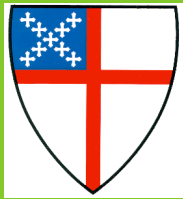


# The Nelsons



INTRODUCING  
FR. BEN,  
LINDA,  
AND  
COOPER  
TO ST. MARK'S  
EPISCOPAL  
CHURCH,  
SAN MARCOS,  
TEXAS  
SPRING, 2012



Fr. Ben, his wife, Linda, and their 4-year old daughter, Cooper

*To paraphrase the traditional Super Bowl question, we just had to ask:*

## NOW THAT YOU'VE LIVED IN HAWAII AND BEEN TO DISNEYLAND, WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO?

And the answer was easy: "We're coming to St. Mark's in San Marcos, Texas!"

The Reverend Benjamin Howard Nelson, III and his wife, Linda are packing up 4-year old Cooper, along with their two dogs, Biscuit and Bacon, and their surfboards to come home to Texas.

Ben was born in Sewanee, Tennessee, while his father was in seminary at the University of the South, and was raised in Jackson, Mississippi among other southern landmarks.

Linda is a Dallas native, but her mother, Betty Sue Cooper, lives in Wimberley, and her sister and brother-in-law in Driftwood.

Ben served as the youth minister at the Church of Reconciliation in San Antonio ((1998-99), and as Assistant Rector at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Corpus Christi (2002-2004). He went on to serve as assistant to the Rector at St. Paul's in Chattanooga, Tennessee (2004-2008) and has served as Rector of All Saints' Church and Preschool in Kapa'a, Hawaii since 2008.

He has a Bachelor of Arts in History from Milsaps College in Jackson, MS, and a Master of Divinity from the University of the South School of Theology. He is finishing his Doctorate in Divinity at the Columbia Theological Seminary.

### St. Mark's Prayer for the Search Committee

Almighty and everliving God, giver of every good gift, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Where it is right, strengthen us; where we are in want, provide for us; where we are divided, reunite us. Look graciously on your Church and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a rector for this parish, that we may receive a faithful pastor, who will care for your people and equip us for our ministries; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## The Process

The following composite description is drawn from the results of a Rector Profile workshop held at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, San Marcos, TX on August 14, 2011, to clarify the profile of the next rector. The results are from the Prioritization Exercise, surveys and the Parish Profile. Attending this workshop were members of the Vestry, Search Committee and a few visitors, facilitated by Reb Scarborough, Church Consultant. It is subjectively determined by this consultant but represents majority responses.

### **Past Experience:**

Experience (Rector or strong asst. Rector) with growing a program-size church. Prior life experience is desirable. Conflict resolution experience that is insightful and redemptive. Has a track record with family ministry with an emphasis on youth and congregational dynamics. Demonstrated organizational and administrative skills.

### **Personal Theology:**

Well grounded in Biblical theology, inclusive, respecting differences while respecting the traditions of the Episcopal Church with the ability to relate the word of God in contemporary words to people of all backgrounds.

### **Liturgy and Style:**

Equally at home with traditional and contemporary services, respecting and valuing the liturgical styles of each. Have the ability to connect with all generations.

### **Leadership and Relationship Qualities/ Behaviors:**

The next Rector must believe it is important to lead and equip the parish focused on its Mission, Values and Vision while helping us to live into God's will for our church in the future. Also, the new Rector needs to remain open to new ideas, listening to others and objectively consider ideas and opinions, even when they conflict with his/her own. We are looking for someone who will build and entrust teams, empower others and delegate well. He or she must be present and involved with staff, lay leaders, the congregation, in an outgoing manner. We are looking for someone with strong pastoral and listening skills, who is nurturing and accepting of all people.

### **Decision Making Style:**

Consistently works with lay leaders and staff to collaboratively make decisions; a team builder seeking consensus to effectively develop and maintain mission and vision.

### **Communication Style:**

A good active listener, who is open and available to the staff and congregation, delivers a consistent message in a captivating style. Protects confidentiality while at the same time is honest in all things. Important is his/her Integrity (spiritual, relational, institutional).

