

The Very Reverend Beth J. Fain



Age (at time of Nominating Synod): 58

Diocese of Canonical Residence:
Texas

Current Position:
Rector, St. Mary's Episcopal Church
Cypress, Texas

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Résumé

The Very Reverend Beth J. Fain

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Profile

My first career serving in a variety of Special Education settings (classroom, itinerant, and home-based) teaching, evaluating, and planning for special needs children and their families paired with an active lay ministry including leadership in pastoral care and outreach, Christian Formation, and Stephen Ministry, was foundational to my ministry as a priest serving as a rector, convocational dean, member of the Commission on Ministry, Examining Chaplain, and as the chair of the committee visioning, planning and bringing into active service the ministry of the deacon in the Diocese of Texas.

Experience

Rector, St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Cypress, Texas 1997--present

Called to a parish in conflict and with huge debt, we are now a healthy, vibrant, program-size suburban parish which the Diocese uses as a center for mentoring new clergy and seminarians

Dean, San Jacinto Convocation, Diocese of Texas 2008--present; 1998--2001

Convene monthly meetings of clergy in one of ten geographical areas; serve as liaison

with Bishop and convocational clergy; voice (no vote) on Diocesan Executive Board

Mission New Orleans 2007--current

Went with parish group to assist with tearing down damaged houses; met, prayed, and

worshipped with those still ravaged by Katrina; encouraged and supported other parish

trips to other Gulf areas, now in the Texas Gulf Coast post-Ike

Commission on Ministry, Episcopal Diocese of Texas 1994--present

Serve as one of eighteen committee members entrusted with the discernment of seminary-prepared candidates for the priesthood; assisted with beginning a program for locally prepared priests; chair of subcommittee which rewrote discernment manual for aspirants; chair of committee since 2008

Iona School for Ministry, Episcopal Diocese of Texas 2004--2008

Developed curriculum for the Diocese's new school for the preparation of deacons and bi-vocational priests; supervised field work and taught several classes for deacons

Chair, Committee for the Diaconate, Episcopal Diocese of Texas 2003--2008

Visioned, planned, communicated, and implemented the ministry of the [permanent] diaconate in the Episcopal Diocese of Texas

Examining Chaplain, Episcopal Diocese of Texas 1995--2003

One of five members of clergy committee evaluating canonical proficiency of candidates for the priesthood; specialty areas: Holy Scripture and National Canons

Mission Ukraine Summer, 1993

Went with my father's church as the only non-Baptist to newly independent Ukraine;
served on a team with him, finding a way to share a woman's perspective in worship in a patriarchal culture and acted as a liaison with the many of Orthodox faith

Assistant to the Rector, St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas 1992--1997

First woman to serve as priest in this resource-size suburban parish; responsible for pastoral care, children and youth ministries; created video for capital funds mission

Summer Camp Director, Camp Allen, Diocese of Texas 1993--1995

Planned and led week-long summer camp sessions for elementary age children; trained
and supervised high school age counselors

Interim Director of Religious Education, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Bellaire, Texas 1990--1991

Responsible for all Christian Formation (birth through adult) in a program-sized urban parish

Special Educator, Klein Independent School District, Klein, Texas 1978--1990

Variety of positions including teacher of visually handicapped infants, early childhood, and severely-profoundly retarded children; Educational Diagnostician, specializing in the assessment of infant, preschool, and autistic persons

Resource Teacher, Carrollton Farmers Branch ISD, Carrollton, Texas 1974--1978

Taught emotionally disturbed and learning disabled students mainstreamed in regular education classes; selected Teacher of the Year in 1978

Teacher of Minimally Brain Injured, Grand Prairie ISD, Grand Prairie, Texas 1972--1974

Taught learning disabled primary-aged children in a self-contained educational setting

Education

Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, Austin, Texas. Certificate of Individual Theological Studies 1992

Houston Graduate School of Theology, Houston, Texas. Master of Divinity 1992 Selected as Outstanding Student, 1992. Thesis: *Truly Divine: Holy Women of the Caroline Era*

Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas. Master of Education 1974 (Magnum Cum Laude) Educational Diagnostician

Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas. Bachelor of Science 1972 (Magnum Cum Laude) Double major in Elementary and Special Education; minor in Reading

Skills

Provide spiritual leadership in the parish and the diocese particularly through modeling healthy spiritual practices

Open and accepting of variety of people and situations, using careful listening and patience in especially challenging circumstances

Ability to vision and implement new ministries in the parish and on a diocesan level

Mentor of clergy before and after ordination

Passionate teacher and facilitator of Christian formation for persons of all ages

Encourager of both the priesthood of all believers AND the diaconate of all believers

Ministry of reconciliation between individuals and within a parish

Ability to stay in difficult situations long enough to bring transformation, learning from successes and mistakes

OTHER

Postulant seeking to become Oblate, Our Lady of Grace Monastery [Order of St. Benedict] Beech Grove, Indiana

Daughter of the King

One of four candidates, 15th Diocesan Bishop of Connecticut, 2009

Written Responses to Questions by the Nominee

The Very Reverend Beth J. Fain

Question One: Who do you say Jesus Christ is?

