

## The Reverend Robert E. Hensley



**Age (at time of Nominating Synod):** 59

**Diocese of Canonical Residence:**  
Massachusetts

**Current Position:**  
Rector, Grace Episcopal Church  
Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts

**Spouse:**  
Michael W. Helgert

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## Résumé

### **Robert E. Hensley**

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### **Ministry Objective**

Rector of program size parish or Cathedral dean in search of dynamic, prophetic preaching and leadership focused on empowerment and inclusion of all the baptized for outreach, evangelism, congregational growth, stewardship development and education.

### **Summary of Qualifications**

- Over twenty-five years experience in congregational and organizational ministries growth and development; primary focus on outreach, education, Christian formation and stewardship.
- More than ten years experience designing and developing specialized HIV/AIDS ministries in North Texas; bi-lingual homeless and social services programs in Illinois and Washington, D.C.
- Spanish language liturgical competence.
- Five years experience working with USAID federal programs involving women's health, child nutrition and welfare issues.
- Three years experience as adjunct faculty member at Virginia Theological Seminary in Arts, Music and Liturgy.
- Jubilee Officer, Diocese of Washington.
- Provisional Clergy Deputy to General Convention 2009.
- Current Member, Diocesan Council, Diocese of Massachusetts.
- Current President, Massachusetts Episcopal Clergy Association.

### **Pastoral Specialties**

### **Program Development**

- Doubled Sunday school attendance, tripled class offerings, instituted *J2A/Rite 13* curriculum, assisted starting Children's Choir at St. Margaret's.
- As Interim Director, Chaplain and grants writer, guided *Charlie's Place/La Casa de Carlos* at St. Margaret's to designation as a Jubilee Center, supervised major program expansion.
- Member of Bishop's Latino Ministries Committee; assisted in creation of full-time diocesan staff position for Latino Ministries; evaluated grant applications and awarded funding.

- Initiated and sustained parish involvement with the Congregational Development Institute (CDI) program.

### ***Stewardship***

- Assisted in increasing financial stewardship over 35% at current parish, through sound Biblically-based preaching and personal witness.
- Successful and experienced grant writing capabilities for outreach ministry funding, growth and development.

### ***Evangelism & Renewal***

- Continued and sustained growth in annual attendance figures by over 25% per year, with concurrent increases in committed membership and financial giving.
- Visionary, creative ability equipping congregations to “think outside the box” to design and implement new, sustainable programs.
- Completed *Via Media* Episcopal Evangelism program

### Employment History

2006 – Present	Rector, Grace Episcopal Church, Vineyard Haven, MA
2002 – 2006	Adjunct Faculty Member, Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA
2001 – 2006	Associate Rector & Chaplain for Charlie’s Place/La Casa de Carlos, bi-lingual breakfast/social services ministry, St. Margaret’s Church, Washington, DC
1998 – 2001	Project Assistant and Consultant, LTG Associates, Takoma Park, MD <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provided programmatic analysis of Ryan White Care Act; designed Title III Site Visit Protocol; authored and edited documents for HND Division of USAID.</li> </ul>
1997 – 1998	Interim Rector, Epiphany Church, Forestville, MD <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Successfully merged life and ministries of historic white, congregation with young African-American mission.</li> </ul>
1988 – 1996	Adjunct Priest, St. Thomas the Apostle and Director of Client Services, AIDS Interfaith Network of North Texas, Dallas, TX <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designed &amp; implemented Care Team Volunteer program, involving over 350 volunteers from 50+ congregations; received 1991 Volunteer Action Award from President George H. W. Bush.</li> </ul>
1986 – 1987	Interim Rector, St. Christopher’s Church, Oak Park, IL
1983 – 1986	Curate, Assistant Rector, Emmanuel Church, Program Coordinator, Shelter Care Ministries, Rockford, IL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assisted with parochial ministries of Emmanuel parish, responsible for Education and Outreach; founding member of Shelter Care Ministries, received Jubilee Center and Episcopal Charities of Chicago designation.</li> </ul>

## Education

MDiv, Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, Evanston, IL, 1983, Ordained Deacon and Priest.

MA, Western Illinois University, Macomb, IL, 1977, Theatre and Communications

BA, Western Illinois University, Macomb, IL, 1975, History

Continuing Education studies in Latino Ministries, Field Education Supervision, Stewardship, Congregational Development, Journey to Adulthood and *Via Media*.

