal promise give me the freedom to live the Gospel. No matter what happens, I have the blessed assurance of knowing that Christ is with me, Christ will not give up on me, Christ will love me no less.

Jesus calls us to share that same love with others. In John 13, Jesus says to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

3. The Diocese of Albany, at its Convention in 2007, passed a resolution which stated that it "affirms the sanctity of human life as a gift from God from conception to natural death." As bishop, how would you interpret and teach about sanctity of life? What would be your pastoral approach to persons struggling with these issues?

Our God is the ground of life and the source of being. We first meet God, at the beginning of the book of Genesis, in the act of creation, calling forth life from the chaos. The same God calls life out of the empty tomb, and through the resurrection of Jesus, conquers death. Life is a gift from God.

And yet, life in the context of this mortal sphere is immensely complex and raises significant questions for us. It is difficult to find crystal clear, easy answers in the Bible about those things that can and do preempt "natural death": war, capital punishment, abortion, guns, addiction, unequal access to healthcare throughout the world, even poverty. The poorest region of my current city has an average lifespan that is almost 20 years lower than the rest of the city. These topics can be very controversial and politically charged. And so at my parish, we talk about them. Last year, after the months of isolation caused by the pandemic, I started a class called Conversation Space. The idea was to reestablish relationships and model respectful dialogue around difficult topics – something that our culture has not done well in recent years. Among many other topics, we have discussed abortion, guns, the miracle of birth, and death. Dozens of people attend and open their hearts. I do not expect people to agree; they often do not. But the conversations have been beautiful and holy.

And a little bit messy. Because in conversation with others we realize that we do not have all the answers, that the answers are typically not as simple as partisan talking points would have us believe. In the Church we tend, at our best, to stand humbly before holy things. Life is holy. We do well not to reduce life to easy answers but to stand humbly before the mystery of life. I find a lot of wisdom in the General Convention statement on Childbirth and Abortion that was reaffirmed in 1994. It begins very much like this Albany resolution: "All human life is sacred from its inception until death." The statement calls for concern, compassion, pastoral sensitivity,

and political pragmatism, while still maintaining the overwhelming preference for life and acknowledging the tragic element present any time life is ended. It is far more nuanced than most of our more recent statements.

We all struggle with questions of mortality. The knowledge of our own mortality, and the mortality of those we love most, is a tremendous burden. And so, it is our Christian duty to deal gently with each other as we stand humbly before the sacred mystery of life.

4. Describe how you reach out, engage, and minister to “the least, the lost, and the left out,” and give an example. How do you live out your beliefs and address social justice?

I have spent my entire ordained ministry in urban parishes. I served on the board of an organization that provided resources mostly for those who were no longer permitted to visit the shelters in the city – because of addiction or violent outbursts. On a recent Sunday morning at my current parish, in downtown Colorado Springs, I arrived to find eight men sleeping on our property.

What I have learned in my ministry is that Jesus’ command to love is challenging. People are complex. Doing the loving thing is not always the same as doing the nice or easy thing. My experience working with the unhoused and the neediest of our society has been a mixed bag. I never know if I am doing the right or best thing; I usually do not feel great no matter what I decide to do.

During my ministry, I have been physically and verbally assaulted. I have been screamed at when I refused to give in to unreasonable demands. I have had to call the police on folks who were creating a dangerous or unsafe environment. We welcome everyone at my parish, but we do not welcome every behavior. It is always hard to turn someone away – even if it feels like the right thing to do.

I have also had beautiful moments. I have received thank you notes months later from folks I’ve helped. I have seen tremendous transformations as my congregation has accepted and embraced folks living on the streets as members of the parish community. One man we invited to dinner and Bible Study, started coming weekly and building relationships. We walked with him through some of his challenges. He now lives with his adult daughter after four years of living in homelessness. He came back recently to thank me for seeing him through the worst time in his life.

There are a lot of hurting people in this world. Each person is made in the image of God. Each person deserves to have their dignity protected and respected. Every person on this planet needs to know and experience the love of God. We are called to be the ones to share that love – even when that is difficult or uncomfortable.

That is what I believe and so that is what I try to live. Sometimes it is frustrating; sometimes it is really difficult to see the image of God in someone who is hostile or manipulative. But I take my integrity very seriously and do my best to live my beliefs.

God is calling us to help establish a just society. Social justice can sometimes be a buzz phrase used to promote partisan ideology or programs. But for us, for Christians, social justice is a mandate of our Gospel and the goal and promise of our Baptismal Covenant.

Every person should know peace and justice. Every person should be treated with kindness and respect. Our Gospel should compel us to challenge the hatreds and destructive prejudices that plague our nation. As ministers of the Gospel it is our job to live Jesus' prayer: Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

5. Please describe your views on same sex marriage and explain how you would approach that issue in your role as Bishop of Albany. Please include in your approach how EDoA Canon 16 and General Convention Resolution 2018-B012 will be handled and how your approach would apply to

- a. you as Bishop**
- b. rectors with parishes**
- c. laity**

I am supportive of same-sex marriage. I have blessed two same-sex marriages – including the marriage of my aunt to her wife. The blessing, actually, brought my aunt back into the Church after decades away from Christian community.