There is a church in Chimayo, New Mexico, where I go to pray each Advent. Placed in a window in the nave is a glorious wood sculpture of the head of Jesus, thrown back in joyous laughter. Once when I was kneeling in prayer, my eyes were drawn across the aisle to the wooden sculpture placed opposite the laughing Jesus. It was a wooden carving of a bloody Jesus, dying or dead on the cross. It was as if the glorified, resurrected Christ were laughing in the face of his terrible death, knowing that evil and death had been overcome. These two images of Jesus Christ, held together, are who I say he is.

I cannot remember a time in my life that I did not know that Jesus loved me and was with me. My favorite book as a small girl was *If Jesus Came to My House*, a picture book in which a little boy imagines the boy Jesus coming to spend the day with him. It ends with the child realizing that by serving others every day, he is spending time with Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the first person to whom I speak every morning (*Good morning, God, this is your day. I am your child. Please show me your way.*), and the last with whom I speak each night (*Thank you, God, for another day to serve you.*).

I cannot imagine my life without a relationship with Jesus Christ. I do my part in nurturing that relationship by learning more about him through the study of Scripture, the sacraments, prayer, music, and serving him by serving others.

I am aware each day of Jesus' presence with me through the gift of his Spirit. I listen for his quiet voice as I strive to be his presence in the world. I could not be writing these papers if I did not know that Jesus were sitting beside me, encouraging and guiding me.

The word that Jesus used to describe his relationship with us, his disciples, is friend. A huge piece of my personal mission is to introduce Christ Jesus to those who do not yet have a relationship with him, and to encourage those who do that Christ Jesus yearns to have an even deeper relationship with them.

I pray that my life shows who Jesus Christ is to me. I pray that my relationship with him makes others curious to know more about Jesus--the Jesus Christ of sorrow and suffering, of grace and forgiveness, of laughter and abundant life.

Question Two: What is the gospel message?

The Gospel message is:

God is always with us.

God always loves us.

God will never stop pursuing us.

God is alive and present and available for all people, no exceptions.

We are each beloved sons and daughters of God, beautiful and exceptional because we are each created in God's image.

God's only son, Jesus, came to show us the kind of relationship we can each have with God. Jesus expressed that relationship best by telling us he came to be our friend. He chooses each of us to be his friend, and desires each of us to say yes to his invitation. Being Jesus' friend means that God not only loves us, God *likes* us, too. Although Jesus came into the world to love each of us, one by one, he came to form a community of those who called him friends.

Through his Spirit, Jesus gives each of us gifts to share with members of his community, to build up and strengthen his community, and to bring the whole world, one person at a time, into his community.

By accepting Jesus' friendship and the gift of his Spirit, we no longer live for our own selfish needs but to serve others. Jesus reminds us that every time we serve others, we serve him.

The Gospel message also reminds us how big Christ's table is. He chose unlikely folk to join him in meal after meal, conversation after conversation. That means we must be very careful in judging others. It means that it is especially important for us to sit with others and be in conversation with them.

The Gospel message is that, with God, nothing is impossible. God is a God of abundance. God is a God who loves to surprise. God will only give good gifts to God's people.

The Gospel message is that God is a God who suffers. The Christ Jesus who died a horrible death, innocent and without any sin, is with us in our daily sufferings.

The Gospel message is that there is no thing that we can do that separates us from God's love. When we sin, when we do those things that separate us from God, God does not leave us (we are marked as Christ's own forever). God is there, ready to forgive before we even ask, and yet waits for us to repent and return to the Lord, then runs to forgive us.

Question Three: What is your understanding of “Mission” and “Ministry”?

Mission and ministry is the work of the baptized.

Jesus says that our mission is this: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them all things that Jesus has commanded us. Remember: Jesus is with us always, to the end of all days.” (Matthew 28. 19. 20, paraphrase) What has Jesus commanded us? What is it that we are to teach? Two things: love God and love our neighbor. (Matthew 22. 37--40).

How do we love God and love our neighbor? I believe that Jesus described that love when he told the disciples of John the Baptist that “the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them.” (Luke 7. 22). As Christ’s ministers, we do this both literally and, of course, metaphorically. Jesus also told us that every time we do for others, especially for those whom we find less desirable, that we are serving him.