**Spiritual Life:** Is an example to us all, recognizing that we are all on a personal journey of faith, but not afraid of expressing his/her intimate walk with God. Has a disciplined prayer life with a teacher's heart, and is active in daily Bible study. Uses sermons to preach, teach, share and reach.

Our new Rector should have the ability to lead the church while also being actively engaged with the congregation, someone who can model our mission statement with enthusiasm and energy, caring for all, and not dogmatic.

In summary, from the Prioritization Exercise:

1. Good pastoral skills
2. Effective preaching skills
3. Strong children's Sunday School program
4. Youth ministry
5. Encourage and enable lay leadership
6. Good counseling skills
7. Ministry to families
8. Interest in various expression of worship
9. Adult Christian Education
10. Openness in sharing his/ her personal faith

## The 2011 Vestry

Bruce Barnes, Sr. Warden  
Sarah Carlisle, Jr. Warden  
Joan Matthews, Clerk  
Melissa Byrn  
Larry Hanson  
Andrewa Heaberlin  
Dean Lalich  
Ed Longcope, Finance Committee Comm.  
Kaare Remme  
Leanne Smith  
Lynn Villarreal

## The Search Committee

Dianne Pape, Chair  
Peter Baen  
Jim Byrn  
Donnelle Gooch  
Dickie Heaberlin  
Celeste Healy  
Diana Hendricks  
Gerald Hill  
Jim Kimmel  
Susie Lewis  
Ken Nesbitt  
Kevin Valenta

## A Message from Our New Rector:

Dear Beloved of St. Mark's,

In just a few short weeks, Linda, Cooper, Bacon, Biscuit, and I will be making our way across the Pacific to join you in ministry. We are so excited to be returning to Texas where family and new friends await. When this process began for me in the fall of last year, I would have never expected to see so much of God's Grace moving and shaping the entire journey, but time after time, God showed up in the most unlikely places, and I was blown away. I could have never known how amazing this process would be for my entire family and for that gift, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

We are deeply encouraged by the warmth and faithfulness that we have experienced through the vestry and search committee, and we can't wait to experience that same little slice of God's Love when we join you on March 18<sup>th</sup>.

If you haven't already done so, please tell the men and women of these groups thank you for their hard work and prayerful reflection. And while you are at it, please give Ned Bowersox deepest thanks for his work as interim rector! I'm so grateful for all of their leadership and for the opportunities they have given me in this new call to ministry. What a joy to work with such great people! What a joy to see their gifts and talents at work.

**Fr. Ben's favorite  
scripture: Micah 6:8**

**He has shown you, O mortal,  
what is good. And what  
does the Lord require of  
you?**

**To act justly and to love  
mercy, and to walk humbly  
with your God.**

get ready to move across the ocean.

My prayer for us today comes from the collect for the third Sunday after the Epiphany, which I think is mightily appropriate for our new beginning together (and assigned for today's lessons):

*Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

God's work is Marvelous indeed!  
Peace,

Ben



Cooper, Ben  
and Linda  
Nelson,  
Kapa'a, Kaua'i

### About Ben and Linda

This year marks Ben and Linda's tenth wedding anniversary. Ben loves to cook and Linda, not so much, but she is good at cleaning up so they make a great team.

They both love all kinds of music: Dave Matthews Band, Pete Seeger, Tina Turner, U2, and Dolly Parton - and are looking forward to lots of live music in San Marcos and Austin.

Ben says he also loves the Ecclesiastes scripture made famous by Pete Seeger and the Byrds - and of course, his favorite, Dolly Parton - "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven"

He says, "It reminds me that God is in charge... one day at a time!"

## The Format

The wording of this document was originally created by the Search Committee as a narrative presentation which they unanimously and joyfully presented to the St. Mark's Vestry on January 3, 2012. The Vestry accepted the recommendation in a unanimous vote, and Senior Warden Bruce Barnes made the phone call to Fr. Ben Nelson to extend the call.