## Present Community Involvement

- 2007 – Advisory Board Member, *Daybreak Clubhouse (MVCS agency)*
- 2007 – Board of Directors, *Havenside Corporation (Affordable Elderly Housing)*
- 2007 – President, *Neighborhood Convention of Martha's Vineyard*
- 2006 – Board of Directors, *Other Sheep, Multi-cultural Ministries with Sexual Minorities*
- 2006 – Board of Directors, *Massachusetts Episcopal Clergy Association*
- 2009 – Clergy Advisor, Quality Assurance Committee, *Hospice of Martha's Vineyard*
  
- 2006 – Clergy Member, Ethics Committee, Martha's Vineyard Hospital
- 2010 – Member, Duke's County Health Council

**Written Responses to Questions by the Nominee  
The Reverend Robert E. Hensley**

**1. Who do you say Jesus Christ is?**

The most direct answer to this question would be to recite creedal and catechetical statements which are known to the members of the committee and all faithful Christians. To build on those statements and those of scripture, Jesus Christ is God manifest in perfected human form. All of our definitions, all of our metaphors cannot capture the true essence of Jesus Christ's identity.

At times I call him teacher, healer, mentor, guide, companion and friend. But these are only aspects of who Jesus is and what he means to me on a personal level. He is all of that and so much more. To quote Frederick Buechner, "The *Christ* of it is beyond our imagining. All we can know is the flesh and blood of it, the *Jesus* of it." And the "...*Jesus* of it" is where I live, and move and have my being; the best example that I have. It is the "*Jesus* of it" that is you and me and us together, striving to live into and become more of, which informs our abilities to recognize "the *Christ* of it," in all of Creation.

**2. What is the gospel message?**

The gospel message is the Good News of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. That revelation is the incredible claim on the love of God for each of us, even in our fallen and imperfect state. Paul sums this up beautifully in his letter to the Romans (8:38) "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It is passing strange that there are many who attempt to turn this Good News into really bad news in relationship to certain behaviors and beliefs. The Good News has had, and always will have, the ability to build up and transform human hearts and lives, in spite of our constant attempts to tamper with it and re-make it into our own image. As if the Good News as interpreted by our group is the one and only recipe for human behavior and the rule by which we determine who is "in" and who is "out".

The Good News of the gospel message is the incredible claim that Jesus is alive and living in and through us not only in the sacraments, but in all of the dirty, muddy, secret and hidden parts of our lives as well. That is what true love is all about.

I cannot imagine that I could possibly ask for anything greater than this.

**3. What is your understanding of “Mission” and “Ministry”?**

“Mission” is what we do; it is our statement of purpose, simply and elegantly stated in the catechism “...to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” This statement ties directly into our Baptismal Covenant language of striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being. These statements are straight-forward and all-inclusive. No one, absolutely no one, is to be marginalized or left on the outside of the equation.

I know as well as the next person that these are usually impossible to achieve. Hardly a day goes by when I am not guilty of marginalizing someone or in some way demonizing a group of people that in my fallen-ness I perceive to be as “other”. More of us need to realize that when our hand is clenched in a fist and we are pointing a finger at someone, there are always three other fingers on that same hand pointing back toward ourselves. We win many more people to Christ by opening our clenched fists into hands of welcome. That is mission.

Ministry is what we ministers do...or should be doing. The catechism teaching on ministry is quite succinct: we are all of us ministers of the gospel and are to be engaged in the mission and ministry of the church. It will have many nuances and variations from place to place, but all of us must be striving and working towards the goals that we all share in our Baptismal Covenant.

**4. Provide an autobiographical sketch of your life, including those turning points which were significant in your spiritual development.**

Growing up devoted to Sunday school, choir and UMYF, I eventually found myself in leadership positions with the youth group. My first pulpit experience took place senior year: I was ‘delegated’ to preach at the Easter sunrise service. Following the service, my teacher said to me, “You look and sound mighty fine in the pulpit, Mr. Hensley!” It came as a surprise and a shock, but stuck with me.

Later that year I took part in a youth exchange program in Jamaica, where I taught about the journeys of St. Paul. My eyes were opened to a new culture, another race, and to physical poverty, a deep counter-point to the spiritual wealth I found among the Jamaican people.