Our ministry is the many ways that God has each of us live out our part in Christ’s mission. Ministry is a full-time “job” for all of us. As ministers for Christ, every place we are is a place for us to serve him. In fact, one of the Greek words that is translated as “ministry” in the New Testament is a form of *diakonia*, to serve, from which we get the title for those clergy servants, deacons. Ministry is about serving--God and others.

When I interview candidates for the priesthood as a member of the Commission on Ministry, I am always concerned when nominees say that they want to be ordained so they can serve God full-time. If one is not serving God full-time as one of the baptized, I certainly would not expect a person to do a very good job as priest, empowering and encouraging parishioners to be Christ’s presence at school, in the check-out line, or at the dinner table at home.

I believe that as Christ’s ministers, there is no small work for his kingdom. There is no small task for God. By using common words to describe God’s mission field, the kingdom of God--words like nets and coins and yeast and seed--Jesus reminded us that it is in the common that the holy most often happens.

There is no age limit on being a minister of the church (don’t infants get a whole group of people to worship who would not be in church except that they had come to celebrate their baptism?). In the parish where I serve, the children are called “younger Christians.” They have very important ministry, too, and their discipleship is as necessary as any other person in the parish. As a sage man one said, “Youth are not the future of the Church. They are the Church.”

Question Four: Provide an autobiographical sketch of your life, including those turning points which were significant in your spiritual development.

A fifth generation Texan, I grew up in the Southern Baptist Church. When I was nine years old, I fairly ran down the aisle to make my profession of faith. I can vividly remember the sense of near drowning when I was baptized by immersion.

A couple of years later, I read a book about a missionary to China. I loved that book and decided that I, too, was being called to be a missionary. My discernment was correct--I was being called to be a missionary, but not in any way I could have imagined.

In my twenties, a teacher and now married, my family of three stopped attending church regularly. At the invitation of a sister teacher, we visited St. Andrew's Episcopal, Farmers Branch, Texas. My husband felt like he'd come home, and I wanted the family to be united in worship. Within a year I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church.

Soon afterwards my family moved to Houston, and I believe we would have become inactive again had not my husband's boss told us about a new Episcopal mission being formed and that he expected us to be there on the first Sunday. Because of yet another church invitation through work, my family became founding members of St. Cuthbert. It was there that I fell in love with God again and became very active in my little mission church. In the early 80's, while I was attending a Bible study, I heard an Inner Voice saying quite clearly, "You will be a deacon."

Thus began the twists and turns of seeking ordination in the Episcopal Church. My diocese did not have an active (permanent) diaconate. After several more years of discernment, I was made a postulant for Holy Orders seeking ordination as a deacon, the first ever in my diocese.

Midway through seminary, the Holy Spirit did another twist, and after a weekend of heart-wrenching prayer, I knew that something had shifted inside of me, and my call was to serve as priest. I was ordained priest in 1993. For the past twelve years I have happily served as rector of St. Mary's, Cypress, Texas.

Besides my ministry in the parish, I have been active in the Diocese of Texas, particularly in the area of discernment for ordained ministry. God used my initial call to the diaconate when I was chosen by my bishop to lead in the creation of an active diaconate. We have ordained nearly twenty non-transitional deacons.

For several years I have been asked to be a candidate for bishop, but I did not confirm a call. After more discernment, I recognized that to be obedient to God, to be a deacon and a missionary, that I had to allow myself to be willing to be part of episcopal processes. I offer myself to the Diocese of Springfield--to be engaged with you in the process of discerning whom God is calling to be your eleventh bishop.

Question Five: Describe your rule of life in detail.

I strongly believe that those whom clergy serve grow in their relationship with Christ Jesus to the extent that their clergy are faithful to their own personal relationship with Christ. Therefore, I take my spiritual practices very seriously, for my own sake as well as those whom I serve.

I live in a rectory that is big enough for a large family; however, since my children are grown and live in New York City and Portland, Oregon, my cat and I have lots of extra space. What would be the living room is my prayer room. I am blessed to have a whole room set aside for journaling, lectio divina, pondering, and study. The room is my chapel, with everything in it carefully chosen to be a spiritual aid--from the apple green walls, to my sister-in-law's painting of me serving at the altar, to my daughter's photographs, to my grandmother's rocking chair, to particular books, and small spiritual reminders. I have prayed there so often, I can go and sit in the cozy arm chair and almost immediately rest in God's peace. My daily alone time with God, a combination of listening and speaking, reading a variety of materials--especially Scripture--and pondering, is precious to me.

