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New Bishops Gather to Enrich Leadership Skills

By Carol E. Barnwell

Twenty-three bishops from The Episcopal Church and four from the Anglican Church of Canada met in Canton, NC, May 19-23, to continue an annual residency program in formation for new bishops called Living Our Vows.

Sponsored by the College for Bishops, Living Our Vows, is designed to support spiritual health and personal development of new bishops and to equip them "for transformative leadership," said the Rt. Rev. F. Clayton Matthews, director of the Office of Pastoral Development and the College for Bishops. Participants--all elected in the last two years--"gained further appreciation for each other and the people of the dioceses they serve," he added.

The program, now four years old, includes the annual five-day residency and monthly coaching sessions for a three year period following their consecration. By the end of 2009, Matthews estimates, one half (65) of the active bishops in the House of Bishops will be involved in the College for Bishops program. "This program not only provides an excellent foundation for our bishops, it is also a gift to the dioceses and the Church at large," Matthews said.

The Rt. Rev. David Reed, Bishop Suffragan of West Texas, found value in the crowded agenda which he said was "timely and well-presented." "But the more lasting value, for me, has been in getting to know these fellow bishops. ... Despite plenty of differences, we share a common love for the Lord and a commitment to the mission of the Church. And we are in the same boat for sure when it comes to challenges, the steep learning curve and stresses on personal and family life," he added.

Matthews, part of the faculty for the spring program, described the time as, "energized, candid and faithful," adding that "there were some transformational moments." Others faculty included: Fred Borsch, retired bishop of Los Angeles, Barry Howe, Bishop of West Missouri; Tom Shaw, Bishop of Massachusetts and Ann Tottenham, retired bishop of Toronto/York-Credit Valley. Several outside expert speakers also made presentations.

"I love how Living Our Vows encourages new bishops to support one another and together think through significant 'ways of being bishop' for the church's mission," Borsch said. For example, after listening to a presentation about how bishops are to "thoughtfully exercise authority, the new bishops discussed an actual situation of tension and disagreement between a rector and congregation. In a very real way, they were able to talk about the best ways they might deal with a similar situation," he said.

Twenty-seven bishops have been elected in the last two years in The Episcopal Church and in the Anglican Church of Canada. Matthews said he anticipates an additional 9 new bishops involved in the program next year making a total of 37 new bishops plus faculty and coaches in 2009.



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“This formational program is the product of three years of research held jointly by The Episcopal Church and The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America,” Matthews explained. It is canonically mandated (III,12:1) and has become the formation program for new bishops in the Church in Canada as well. Several Canadian bishops attended the May gathering.

Topics covered throughout the program include visioning for the future of the Church, vocational profiles, peer coaching and media training, staff dynamics, organizational development, community building, Title IV and property issues. The Lambeth Conference was a particular topic at the May meeting because of the upcoming once a decade, global meeting of bishops this summer.

Since the program’s inception, all new bishops in the Episcopal Church have taken part and Matthews said he has received inquiries from other denominations interested in the formation program for their executive leaders.

Other College for Bishops offerings include the New Bishops’ and Spouses’ Conference, Conference on Orderly Transitions, House of Bishops Continuing Education sessions and other educational courses presented on timely topics. Visit www.collegeforbishops.org to learn more about the College and its programs.

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