During undergraduate studies, I struggled internally with the United States' presence in Viet Nam. I was raised to believe that the motto on our currency was a certainty. The campus UMC was white and conservative, and I began questioning those beliefs. I began exploring other faith expressions in the Newman Center on campus, led by a very charismatic, young Roman Catholic priest. When he was silenced for his outspoken anti-war views and removed from his position, I left all organized religion for the next several years.

After graduate school I moved to Chicago to teach in the city colleges, and at the invitation of friends I visited an Episcopal Church for the first time. I did not "...feel my heart strangely warmed"; my heart was set on fire. It was as if the bits and pieces of my previous spiritual life had at last come together and I knew I was home and at a new beginning.

I began serving as an acolyte and lay reader, was confirmed, entered the discernment process toward ordination and began seminary. Throughout those years whenever I would question, the Holy Spirit would once again lead me back through ministry and service to others; at the Cook County jail as part of my Field Education placement; at Billings Hospital on the South Side of Chicago as a CPE placement.

As a curate in Rockford, IL, I became involved with the establishment of Shelter Care Ministries, transitional housing for the homeless, working again with the disenfranchised to help them develop self-respect and sense of purpose, moving back from the margins to the center, affirming them as persons of value and worth.

From there to Dallas, TX, help to establish the AIDS Interfaith Network, providing pastoral care and support services to persons living with HIV/AIDS and their families.

Then led by the Spirit to Washington, DC, where I would work with USAID to evaluate global health and education programs, focused on the needs of women and children in the developing world. At the same time I accepted a call as Interim at Epiphany Church in Forestville, MD, an aging, predominantly white church with lots of buildings and few people, merging them with Holy Redeemer Church, a young, African-American congregation with no buildings, but lots of people. I learned much during that time about conflict, racism, reconciliation, healing, thinking outside the box, surrendering the ego, and setting the Spirit free to go where it wills, not where I or anyone else thinks it should go.

At St. Margaret's, my call to work to empower the least and the lost through the work of Charlie's Place breakfast and social services programs, was strengthened.

At Grace Church, the Spirit has led me to become a "re-builder of buildings, builder of congregations, grower of Preschool and ecumenical education programs, servant of the peoples, community fixture, outreach worker, transcender of boundaries, both religious and secular, all in the name of the One, Holy and Undivided Trinity.

**5. Describe your rule of life in detail.**

I have for some time followed the outline of the rule of life of the associates of SSJE. This involves the daily offices with time set aside during the day for prayer and study. There is a constant and seemingly never-ending stack of books that I am reading, but I want to be clear that they are not all theology books. I am a fan of the Harry Potter series and use these in relating to young people regarding ethics and morals...sort of a 'stealth' approach...and you will occasionally here a reference to the wisdom of Professor Dumbledore in my sermons.

More of my spiritual life is becoming focused on my blog, where I am trying to become more intentional rather than occasional about writing. I have other favorite bloggers whom I follow, and am not averse to offering another opinion or insight to the writer if moved by the Spirit.

And as odd as it might sound, I view participating in the Island Community Chorus as part of my rule of life. Those who appreciate the statement by Augustine that "Those who sing, pray twice" will understand this.

I cannot imagine Sunday without celebrating or attending the Holy Eucharist and either preaching or listening to a well crafted sermon.

Lastly, I attempt to take advantage of the seasonal retreat opportunities offered for the clergy of the Diocese of Massachusetts, as well as time away from church and island at least monthly for a time of solitude, silence, study, prayer and meditation, either at our cottage in New Bedford or at the Cathedral in Boston.

**6. 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?**

I confess to being surprised, challenged and optimistic by what I have read of the Profile of the diocese, particularly the survey results. The fact that there appears to be an almost even division of opinion between, for lack of better terminology, the traditional and the progressive attitudes expressed, is I believe an amazing place to be. So much of what is reported outside the Diocese has been slanted toward the more conservative, but what I read in and into the Profile is much more balanced. The word "balance", is, for me at least, the key.

