

ADVICE TO FEMALE CANDIDATES IN EPISCOPAL ELECTIONS

By JUDY STARK
Episcopal Elections Consultant

If you are a candidate ...

Why are some women reluctant to become candidates for the episcopate? They cite these reasons: Misunderstanding of the process. A feeling that women aren't really wanted. A sense that women's career paths don't match what Search Committees are looking for. Hostile or inappropriate questions at the walkabouts. The playing field isn't level, it's all a political game, they don't really have a chance, so why get involved?

If that situation is going to change, there is plenty of work to be done. Here are some suggestions, from women who were candidates not elected, about how potential candidates can prepare themselves.

- **Create a discernment team** to pray with you, ask you hard questions, push you to assess how and why you feel called to the episcopate, focus on how hard the process is going to be.
- **Make sure you understand the process.** What are the steps and why? Candidates are sometimes confused about whether a diocese allows both third-party and self-nominations. Or they wonder who comes up with the questions that are asked in Skype or telephone interviews. There are general guidelines and best practices for the elections and transitions process, but there is also plenty of room for local option, so what happens in Diocese A may not be the same as what happens in Diocese B.
- **Understand the timetable.** If you move ahead through the process, what are the dates of various events: Skype interviews, discernment retreat, home visits? Pinning these down early on can avoid calendar collisions later. Understand that you do need to make yourself available for these steps in the process, and that Search Committees strive to treat all candidates as much alike as possible.
- **Ask someone to review your written materials** (typically the first step in the nomination process). Have you answered the questions? Have you cited examples and personal anecdotes? Search Committees want to get to know you and hear specifics about what you have done.
- **Prepare for the walkabouts.** Rehearse sample questions with a team and have them critique your content, your delivery, your opening statement. (And, yes, what to wear. People will notice, and talk.)
- Think about the **key points you want to get across** and prepare your answers: not a canned response, but a short statement that makes your points and that you feel

comfortable delivering. “It’s a time to be a living witness to your ordained ministry,” the Rev. Martha Macgill said, “to present yourself as best as you can so the voting delegates can say, ‘This is what we’re looking for.’ “ And yet, she said, “Often it comes down to ‘Somebody showed well, he looked like a bishop.’ It does come down to who looks good, who presents well. It’s a beauty contest.”

- Candidates should be aware that **the process is “very seductive,”** a candidate said. It is easy to get sucked in when you get warm, positive feedback at the walkabouts ... when people crowd around you and tell you how great you are, what a fabulous bishop you’d make ... and then on election day your votes are in single digits. What happened?
- Once you are a candidate, understand that **everybody is a reporter** and anything you say can end up on social media. Be prepared to be photographed at any time.
- Think about how you will respond to **difficult or personal questions.** Neva Rae Fox, public affairs officer at the Church Center’s communications staff, recommends that candidates think about “the question you hope nobody asks you,” then prepare a response you will be comfortable delivering. (She offers message training/walkabout preparation for episcopal candidates: nrfox@episcopalchurch.org.)
- **Be prepared for unkind or snide remarks** even from the clergy in your own diocese. (“You think they’re going to elect *you*?”)
- You are **incredibly vulnerable** once you are out there publicly as a candidate. Be sure you have a good support system of family and friends.
- Be mindful of **the toll the process takes on your family** as they work to support you. Their lives are on hold as well. (“Should we paint the bedroom?” “Should we plan next summer’s vacation?” “What shall I tell my boss?”) Families get little attention or support during the process, and candidates are often too wrapped up in it all to be as present as their families might wish. They are preparing to give up careers, lives, schools, friends if you are elected. It is a very strenuous time on family relations.
- **Post-election pastoral care is important.** Two candidates mentioned how exhausted they felt at the end, for which they were unprepared. One was glad she had scheduled a week of vacation right after the election. Another could feel a huge weight lifted from her shoulders. They treasured notes, cards and calls, not only on election day and right after, but in the weeks to come as they processed what had happened. “The process just kind of ends,” one said. “There’s no real way to name it, no wrapping up, no official way to bring the process to a close.”
- The women interviewed said pastoral care ranged from none to “I got it to the extent I asked for it” to abundant care. One urged that candidates’ bishops debrief with

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them more than once in the weeks after the election. Some never heard anything from Standing, Search or Transition committees in the electing diocese. Others received nice personal letters or gifts from the electing dioceses, which were greatly appreciated.

- Another candidate spoke of **“the lonely time” after the election**, when “I needed time to listen to God.” Those not elected within their own dioceses spoke of the feeling of rejection by friends, colleagues, clergy they’d mentored. “I’m surprised that I wasn’t stronger than I was,” one said. “Now I think it’s time for me to move on from this diocese. I’ve done everything I can do here.”
- **Everything does not go back to normal** the Monday after the election. Bridge-building may be required in a parish that has felt neglected in recent months while the rector pursued the election process. Colleagues may feel distant. Candidates who have dreamed of playing on a bigger stage may have difficulty settling back down at home.

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