

Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia Bishop Search

WHY ARE BISHOPS IMPORTANT?

One of the most important answers to this question lies in the symbolic passing of teaching authority from one generation to another by the “laying on of hands,” signifying the Church’s continuing commitment to the teaching of Scripture and of the Apostles, as preserved by the whole church. Bishops declare, in their ordination vows (as do priests and deacons), that they believe the “Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation’ (BCP, 513).

Another reason lies in how the governing authority and leadership of the office of the bishop are reinforced. The bishop’s vow to “conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church (BCP, 513) is strengthened throughout the Church by the vows of obedience that priests and deacons make with respect to their bishops at their own ordinations (BCP, 526, 538). Bishops are thus the lynchpin in an interlocking system constructed from several elements: a confession of belief, a commitment to Scripture, and conformity to a shared tradition. All these work in concert to hold the whole Church together.

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A third aspect of the importance of bishops lies in giving strategic oversight to God's flock and serving as shepherds to diocesan clergy. This oversight is provided in many ways: through episcopal visitations to parishes throughout the year, in bishop-led retreats for clergy, in published letters to parishes, in instruction, and in other forms of communication.

Fourth, from the Church's earliest days bishops have been the chief missionaries for the faith. We can see this acted out in the lives of great missionary bishops of the Middle Ages like Saints Cyril and Methodius, the missionary brothers who went to the Slavic peoples in the 9th century; and in the career of more modern missionary Episcopal bishops like Henry Benjamin Whipple of Minnesota, who went to the Lakota and Ojibwa peoples in the 19th century.

Finally, episcopal continuity aids in the continuing struggle to find and live out the truth of the Christian faith in the face of often militant opposition, not only in the New Testament times, but throughout the ages. Already in the second century, for example, Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon in France (c.125 – c.202), saw in the Church's bishops the repository of the truth entrusted to it. His tenacious insistence has been a foundation of the Church's thinking ever since.

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