



the COLLEGE for BISHOPS

College for Bishops Announces Training for New Bishops

By Carol E. Barnwell

The College for Bishops announced recently a formational coaching program developed for new bishops during the early years of their new ministry. The three-year program would provide resources, support and leadership development and is based on feedback from the recently concluded New Bishops Research Project. “The New Bishops Research Project was designed to identify and develop the unique set of skills bishops need in order to transition into their new position, articulate their vision and effectively lead their dioceses,” said the Rt. Rev. F. Clayton Matthews, bishop of the Office of Pastoral Development for the Episcopal Church.

Although there is training and support available for other areas of ordained ministry, research and feedback from the initial project indicated a specific need for a formational/coaching program that was substantive in content, reflection and evaluation over an extended period of time for persons elected to the Episcopate.

Part of an overall retooling of the College for Bishops, the three-year research project concluded this past December. Twelve new Episcopal bishops consecrated in 2001 and 2002 took part in the initial research project. Ten new bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church also participated, meeting together at times as well as separately. The project created a learning community of bishops that met together four times using an action-reflection design that included interviews, evaluation instruments on leadership styles and organization assessment, case studies, presentations, simulations, and discussions.

Election brings dramatic changes

Participants in the New Bishops Research Project gathered on the last evening of the House of Bishops spring retreat to discuss their experience. Bill Gregg, Bishop of Eastern Oregon said that the “on the job” learning curve was steep for a new bishop. “You become a bishop immediately and don’t know how to *be* a bishop.” James Curry, Bishop Suffragan of Connecticut, said, “It’s more [complicated] than all the same things with a new hat. The scope of ministry changes dramatically.”

Philip Duncan, Bishop of the Central Gulf Coast, noted the “lack of a defined community of support for new bishops” prior to this program. Neil Alexander, Bishop of Atlanta agreed. “Formation of a collegial support system for bishops was something that the Church had not addressed,” he said, although there was established training and support for deacons and priests. The need was certainly present.

Don Johnson, Bishop of West Tennessee, described the New Bishop’s Research Project as “a terrain we walked through together [complete with] sign posts and pot holes.”

According to the College of Bishops proposal for the new coaching program, new bishops report, “only 30% of what they had learned in their previous positions was transferable to the office of bishop.” Leading a diocese is “dramatically different than being rector of a large congregation,” the proposal stated, adding that expectations of the office of bishop are changing rapidly. The new program will respond to these issues and with feedback from the research project, will provide a comprehensive program with far-reaching effects for the life of the Church.

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Over and over, bishops noted the expectations of the new job were vastly different from previous positions they had held. Isolation was high on the list of challenges each experienced, as was the broader range of voice that comes with a miter.

“The way to learn is by being,” said the Bishop of Spokane, James Waggoner, Jr. “When we are consecrated we have expectations of ourselves, but the expectations of others are enormous. People expect you to be different immediately and why not, you’re wearing the bishop’s clothes?”

Bishop Suffragan of Southern Virginia, Carol Gallagher’s election brought both public and private isolation. “It’s a new way of being,” she said, “There are no longer any casual conversations.”

Robert Gepert, Bishop of Western Michigan, agreed that isolation comes with the new territory. “You become a person without a community, the occasional visitor,” he said. Duncan Gray, Bishop of Mississippi, found his closest relationships with fellow priests of 25 years changed when he was elected bishop.

Thomas Ely, Bishop of Vermont said the broader leadership community in which he was expected to participate was very different. “The relationship with [the House of Bishops] and the larger ecumenical picture was more than I had experienced before,” he explained. The secular media’s interest was also jarring. “Now whether [the media] cared about it or not, they certainly started to pay attention to what I said and they wrote about it,” Ely stated.

One of the primary challenges that bishops saw from the beginning of the research project was staff development. “This can’t be done without understanding the diocese as a whole—its challenges, conflicts, and resources,” said Timothy F. Sedgwick, Professor of Christian Ethics at Virginia Theological Seminary and a member of the advisory board of the College with responsibility for oversight for the research project. “Staffing is then rather like constructing a plane while flying it. What is not clear is what all is needed to do such strategic work with old and new leadership in a dioceses that may differ so significantly,” he added.

Building trust in the House

With 70 new bishops consecrated in the past six years, more than half of the House of Bishops has been in office for less than four years. One of the most dynamic and potentially far-reaching effects of this program is reflected in the collegiality it builds within the House of Bishops and by extension, in the larger Church and its mission.

“Even though there is a variety of theological thinking within this group there is remarkable trust among them,” Matthews pointed out.

Participants agreed that the project helped to foster respect, a deep commitment to one another and a high level of trust, even though the group reflects a broad range of theological opinions on the issues facing the Church today.

After three years, Neil Alexander, Bishop of Atlanta, says he finds a greater sense of responsibility to other bishops. “I feel a connection of my work and theirs,” he adds.