In the last few years, my time of community worship has become especially essential. Several years ago, I instituted daily Morning and Evening Prayer in the parish where I serve; led by Worship Leaders, it is a place for me to join others in sharing our thanksgivings and concerns, particularly as we cycle through Scripture, psalms, and canticles. I do not attend every day, but I do my best to schedule meetings inside and outside the parish so that I (and others) can gather for the Office.

Seven years ago I became part of a Lilly Foundation grant for women pastors called Women Touched by Grace. We meet regularly at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana, and worship and play (yes, play) with the Benedictine Roman Catholic religious. My love of the Benedictine Rule of Life, which I was already trying to follow, has deepened, and I am in the process of becoming an Oblate of Our Lady of Grace Monastery.

Another spiritual practice is finding the holy and divine in the secular. I love to read books, go to movies, view art, and find music that speaks of the yearning we all have for God. This search has led me to many wonderful artists who do not necessarily consider themselves religious, but who have fed me spiritually.

I faithfully keep Sabbath (usually Friday) each week as a spiritual exercise. I also encourage others to cease to work as a regular practice. I participate in retreats and continuing education regularly (I have no difficulty getting my mandated CEU's each year) as well as spiritual direction. Of special import are the trips I take to rest and refresh each Advent (to New Mexico) and Lent (to the beach).

Question Six: Based on your reading of the Diocesan Profile (including the Survey) and any other knowledge you have, what do you see that is positive and what do you see that is challenging for the next Bishop of Springfield?

In the information that I have read about the Diocese of Springfield and in conversations with those who know the Diocese well, I hear a spiritual yearning among the baptized--a desire to have a deeper relationship with God and to serve God more fully in a world that largely does not know God. This gives me great hope for God's people.

I was especially delighted as I visited the Diocesan website and the page that pictured each church in the diocese with information and links. It was easy to visit each parish and mission from my desk in Texas, either by finding them on a map or going to an actual website. Those thirty or so churches are places where good work has already been done for God's kingdom-- but I believe that God has much more in store for them.

The issues of decreasing attendance, membership, and money do not worry me. I believe that God always gives us abundance to do what God has called us to do. Everything that we need is already present in the Diocese of Springfield. To discover those abundant resources will require prayer, conversation, hard work, creativity, and openness to a God of surprise. I have experienced this time and again both in the parish where I serve as rector, and in ministry projects outside the parish. I have no reason to believe that God would stop giving now.

Our challenge is to empower more fully the ministry of the baptized. In a changing Church for a changing world, I believe that the role of the ordained will have to change. There are ministries within the church that only bishops, priests, and deacons can do by Canon and by ordination. But there is much, much more that the baptized can do, and it is through their empowered, faithful ministry in the Church and in the world, that God's kingdom can become all that God created us to be.

Each parish must be urged to ask (if they have not already): If we were to close our doors permanently, would we be missed in our community? Each church, if indeed created and called by God to exist, has a unique purpose. Helping each place, no matter how small, to find that unique purpose is an urgent task.

It is also time for us to put aside endless conversation and distractions regarding issues upon which we may never agree. A wise priest once told me that those who visit (and may even have a place in the Episcopal Church) and find us arguing, will not return; if they wanted to be in a place of disagreement, they could go home. There is more, much more, upon which we agree with the Great Commission and the Great Commandment as our common starting place. It is living out these two commands by Jesus that must be where we put our energy and resources.

Question Seven: Describe your understanding of leadership, particularly as it would be exercised as a bishop.

As a leader in the Church, my first priority is to practice faithfully my own spiritual disciplines of prayer, worship, study, and rest. I am only able to lead as well as I am centered in Christ.

I try to model what I expect from others. I expect no one to do something I would not myself be willing to do.

I lead by trusting others. I am clear about my personal strengths and weaknesses. What I cannot do well, I find others that can and encourage them to do so. When people have been given a responsibility, I trust them. Though it may seem easier to do some things by myself, Jesus came to form us into community, and I know that the ministry I do is far, far better when it is shared with others.

I am truthful. When I make mistakes, I acknowledge them and try to learn from them. When there is conflict, we talk openly and prayerfully about that which divides us.

As I pray about the kind of leader that I would be as bishop, I am reminded of the model of three bishops:

In seminary, I was sent to Chicago as a representative at an interfaith conference. We were invited to the Cathedral for Eucharist and breakfast. As we gathered for breakfast, the Diocesan Bishop was the one gathering chairs and putting them out, walking around and serving us orange juice. With great humility and no pretense, he served us. A bishop is one who serves as Jesus serves.