The vestry's composite description is printed in italics, followed by the committee's narrative about Fr. Ben Nelson.



Ben and Linda Nelson (at right) after a ziplining adventure on Kaua'i, with Linda's sister and brother-in-law, Donna and Alan, who live in Driftwood, Texas.

### Past Experience:

*Experience (Rector or strong asst. Rector) with growing a program-size church. Prior life experience is desirable. Conflict resolution experience that is insightful and redemptive. Has a track record with family ministry with an emphasis on youth and congregational dynamics. Demonstrated organizational and administrative skills.*

Ben Nelson comes to us with the most experience of all of our finalists. He has been a pastor for more than ten years, and grew up in the Episcopal Church as the son of a rector. He earned a degree in history and attended law school before answering the call to preach. He has a passion for teaching (in the church organization as well as theology in the local community college), loves working with people of all ages. He will lead and shepherd all ages, and we believe he will bring a new enthusiasm to St. Mark's that will be effective within our parish family as well as in the community and beyond.

After college, he went to a year of law school but was drawn to seminary. He visited with Jim Folts who encouraged him to not wait – but to go straight to seminary. Even though he already felt called to seminary when he started law school, he felt like he should follow the “logical” path of working at another vocation before going into seminary. This encouragement to go straight into seminary was his first real “surrender” to what God had in store for him. His first huge risk was when he moved to San Antonio to work in youth ministry. He was led to youth ministry, and while his ministry has grown to that of a well-rounded leader, pastor

and shepherd, families, young adults, and youth are still a strong call for him.

Ben Nelson is the new face of the Episcopal Church. When asked about his relatively young age, (37 years old), he responded that his age related not only to his 10-year experience as a priest, but also to the virtue of his ordination that has 2,000 years of experience. He recognizes that we have to change to grow the church. He has a joyful and enthusiastic openness to possibilities.

One might question the fact that Ben has little experience outside the church context. However, he has not lived as a cloistered priest. He has lived an active life as a husband, father, athlete, and a priest and person in his communities. His conflict resolution experience is, indeed, insightful and redemptive. He brings many memorable messages to the table – and among those, that “God loves us, and He is infinitely more concerned about our future than our past. No matter what you do,” Fr. Ben said, “God is going to show up.”

He shared several situations with us, including a situation with a strong-willed organist at All Saint's, where he presently serves. The woman had been the organist for more than 30 years and had not taken a day off in all of that time. She was set in her ways and things were done one way only. He carefully ministered to her to discern that she needed to take time off to take care of herself and to allow her own ministerial needs to be fed. Now she plays one Sunday a month, and the music ministry has grown to include a fledgling choir and other musical avenues. †

## Personal Theology:

*Well grounded in Biblical theology, inclusive, respecting differences while respecting the traditions of the Episcopal Church with the ability to relate the word of God in contemporary words to people of all backgrounds.*

Ben Nelson is well grounded in Biblical theology. He has “never not known God” in his life. He was born in Sewanee, while his father was in seminary, and he grew up in the church, fed by experience with God’s people. He shared fond memories of his childhood, which include the scent of Murphy’s Wood Oil Soap and Brasso. He has always had an awareness of God in his life, and continues to develop a vocabulary of Grace to tell people about his spiritual journey and encourage them in their own journey.

He uses daily prayer, meditation and a conscious contact with God to sustain him. He demonstrates faith through his self-care, considers daily exercise as holy and important to his relationship with God. We like the fact that he had the determination to finish two marathons, which shows a strength of character that any priest needs.

He is nearing completion of his Doctorate of Divinity, with a project-based dissertation about the spirituality of water. About this study, he said, “The waters of the ocean do not separate us. They connect us. The science of water carries a powerful message. Take the science of water and connect it to the waters of baptism and see how powerful it can be. Water connects our planet, and runs through our veins and through our souls. And it marks us as His Own forever.”

Ben loves to preach, and his favorite thing about being a rector is Sunday morning worship. He considers preaching his art form. He loves the preparation, the delivery and taking the message into his week.

