

# VOICES OF THE CANDIDATES: WOMEN IN EPISCOPAL ELECTIONS, 2014

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If the church is serious about seeing more women elected to the episcopate, the work to achieve that goal needs to start long before an electing convention gathers to choose a new bishop.

And the work needs to involve bishops, dioceses, and search and transition committees.

This is not about teaching female candidates to write effective resumes or to offer sparkling responses to questions at a walkabout.

It is about ...

- widening and deepening the understanding of leadership;
- helping search and transition committees to understand and value the experiences and accomplishments of women, whose career paths may differ from those of men;
- expanding voting delegates' vision of "what a bishop looks like" beyond that of the straight white male.

This same work needs to be accomplished at the parish level, as search committees and vestries call new clergy leadership. Parishes need to see women and other nontraditional candidates in positions of leadership, and they need to understand the unique gifts and strengths these candidates offer.

"I learned that my gender was a disqualifying factor," said the Rev. Mimi Lacy, a candidate for diocesan in East Carolina in 2014. During the walkabout week there were the thoughtless slights. A greeter didn't seem to understand that the female in the clerical collar was, indeed, a candidate, not the spouse of a male candidate. Delegates asked how her husband liked being her "arm candy." People congratulated her "on really holding your own against the guys" during a Q-and-A session. "Somehow the expectation for me was so much lower, and it was because I was female," she said.

And then there were the really hurtful slams: A priest offered grace before dinner for the candidates, asking God to bless "the candidates and their wives."

In another diocese, a search committee member surveyed a group of female semifinalists at a candidate retreat and remarked, "I guess we'll be having the swimsuit competition later tonight."

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These anecdotes -- while attention-getting and gasp-inducing -- go to the heart of the issue: How seriously do we take women candidates? How do we mentor and prepare them, both for the bishop election process and for the job of the episcopate? How do we change hearts and minds of electors in a church that elected its first female bishop only in 1989 and has elected just 21 since then ... and elected 230 male bishops during the same period?

Search committees often present slates of candidates that are diverse in gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. "But beyond the four or five people who might have believed it was a good idea" to offer such a diverse slate, "there was never a serious consideration for anyone but a white guy to be elected," said the Rev. M. Sylvia O. Vasquez, a candidate in New Jersey in 2013.

How well will a diverse slate of candidates play in a diocese where the members of the electing convention do not reflect the demographics of the diocese? Given the time demands on delegates to diocesan/electing conventions, it is no surprise that in many dioceses the majority are older and white, who statistically are inclined to support traditional candidates -- the ones who look like the bishops they have known in the past. It may well be that we will see no major changes in who is elected until there are changes in who is doing the electing. "People are going to maintain their position of comfort -- the white male," a candidate said.

"For any real change to come in terms of who is elected, the diocese has to do the work around issues of women and race," said this candidate, a woman of color. "This has to happen at the beginning, not after the slate is announced. We have to talk about the diversity our church welcomes."

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Successful candidates tend to be "rectors at big churches or on the diocesan staff," said the Rev. Martha Macgill, a petition candidate in Maryland in 2014 and in Atlanta in 2012. Search committees "tend to look for success in numbers," i.e., big parishes, or someone who is a diocesan canon, "almost a bishop," she said. "There's a fear of getting it wrong for the diocese, so they go for those default candidates."



"The candidate from the multi-staff parish position is the most viable," the Rev. Holly Lyman Antolini, a candidate in Massachusetts in 2014, observed. "They're the ones who seize the managerial vision of the electorate. According to the 2007 Report on the Status of Women, only 3 percent of female clergy were called to such parishes, so just plain statistically we have a problem here" -- both to support women's candidacies for those key positions, and to support them once they get there.



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On the other hand, at a time when small churches are on the front lines of financial failure and are on the brink of closing, Martha Macgill said, rectors of those churches “are an important voice we need to have in the House of Bishops and in the leadership of the church.”

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Women who were interviewed for this report -- seven women from six dioceses who were not elected in 2012 through 2014 -- said they felt a deep call to the episcopate. Most had formed some sort of discernment group to sit with them, ask them questions about their sense of call, prepare them for the process that lay ahead. And all of them said it was a time of deep spiritual growth. As arduous and exhausting as the process is, they said they enjoyed it, and several would consider entering another process.

That said, the lack of mentoring and support by other women, particularly female bishops, was noted by many of the candidates. “Some male bishops reached out to me on their own, once the slate was announced,” one candidate recalled, “but no woman bishop ever did. ... Another woman who knows what it can be like -- it would make all the difference in the world” for that person to “just say, ‘On election day, you’ll have my prayers,’ or ‘I’ll be praying daily for you leading up to the election.’ Those are important.”

“It would have been awesome to have women bishops reach out, to hear what their process was like,” another candidate said. “To hear what was in your prayers, how you stayed centered, focused on Christ.”

In some electing dioceses, the candidates have been matched up with “ministering angels,” candidates not elected in other searches. Having been through the experience themselves, they were able to offer brotherly and sisterly advice about the ups and downs, what to expect, how to prepare ... and to minister to those who are not elected, since no one else knows how deeply disappointing -- indeed, traumatic -- that can be.

