

ADVICE FOR DIOCESES ELECTING A BISHOP

By JUDY STARK
Episcopal Elections Consultant

As an electing diocese ...

The idea of women (and nontraditional candidates) as bishops or other senior leaders needs to be part of the conversation in your diocese long before your current diocesan announces plans to retire and calls for the election of a successor. Your diocese needs to feel comfortable, familiar, and confident with women and minorities in senior positions, and that happens only if they have strong models in those roles.

Your diocese should be made aware of just how few female and minority bishops there are. Strong non-traditional candidates may be overlooked because we carry with us an image of “what a bishop looks like” -- and that vision is of a straight white male, typically the example with which we are all familiar. At a time of high anxiety in a diocese about what the future holds, it is easy for a diocese to slip into a position of comfort, to avoid risk-taking, to opt for the familiar.

What can you do as an electing diocese to overcome these cultural blind spots?

- **Talk about them.** Ask your Search Committee to seek out training to help them recognize their own biases. Charge them to be aware at every step of who is being moved ahead, and why or why not.
- **Seek out a diverse Search Committee.** Many dioceses populate these committees based on geography (two people from each deanery, for example), or on diocesan organizations (making sure that various organizations and interest groups are represented) or politics (liberal/conservative). Consider as well a good representation of women/men/people of color/representatives of ethnic groups. Also important: Look for the skills your committee will need: gathering and interpreting information, writing a profile, conducting interviews, designing a discernment retreat.

Sometimes Search and Transition committees are made up of familiar diocesan faces, reliable volunteers who have served the diocese long and well. A seat on the committee can be seen as a reward for meritorious service. One diocese went to great lengths to create a Search Committee that was diverse in every way: race, gender, ethnicity; fresh faces, not just the usual leaders. “The problem there is that some people had no idea what the bishop does, how the diocese runs, what the mission strategy is, the history of the diocese,” one candidate observed.

- **Talk to your diocese** about these issues long before each parish elects the representatives who will vote at the electing convention. In many dioceses, voting delegates tend to be older, white and conservative, because that is who is readily

available to serve, given the time demands. Do the electing delegates reflect the makeup of the diocese?

- Urge your Search Committee to **intentionally seek out** women and other non-traditional candidates. That said, committees cannot force anyone to become involved in the process. Even those committees that have intentionally and aggressively sought out women and minorities have sometimes been disappointed at the small number of such applicants, who often shy away from participating in an election because they feel they have little chance of being elected.
- When the candidates come to town for the walkabout, direct the Transitions Committee to **prepare the diocese to appropriately welcome and interact** with women and non-traditional candidates. What are appropriate questions and what are not? Asking a female candidate, “Who are you with?” -- making the assumption that she is there as the spouse of a male candidate or that she could not simply be single -- is out of line. Asking a female candidate how she will get dinner on the table every night if she is elected bishop is inappropriate. Remarks about shoes or clothing or hair styles or colors are inappropriate.
- **Rethink your attitude toward petition candidates.** Two petitioners said they felt a “negative message” from the Standing Committee or the Search Committee when they submitted their materials -- i.e., they were unwelcome interlopers, spoilers, it would have been better to support the slate and the process. One petitioner said her materials were not posted on the diocesan website and it was hard for voting delegates to find information about her. “I was treated like a second-class citizen.” The petition process is one more way for a diocese to determine who it is God is calling to be the next bishop, and those candidates should be treated with the same respect and dignity as slate candidates. Petitioners may be a way to achieve further diversity among the candidates.
- **Post-election appreciation and thanks are important.** The resigning bishop, the president of the Standing Committee and the chairs of the Search and Transition committees should be in touch with the candidates not elected on election day to thank them for their participation. Written notes of appreciation and gifts are appropriate in the days ahead.

Also see the companion resource “Voices of the Candidates: Women in Episcopal Elections 2014” by Judy Stark, Episcopal Elections Consultant.