He has a deep respect for Episcopal traditions and liturgy and feels strongly about the importance of music in worship.

He said, “It is not just ME giving it to you, but it is US in common response to the Gospel.” He preaches sometimes from notes but most of the time, not. He loves *celebrating* the Eucharist.

He was invited to teach World Religions at the local community college, and took this as an opportunity to not only share knowledge of world religions, but to reach out to people who were not yet comfortable walking through the doors of a church. He loves the traditions of the Episcopal/Anglican church but also respects the strengths and differences that other religions bring to the table.

He says that failure is not a measure of worth, but a chance for a new beginning. He wants people to recognize that they can grow by sharing in God’s love and that by digging deeper into the study of theology and spirituality, we can all grow the community of Christ around us.

He has been actively involved in Episcopal Relief (with a mission trip to Haiti planned for this spring), the Episcopal Church and the State of Hawaii Advisory Boards of Mental Health and Substance Abuse. He has worked very closely with the Bishop of Hawaii on several high profile projects within the diocese and throughout the islands. He led a group of college students on an inner-island outreach mission trip from Kaua’i to Honolulu, collaborating with another Episcopal church from the the Big Island.

Ben is very intrigued by our School of Wisdom. He is energized by the fact that this is a lay-led ministry and a gateway for so many to find St. Mark’s. He loves to teach, but he loves to learn. He said that the “Quickest way to screw up a successful lay-led ministry is to get the clergy involved – or worse yet, to take charge!”

He looks forward to participating and being a part of the School of Wisdom and serving as a motivator for its success. He wants to be supportive and encouraging, and not dominating.

Ben is also very interested in making a connection with the university students while respecting the work being done at Christ Chapel. He believes we can strength their efforts, and bridge the college transition experience for young adults seeking a permanent home church. †



## About Cooper

At age 4, Cooper loves Disneyland.

Closer to home, she loves coloring and having "dance parties" (to the music of Taylor Swift, Adele, and the occasional Johnny Cash).

She is excited about living close to Gigi (pronounced ghee-ghee with the soft G)

and Aunt Donna (Linda's older sister who lives in Driftwood with her three horses, two dogs, and Uncle Alan). She will be attending St. Mark's Pre-School.

## Liturgy and Style:

*Equally at home with traditional and contemporary services, respecting and valuing the liturgical styles of each. Have the ability to connect with all generations.*

Fr. Ben loves the traditions of the Episcopal Church. He models his own priesthood after his relationship with many with whom we are familiar, including Ned Bowersox and Jim Folts. He has also worked closely with Ed Dohoney, and has known most of these church leaders all of his life. He recognizes the wisdom passed down through the church and models his ministry after those who have been very successful before him.

As far as the liturgy goes, he believes there are two levels – First level is invitation and hospitality – with an all inclusive bulletin for all newcomers and novices who are not adept at juggling the BCP and Hymnal. Second Level: He also likes to offer Instructional Eucharist and prayer book learning opportunities twice a year, to invite others to learn the richness of the prayer book (All Saints was not a prayer book savvy congregation when he arrived, but they are learning!) He believes that one of our greatest riches is the BCP, and encourages people to develop as Episcopalians by becoming familiar with it and learning to use it.

He has been a part of all sorts of services in the Episcopal Church, from high church in Tennessee to island casual in Kaua'i. He said he truly loves everything from Rite I to Contemporary Island worship that they have at All Saints. Votives and incense and casual contemporary worship all have a place in the Episcopal Church.

He recognizes the responsibility to fill the needs of the parish – and knows that some prefer high church traditions, while others feel most comfortable with a more informal presentation, but he said what makes the Episcopal Church special is its form and liturgy. While tradition is utmost in mind, he wants to make all



who seek a home in the Episcopal Church feel at home here.