My reasons are not partisan or politically motivated, but are founded on my faith. The Bible, in my view, never directly addresses the topic of same-sex marriage. Certainly, Jesus never mentions same-sex marriage, or even homosexuality, in the Gospels. The passage in Mark 10 that is sometimes cited in conversations on this topic is very obviously about divorce, not same-sex marriage. The other passages in the Bible that are often used to condemn homosexuality are certainly not about modern same-sex marriage and are very likely more interested in condemning sexually exploitative encounters than the affection shared by two adults of the same gender. Instead, the heart of the biblical narrative seems to be focused on love of neighbor. Loving my neighbor, I would argue, requires that I extend the same grace to others that has been extended to me.

To that end, I believe that those who receive that primary sacrament of baptism should then be eligible to fully participate in the other six sacramental rites. It seems to me that offering the sacraments to those who seek God's grace is in keeping with our vow to seek and serve Christ in all persons and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Even our marriage liturgy, despite its gendered language, seems open enough to accommodate same-sex couples. The liturgy cites three reasons for marriage. They seem to translate easily to same-sex couples as well as opposite-sex couples: mutual joy; the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord. The final reason we include in the rite even when an opposite-sex couple is beyond procreative age or cannot "naturally" conceive. And, in my own life, I have witnessed the love of Christ shine through same-sex marriages. Just as my faith and ministry have been strengthened by the Christian witness of my LGBTQ

siblings, so has my marriage been enhanced by faithful and graceful same-sex couples. In my experience God's grace can be, and is, apparent in same-sex marriages.

And we know that same-sex couples do not need the Church to be married. Any couple that does appeal to the Church is seeking the transformative grace of God – a grace that gives each couple the strength to keep and maintain their life-long covenant promise. In a culture in which so much is disposable, I want to be in the business of blessing life-long covenant relationships, founded on love and sustained by grace, of same- and opposite-sex couples. I want to honor those couples who desire God's presence, blessing, and help.

And I realize that you might not agree with my perspective or my reasons. That's OK. We can love each other and disagree with each other – though you are certainly welcome to agree with me; I'm OK with that too.

The more pressing issue in the diocese seems to be Canon 16. What do we do with a canon that could cause your new bishop to be brought up on ecclesiastical charges – a circumstance which seems less than ideal?

I am not a leader who leads by fiat or decree. I would like to see us work together, respectfully and prayerfully, to navigate the tension around this topic. I know you are doing this work even now; I want to walk with you on this journey.

Ultimately, I would like to see the diocese create more room, make more space for a diversity of opinions. I do not envision a diocese of winners and losers; I do not believe that is the future God wants for us. I want us to be a community that transcends those divisive and hurtful outcomes.

I would like to see the Episcopal Diocese of Albany share God's immense love with the LGBTQ community. I would love to make a way possible for those parishes and clergy who feel called to bless same-sex marriages. And, as your bishop, I will love and walk with, and never marginalize, those who still have reservations, or who disagree with me.

6. How do you perceive yourself working with traditional/conservative clergy/laity and progressive clergy/laity to unify and bring them together for the common good of the diocese of Albany?

Bringing together a theologically and ideologically diverse diocese is one of the aspects of this episcopate that most excites me. Much of my ordained ministry has been focused on exactly this. My congregations have always been a good mix of perspectives. My current parish experienced a painful and public split not long before I arrived, one that culminated in ecclesiastical and legal charges being brought against the former rector. I was called, in part, because I am skilled at fostering reconciliation and promoting loving relationships across difference.

I love building big tent churches; I think a big tent diocese would be an incredible witness to the Episcopal Church, to our nation, and to the world. Unique perspectives and passions,

complementary talents and backgrounds are what make a functional Body of Christ. “If all were a single member, where would the body be?”

Of course, holding together a community in which some claim the label “conservative” and others “progressive” and still others “none of the above” is not easy. And that is probably why so many people give in to the temptation to escape to safe and comforting silos, thundering echo chambers. But let’s be honest: a homogenous community is boring and unhealthy.

Besides, this kind of work is exciting and rewarding. Tension held respectfully can promote tremendous spiritual growth. I think folks in the Episcopal Diocese of Albany are experiencing this already. And so you know that even when the conversations are difficult, they are worth it. I don’t want anyone to leave or bail. We are united in Christ. Jesus is praying, even now, not for our uniformity, but for our unity. I want us to stay together, to hold each other accountable, to love each other. That will be a goal of my episcopate, just as it has been a goal of my priestly ministry.

As your bishop, I would not expect you to agree with me on every theological point. In fact, I expect you to sometimes disagree with me. Sometimes you might think I am too conservative, sometimes too progressive. That’s OK. I will probably think the same of you. But I hope you come to realize that you can trust me. I will listen to you and respect you even when our closely-held beliefs are not aligned. And we will still kneel together in prayer, dine together at the Holy Table, and work together in the name of Jesus.