All bishops “really need to be aware of some significant differences in how women view themselves and how they move into ministry, versus how men do it,” a candidate said. “If the women aren’t mentored, they’re the ones who will fall behind. Men are well connected and they move right up the ladder. Bishops need to draw women out, help them honor their gifts, use them well.”

Other parts of the church may be able to play helpful roles. One candidate suggested that a CREDO conference for candidates not elected would be helpful as they considered their future and their sense of call.

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It is standard procedure for Standing Committees to remind an electing diocese that this is a Holy Spirit process, not a political process, and to discourage activities that could be construed as electioneering or politicking.

“But it IS political,” one candidate said. At least in her diocese, “politics is in our DNA. Our Standing Committee president told people, ‘Don’t make judgments on what you knew before, but on what you learn at the walkabout.’ That’s just naive.”

“We were treated as if everyone knew it was a level playing field, and it’s not,” Holly Antolini said.

Standing Committees and transition committees need to be coached and supported in making their dioceses conscious about the issues surrounding women and the episcopate. “Before the politicking starts” is the time to start talking about women and people of color, Antolini said, to “encourage people to push back against deep prejudices that lie at a level we don’t even want to be conscious of.”

Share the statistics on how few women and people of color are elected, Antolini suggested: “We want you to be conscious of that as you begin to discern” whom God calls to be the next bishop.

From 2010 through 2014, the Episcopal Church elected 47 bishops, of which 41 were men: 35 diocesans, two coadjutors, four suffragans. Of the six women elected, one was a diocesan, five were suffragans. There was one Haitian male (suffragan), one African-American male (diocesan), one Japanese-American male (diocesan) and one Korean male (suffragan). Only one openly LGBT bishop was elected, a female suffragan.

Several candidates urged some way for the diocese to get to know the candidates other than at a walkabout. That’s not enough time, they said.

And there needs to be a way to talk about the unspoken things: “We can’t elect a woman bishop, we already have a female suffragan.” Gossip about sexuality, or weight, or marital status, or clothes. Racial slurs. A rude driver. In a diocese with two female candidates -- “both middle-aged, gray-haired women with glasses” and similar-sounding first names -- the candidates heard delegates in a breakout room wondering, after the candidates had left, “Now, which one was which?”

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An electing diocese can take some steps that would be helpful to all candidates, not only women:

- \* Acknowledge that the episcopate is changing. The role of bishop is not always what sitting bishops expected it to be. The role of the future bishop in the electing diocese may not be what it was when the current bishop was elected years ago. “People say they want a pastoral bishop, but they really want someone to do the hard work of closing churches and making hard decisions,” Martha Macgill said she was told by several bishops who met with her during her candidacy.
- \* Listening sessions and surveys, conducted by the Search Committee, can draw out helpful information on the readiness of a diocese to welcome women and nontraditional candidates. These can also be opportunities for structured conversations that nudge our preconceived notions of “what a bishop looks like” or “who ought to be a bishop.” Deal upfront with comments like “I’d never vote for a woman” or male clergy who say, “I don’t want to work for a woman boss.” What is behind those comments? Where do they come from? How do we need to address that thinking?
- \* Provide role models at the diocesan level. The Episcopal Church takes pride in the fact that the Presiding Bishop, the President of the House of Deputies, and the President of the Church Pension Fund are all women. But the Presiding Bishop is the only one of those three who might be known to the people in the pews. Many of them have no image or experience of local female leadership. A diocese needs to see smart, strong, powerful, effective female clergy leadership day in and day out so that, when the time comes to elect a bishop, the female candidates do, indeed, “look like a bishop.”
- \* Create a feedback mechanism. Candidates have some things they’d like to say. Even though a diocese may not elect another bishop for 12 to 15 years, it is helpful to know now what worked well and what didn’t. That information may assist a diocese in raising up new leadership for other positions in a way that is healthy and life-giving. Or it may pave the way for the future candidacy of women in that diocese or another. Elections processes tend to mirror the anxieties and dysfunctions in a diocese, so as a new bishop takes over, it can be very instructive to confront those anxieties as viewed by the candidates.
- \* It is also instructive for candidates’ own bishops to debrief with them. “How we continue to harness and receive the gifts they want to give to the church is very important. It’s a missed opportunity if a diocese just lets them fade into the woodwork,” one candidate said.
- \* See the resource, “Advice for Dioceses Electing a Bishop,” for more suggestions.

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*When will more women be elected to the episcopate?* Not when they start acting more like men ... but when their experience, career paths, and gifts are acknowledged and valued for themselves. “A woman brings distinct gifts to traditional male roles, and these distinct gifts are essential to the fabric of change,” a candidate commented. “This might mean a slower walk to leadership, but it brings with it our full identity.”

*When will more women be elected to the episcopate?* When men who support women in leadership give their support and their outspoken help.

*When will more women be elected to the episcopate?* When those doing the electing have come to see them as people “who look like a bishop,” that is, when the skills and intelligence and spiritual leadership they offer are the basis for that decision, guided by the Holy Spirit, and not the fact that they look like the white male bishops of yesteryear. The same can be said for candidates of color.

*When will more women be elected to the episcopate?* When the church as a whole lifts them up, not because they are weak but because they are strong.