This carries over into his feelings regarding national church issues. With regard to his feelings about the national church issues, ranging from prayer books to priests, he said that his life has been about adapting to the spirit of the church. This is not his to argue, as he has used the 1979 Book of Common Prayer since he was old enough to read. He mentioned in passing that Gene Robinson was ordained as Bishop at about the same time he was ordained. Women have been ordained as long as he can remember, and it is a norm, rather than something new. He said that his calling is to pastor his parish, not to set policy for the national church.

He believes that the key to any issue of dispute is to relate on the pastoral level – staying together in the issue and listening. “With God’s love, we’ll get through the issues,” he said. He’s comfortable with who he is, calling himself a “work in progress – with no apologies.” We would describe him as well-rounded, affable, loving and caring, with energy and a contagious passion for his calling. He believes in “living as a role model, for people of any faith, or of none.” †

## Marathon

Fr. Ben has finished two marathons (26 miles and 385 yards). Members of the search committee determined that this was, indeed, a good measure by which to judge a potential rector. It takes training, discipline, and endurance - as well as a strong spiritual sense.

*Below, Cooper helps her daddy near the finish line of a recent Kaua'i marathon.*



## Leadership and Relationship Qualities/ Behaviors:

*The next Rector must believe it is important to lead and equip the parish focused on its Mission, Values and Vision while helping us to live into God's will for our church in the future. Also, the new Rector needs to remain open to new ideas, listening to others and objectively consider ideas and opinions, even when they conflict with his/her own. We are looking for someone who will build and entrust teams, empower others and delegate well. He or she must be present and involved with staff, lay leaders, the congregation, in an outgoing manner. We are looking for someone with strong pastoral and listening skills, who is nurturing and accepting of all people.*

Fr. Ben comes to our discernment process with qualities, wisdom and energy to lead St. Mark's in our mission, values and vision. He is enthusiastically open to new ideas and listened carefully to our challenges as well as the opportunities ahead. He does not seem to try to draw attention to himself, but characterizes himself as a something of a "cheerleader." By this he means that he tries to help people discern their particular calling and then helps them pursue it.

He has a desire to work with a congregation that wants to go deeper into theology. He would like to tap into the parish enthusiasm and grace, with support and leadership from a parish that has ideas and ideals about its course. He believes he can help to facilitate that direction and is interested in the challenge of working with youth, young adults and young families, as well as offer pastoral support for all members of our parish family today. He said "The Episcopal Church is uniquely suited for deep thinkers."

He loves that our church is continuing in outreach even in the midst of change, and he likes the space, the labyrinth and our unique blend of contemplative and active ministry. He really likes that so much of our activity is lay-driven and looks to be a leader-who supports and "cheers" rather than

micromanages and sets course. He was very interested in the possibilities for our 9 o'clock service and the labyrinth, and would like the challenge of a University community; with faculty staff and students that tend to challenge theology.

Fr. Ben gave examples of several of his decisions and actions as a priest that represented wisdom as defined in the Rector Profile. Those ranged from handling the cultural differences encountered as a Mississippi priest serving a Hawaiian parish to proactive visibility in the community.

He listens well and contemplates the questions before answering. He is thoughtful and considers his answers before he speaks. He believes in building strength among lay leaders in the church and his spirit is very contagious. He has good health and the energy to work within the church family as well as out in the community to open doors and build upon our foundation.

He wants to see kids in church – not out in Sunday school or nursery or other activities during service time. He wants the youth to know what it means to worship together as a community. He puts kids to work as acolytes, lay readers and likes to be involved in teaching and training them himself. He has doubled their acolyte core and created a strong young contingent among the congregation. When it comes to youth ministry, he believes it needs to be "all hands on deck." If we have parents who have teens who are not coming to church, we need to find something that will interest them in coming and help the parents encourage their children to come.

*He likes teams rather than committees – because teams reflect a spirit of working to succeed- rather than meeting for the sake of meeting.*

Fr. Ben believes that to get people involved and develop leadership in a parish requires spotting and supporting initiative – and celebrating it! He

believes in cultivating new leadership and helping to remind people to share their faith and what they have learned with everyone. Unlike other volunteer commitments, being a part of church leadership involves sharing the love of God with people every day, within and beyond the walls of the building.