Another time in seminary the retired Bishop of Cuba was our preacher. When the offering plate was passed, he lifted his chimere and rochet, took money out of his pocket, and placed it in the plate. I had never seen a bishop do that during worship (or since). A bishop is one who is humble and giving.

When Claude Payne was elected Bishop of Texas, conversations about sexuality were heated. Many who voted for him believed that he would make a strong stand regarding traditional views of human sexuality and lead the diocese and the larger Episcopal Church to a new commitment to orthodoxy. While Bishop Payne was clear about his orthodox theological stand, once said, he rarely had conversation about these issues. He spent his Episcopate returning the diocese to a strong focus on mission. My memory of Bishop Payne, in his purple cassock, traveling around the diocese teaching us new ways to be the Church and to do mission is an icon. A bishop is one who not only teaches by example, but encourages and empowers others to focus on mission and all that God has called us to be.

Question Eight: A bishop is called to “guard the faith, unity and discipline in the Church” (BCP 517). How do you understand this charge as it relates to the current crisis and other challenges within the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion?

In the ordination liturgy for a bishop, there are approximately five hundred words in the Examination. Those portions of the ordination vow which the above question addresses make up roughly ten per cent of that which the bishop promises to do with God’s help. That means that these words are important, but there is another ninety percent worth of words that need to be lived faithfully, too.

Yes, it is important to guard the faith, unity and discipline of the Church, but this is a small part of being bishop. Focusing on the mission and ministry of the diocese is far more important, I believe, to the health of Christ’s Church. If we were to spend more time in conversation about how we as a Church could be the presence of Christ in the world, particularly serving those whom Jesus Christ told us to serve, I wonder if some of those issues that seem so big and so important would turn out not to be issues. That has been my experience in the parish where I now serve.

As bishop, I would “share with [my] fellow bishops in the government of the whole Church...” That means that I would gather with my brother and sister bishops, with prayer and humility, having asked for the faithful prayer of the members of the diocese I was called to serve. That means that I would have a relationship with others within the larger Episcopal Church structure as we prayerfully discerned together that artful juggle of what was best for the parish, the diocese, the Episcopal Church, and the Anglican Communion. That means that I would engage in conversation, listening and speaking, during those opportunities that God gives us to be together. This also means that I would obey the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church, and, with God’s help, do no action contrary to those canons.

Question Nine: Describe your liturgical style; include in your answer your understanding of the place of preaching and the use of music in the liturgy

I was new to the Episcopal Church when changes in worship began with the *1979 Book of Common Prayer* and *The Hymnal 1982*. The vicar of the mission church where I was a member decided that the way that the parish would come to one mind about worship was to alternate worship styles from Sunday to Sunday. It was quite a challenge to switch from “and with thy Spirit” and challenging liturgical music, followed by a Sunday of Prayer and Praise-type music and “also with you.” At the end of those three months, I realized that something extraordinary had happened within me--I could worship anywhere, anyhow. This has certainly served me well as a priest in the Church. I might have personal preferences, but worship is about God and not me.

I can move relatively easily between liturgical styles. On Sundays at St. Mary's we have a 7 AM (lay led) spoken Morning Prayer, an 8 AM said Rite One Eucharist, a 10:30 AM Rite Two Eucharist with Children's Chapel and a variety of music, and close the day at 5:30 PM with Form Three non-vested Eucharist with healing. What is important to me is that the liturgy be done with excellence, joy, and hospitality; be prayerful; rubrics followed; and most importantly, *be worship*. The purpose of worship is first to give God honor and glory, second to serve those who worship with us, and third to nourish us so that we can nourish others.

I have found it ironic that music, a type of prayer, would be that which would could separate us from each other. When I came to St. Mary's as rector, the battle lines were drawn between traditional, organ music and more contemporary music with guitars. One year, as we prepared for Pentecost, we realized that the different "tongues" within our parish were the different personal preferences in style of music. That year, every type of music that we could provide with excellence was used during our worship: plainsong, Anglican chant, music from *LEVAS*, *WLP*, *The Hymnal 1982*, organ, piano, and guitar. At the end of our worship, after the dismissal, there was a palpable sigh of relief among those gathered for worship; both guitars and organ had been used and no one died or ran out screaming. It was a turning point in our parish.

The call to preach is a most sacred gift. In that ten or twelve minutes, I have the attention of the parish in a way that I will not have again during the week. Thus I take my sermon preparation very seriously, spending a great deal of time and care in that holy task. I believe that the sermon is a conversation between me, God, and the listener. However, since I am the only one who speaks aloud, I do not use the sermon time for topics that need to be had in face to face conversation. My sermons are based in Scripture, and I make sure there is something practical that will help us all in the week ahead.