Jim Waggoner, Jr., Bishop of Spokane said that the group showed a “real respect for the deep conviction others held.” He said he had learned much about the Church across the country because of the friendships he’d built during the New Bishops Research Project. “I understand what the Church is like in Oregon, in the Central Gulf Coast,” Waggoner said, indicating other bishops sitting in the circle.

Gregg said the relationships built during the research project have allowed conversations in general to be on a deeper level. "It has diminished the level of insidious competition and the depth and richness [of our relationships] makes us better bishops and serves the church in a richer, more fruitful way."

First fruits in extraordinary times

Not only has this group faced dramatic changes in their ministries, they have done so in an extraordinary time for the Church. The research project's first meeting was initially scheduled on September 11, 2001 and the last meeting followed the consecration of Gene Robinson.

Gregg said, "We gave ourselves to this process and in return we got back valuable tools and wonderful and enduring relationships." He said he had gained the expectation of finding multiple ways of doing things. "It's very important to create options," he said.

The project helped Waggoner define his vision for the Diocese of Spokane in realistic terms while Gepert said he gained valuable tools to "unite and bring the diversity of the Diocese of Michigan into one vision." Stacy Sauls, Bishop of Lexington found "a place where I could hold onto myself," during the transition into an effective episcopal ministry.

Research reveals specific needs

During the research project, new bishops identified challenges and needed resources. With the College of Bishops, they helped refine a program to better support other new bishops in the transition to new ministry.

"We sought to learn from the experience of the bishops themselves what resources they needed to build a healthy episcopate," said Charles E. Kiblinger in his summary report on the project. Kiblinger, coordinating consultant on the research project, is retired as director of Ministry and Leadership Development at Virginia Seminary and former dean of St. John's Cathedral, Denver.

"Support for new bishops needs to happen one-on-one and on site as well as in remote learning sites with traditional training," Kiblinger said. "We have recommended a coaching bishop the first year and a mentor bishop the next two years. They would work with the new bishop in their diocese as well as by e-mail and telephone," he added.

Bishops participated in four retreats over the three years of the study and consulted with one another between these retreats as well as with a mentor bishop. During their residencies, they discussed understanding a diocese, strategic planning and managing change, staffing, conflict resolution, leadership, management styles and self-care. Presentations included experts from the Alban Institute and the Trustee Leadership Project. In the report, Kiblinger states that participants found their "most important learning came from the interaction with their peers."

New program for College of Bishops

"The future health and wholeness of our Church is critically dependent on our Episcopal leadership and their educational development and vocational wellness," said Bill Craddock, managing director of CREDO Institute, Inc. and a member of the College for Bishops Advisory Committee.

The new program for new bishops will begin in 2004 and will be divided into specific areas of study for each of three years. It will include an annual residency to facilitate case studies, process and teaching as well as peer-to-peer contact anchored by worship and Bible study. Each annual residency, except the first, will include bishops who have been in office for differing periods of time and will address issues in dioceses of similar geographical size, number of churches and clergy, size of budget and staff, etc. Experts on the church and in leadership development will facilitate learning at each residency. Trained coaches will serve as mentors to help each bishop conceptualize a plan to reach his or her goals. Biblical and theological study will be part of each residency as well as the formational coaching between residencies.

Matthews hopes the new program, expected to cost \$175,000 over a three year period, will help form new leaders for the Church who will be adaptive in responding to the complex issues facing all judicatory heads today. "Our new bishops will be better equipped to be receptive and responsive to the needs of the pastoral leaders for whom they exercise oversight as well as to the religious institutions they serve," he said.

The New College for Bishops

"The newly formed advisory group is serving as a springboard group to create and implement significant educational resources for newly elected bishops and for the ongoing development and formation of all bishops in their critical leadership positions in the Church," Craddock said.

In addition to the Formative Coaching Program for New Bishops, The College for Bishops also offers other courses, conferences and retreats on an annual basis that addresses formational and transitional issues facing bishops today. The purpose of The College is to create a community of learning within the House of Bishops, and The College offers assistance at each transition period in the life of those who serve the Church in this office.

The College for Bishops was created for the formation and education of bishops by General Theological Seminary and the House of Bishops in 1993 and has developed in partnership with the House of Bishops' Office of Pastoral Development, Virginia Theological Seminary, the Church Pension Group, the Church Foundation, and the Lilly Foundation. The College will continue to assess, coordinate and develop offerings for the formation and education of bishops throughout their episcopacy to help strengthen them in their personal lives and in their vocation. These include New Bishops' and Spouses' Retreats, regional family systems colleague groups, Orderly Transitions Conferences for retiring bishops, and the Clergy Reflection, Education, and Discernment Opportunity (CREDO) sponsored by the CREDO Institute.

For more information on the College for Bishops or to learn more about the program for new bishops, contact Ellie Rolfes at erolfes@collegeforbishops.org.

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