We see St. Mark's as offering strong community support to and for Ben and his family – not just being on the receiving end of what he has to offer us. We sense a true "relationship" between Fr. Ben and St. Mark's and growth for us, as well as for Ben. †



## "Fur babies"

The Nelsons come to St. Mark's with Bacon, a bischon, and Biscuit, a standard poodle.

## Super Heroes?

Not to put too much pressure on the Nelson family, but at one of the first meetings of the search committee, a long list of criteria was set forth. Dickie Heaberlin said, "Well, I think we are just looking for Superman!"

Little did we know that the Nelsons had dressed up as a superhero family for Halloween. Coincidence? Or perhaps a perfect fit!





This is not how Linda and Cooper dress every day.

### **Decision Making Style:**

*Consistently works with lay leaders and staff to collaboratively make decisions; a team builder seeking consensus to effectively develop and maintain mission and vision.*

He is an effective team builder and seeks to develop the bonds that a strong family shares to keep the church growing. He likes the idea of a church where everyone can know the names of everyone at their service, and more than that, where everyone shares a common interest in growing stronger in God's grace. He is flexible and a good listener but also understands the importance of being a strong "go-to" pastor who can help parishioners find the answers to that which they are seeking. †

### **Communication Style:**

*A good active listener, who is open and available to the staff and congregation, delivers a consistent message in a captivating style. Protects confidentiality while at the same time is honest in all things. Important is his/her Integrity (spiritual, relational, institutional).*

**"Fun is important in faith," he said.**

Fr. Ben was mentored by his father and Ned Bowersox, Jim Folts, and other clergy with whom we are familiar. He asked what we do at St. Mark's to have fun. He followed it with a question about having dances

in the parish hall. Ben is proactive in pastoral care. For example, he uses the bank where one of his parishioners works. He wears his collar to local restaurants and coffee shops, and is open to conversation. He particularly pays attention to the dynamics within the parish to discern where and when pastoral care is needed and how to make it available.

Fr. Ben is very relaxed, flexible and open, with a thoughtful, conversational manner. He holds a deep reverence and awe of participating in the prayers of God's people. He stresses that he is not a micro manager, but an encourager and supporter. He lets his needs be known, but allows people to do things their way. He reminds people to share their faith, and what they have learned. (He referenced Altar Guild being responsible for sharing what they know about their ministry). †

**Spiritual Life:** *Is an example to us all, recognizing that we are all on a personal journey of faith, but not afraid of expressing his/her intimate walk with God. Has a disciplined prayer life with a teacher's heart, and is active in daily Bible study. Uses sermons to preach, teach, share and reach.*

### **How Old Is Our New Rector?**

At 37, Fr. Ben is older by seven years in experience than any of our other candidate finalists.

Our Bishop Gary Lillibridge was consecrated as Bishop at the young age of 49. And our beloved Jim Folts came to St. Mark's as our rector at the ripe old age of 28, to successfully grow and lead a fine and strong church of young community leaders (many of whom are still faithful members of St. Mark's, today).

Jim Folts became our Bishop of the Diocese of West Texas at the very young age of 54.

The Right Reverend Andy Doyle was seated as the ninth Bishop of Texas at the age of 42.

*And if there is concern about what age is the "right" age for being a spiritual leader, we should look back about 2000 years.*

*Had his followers waited for Jesus Christ himself to grow to a certain age before finding value in his words, we all might have missed the boat, so to speak.*

Ben's entire demeanor displays his joy of faith. He loves life, people, nature, the ministry, and the entire process of living a life of faith. He is open to God's movement in his life today. He has a strong awareness of God's Grace in his own life and in the life of his family. Part of his call is to be aware of his own family and their needs and determining how he is called to take God's grace to others. We believe he will inspire our parish to increase our expression of joy, which we do well already but can do even more. This will help make St. Mark's a beacon of love and joy that will help satisfy the longing that many people seek. †