
Of New Bishops and Loving Community

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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"Are you the new bishop?"

Five or six racers queried me with big smiles while I was *staffing* the Peachtree Road Race this Fourth of July. Cathedral members were handing racers the familiar bottled water; four of us clergy were provided with buckets and bowls of holy water. For about three hours we dipped-in and sprinkled-out on passers-by, while declaring, "Blessings! Blessings! Blessings on you!"

So some of the racers may have thought, seeing the black male in a white collar, "Is this the guy just elected the first black bishop of Atlanta?" Every year previously our Cathedral Dean, Sam Candler, has been there blessing the runners. But for the first time since he inaugurated the blessings in 1999 he was not there; he was dutifully attending our national church convention that week along with Bishop Neil Alexander and Bishop-elect Rob Wright. If you didn't see the dean at his usual post you might have reasonably surmised, "Oh, this time the new black bishop is giving the blessings."

"Are you the new bishop?" In sheer honesty of course I said, "No, that's Robert Wright." But after the third or fourth time it felt like people wanted the new bishop to be able to welcome and embrace him. Perhaps they also needed a dean or bishop to be out there, signaling the event as a special liturgy. Indeed, "blessing the runners" has become a special liturgy for us—an outdoors extension of the church every Fourth of July. We even conclude with a service of Holy Communion on the church lawn nearest the roadway.

Speaking of liturgy (literally, "people's work"), consider the following query I think every community poses to its bishop. Suppose that every bishop is asked to respond to this query by the people of his or her diocese, and that it is posed from candidacy through to election and into retirement following years of faithful service: "Will you love us?" or, "Do you love us?" or finally, "Do you love us still?" knowing what you know about us?

To amplify: we want to know of our bishops, "Are we your beloved as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for her?" (Ephesians 5.25). That's because in our tradition the bishop serves as the chief vicar or vicarious presence of Christ in the church. Even our name, Episcopal, signals that bishops are key (the Greek *epi-scopos*, meaning overseer—compare "over-scope"—was rendered *biscep* or "bishop" in Old English). So that's why there's such intensity in church history focused on the role and person of the bishop. It's not just about clericalism or hierarchy; it's also about the church as "body of Christ" having a bishop as his vicar (representative).

Beyond clericalism however—at the deep level where every cell bears the DNA signature of the whole body, today's *Book of Common Prayer* commissions all baptized persons to represent Jesus Christ; to be out there "epi-scoping" and blessing the church and the world.

"Are you the new bishop?"

"No, not me, I said that day. But, 'Yes' we are! Collectively we are an episcopal community commissioned to 'scope-

out" and offer blessing to all people for the sake of loving community; for the sake of being loving community as a church that fosters loving community in the world. Together we answer affirmative to that deeper, unspoken question asked every day, asked in every situation, and asked by every living soul: Love me? "Yes, we love you. And in the name of God be loving community with us and for all!"

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