If we want to get all theological, *ala* Richard Hooker, the balance that is maintained by our "three-legged stool" and the tension that creates within the body as individuals and as a community, is what I believe to be the exquisite and painful beauty of our polity. That is at once what is positive and what is challenging for the

next Bishop of Springfield. To be able to *balance* with integrity the validity of seemingly opposite theological points of view is one of the most valued gifts of the Spirit for which we all must pray. To hold those of opposite sides of the theological spectrum together is one of the rare opportunities to participate in maintaining grace-filled relationships.

To my way of thinking, the key to maintaining that balance, is constant communication and respect for other's opinions, even if they are totally opposite one's own. All are valid, all are to be valued, and all are worthy of respect. Former Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning articulated this best when he said that he wanted us to be "...a church where all are respected and none are despised." In short, where love is allowed to lead and be our primary motivating force, the secondary nature of all other things will be revealed.

**7. Describe your understanding of leadership, particularly as it would be exercised as a bishop.**

My understanding of Episcopal leadership is first of all "...to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a servant [leader] to those in need." Those familiar will recognize that as part of the description from the catechism of the definition of a deacon. I believe that this diaconal foundation is what undergirds all layers of ordained ministry, and the laity for that matter.

Additionally, as chief priest and pastor of the diocese, the office of the bishop is, to use the words of President Truman, where "The buck stops..." (And I am not speaking financially...although some might have it otherwise!) He or she must be the symbol of Christ for the diocese; not *be* Christ, but as the catechism says, *represent* Christ.

It is an awesome and terrible responsibility. Proclaiming, confirming and ordaining; that's pretty basic to the bishop's functions. Building up the Church is (or should be!) the role of all the baptized and not reserved specifically for the Bishop. Acting in Christ's name for the reconciliation of the world; that for me is the scary part. Working for the reconciliation of a world in which many people are content to be at enmity and not be reconciled. That is where the rubber hits the road.

And of course this leads to the next inescapable question...

8. **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?**

This is one of the historic statements of belief about the role of the episcopate as handed down through time. The way that it is presented in relationship to the “current crisis and other challenges” would lead one to think that “crisis” and “challenge” are something new in our polity. However, the understanding of “faith, unity and discipline” varies as we continue to see within Provinces and even between neighboring dioceses.

Most often when this phrase is quoted, it is against a backdrop of belief that the Word of God as revealed in Scripture is static and unchanging. God is viewed by some as the curator of a museum and incapable of changing God’s mind. However, serious students of Scripture know this is not the case; God can and does change God’s mind...and as the Biblical record reports has done so on many occasions! Our interpretation of Scripture and what is revealed therein can and does change. The Holy Spirit lives and breathes and moves where it wills...not at our direction, desire and perception, but according to the will of God.

I make no claim to know the will of God. I try to be constantly open to God’s revelation in the world through the living Christ as I know and perceive him in other people. God’s will for me is lived out in relationship with and to others; my openness to their hurts, their trials, their joys. My response, our response as a loving, faithful people to those hurts, those needs, those joys is where faith, unity and discipline are found and grounded. It is in and through our servant ministry to others. I am convinced that this is where the will of God is found – alive and living in our brothers and sisters, not in a sterile statement that some would enshrine above flesh and blood human beings.

9. **Describe your liturgical style; include in your answer your understanding of the place of preaching and the use of music in the liturgy.**

My liturgical style, for lack of better words, is “Broad to High.” Those of the Anglo-Catholic persuasion would probably define it as “somewhat lacking”; those of the Evangelical wing might term it a bit “over the top”. How do the words *via media* sound?

All kidding aside, I believe, and what I attempted to teach my students at VTS, was that if the Presider is comfortable and confident in their personal style, then worship will flow freely, inviting participants into the worship experience regardless of the style in which it is presented.

Our liturgical heritage has a double focus on Word and Sacrament. Preaching, that is preaching that reaches people where they live, that is also educational, informed and informative, is central to the liturgy of the Word. The Holy Eucharist to the second.

Music is what weaves the two *foci* together into a seamless garment. It has been stated that it is through our music and hymnody that our unique theological understandings as Anglicans is achieved. I whole-heartedly agree. A gathering of the community without preaching or music is possible, of course. In New England, that is what we call a “town meeting”. Some might venture to call that type of gathering a worship service, but I do not. I would simply repeat what I said earlier, that in the words of Augustine, “Those who sing, pray twice.”