



the COLLEGE for BISHOPS

Peer Coaching Program Aids Transition for New Bishops

By Carol E. Barnwell

The Episcopal Church's College for Bishops announced the inauguration this spring of Living Our Vows: A Peer Coaching Program for New Bishops.

The three-year coaching and residency program will provide continuing education for new bishops as well as serve to change the culture within the House of Bishops according to the Rt. Rev. F. Clayton Matthews, bishop of the Office of Pastoral Development for the Episcopal Church.

"There has been no historical expectation for continuing formation for bishops," he said, explaining that the program, which will provide resources, support and leadership development to new bishops, will also build collegiality and strong relationships among each "class" of bishops and the House as a whole.

More and more, Episcopal elections are direct (rather than as coadjutor) and there isn't a time of shared ministry with another bishop in place, said the Rt. Rev. Don Johnson, Bishop of Western Tennessee, a coach in the program.

Although there is training and support available for other areas of ordained ministry, research and feedback from initial research indicates a specific need for the formational/coaching program that is substantive in content, reflection and evaluation over an extended period of time for those persons elected to the episcopacy. There is a process of discernment, formation then ordination for deacons and priests, Johnson said. For those elected to the episcopacy, "It's discernment, ordination then formation," he explained.

The College for Bishops program is 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. Based on the recently completed New Bishops Research Project, Living Our Vows has several components: a relational, peer coaching program and an annual five-day residency program. The Louisville Institute, CREDO INSTITUTE, The Episcopal Church Foundation, General Convention and the participants currently fund the program. Bishop Matthews expressed his hope that the funding support would soon also include The Pension Group.

More than 95 percent of the bishops elected and consecrated since 2002, have already had an on-site visit from their coaches, Bishop Matthews said. The first residency program will be held in May 2005.

Growing need for program

Currently, Living Our Vows has 24 new bishops and 15 coaches. Faculty for the residency includes lay and ordained persons selected for their unique gifts and skills. The Faculty Team will remain for the entire Residency, and others will be invited to join the Residency for brief periods as needed for the schedule. There will be a 5-day Residency each May during the three-year program.

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Prior to the moratorium called for by the House of Bishops on the consecration of new bishops previous to the 2006 General Convention, there were expected to be 50 new bishops in the program by its third year in operation. This number will remain the same, but the moratorium means that the number will not increase gradually, but will jump from 24 in years one and two to more than 50 new bishops in the third year.

The Episcopal Church is the only denomination that provides this kind of resource and leadership training. It is the result of the New Bishops Research Project using bishops elected in 2000 and 2001 that helped identify needs and priorities, helping to shape curriculum.

Coaches and new bishops build companion relationships that support their spiritual health and personal development as well as help equip them for transformation into their new leadership role. While the coaching program is based on Co-Active Coaching, by Whitworth, Kimsey-House, and Sandahl, it uses a more relational formula than its executive counterpart, Bishop Matthews said. Coaches replace a previous mentor program in which the new bishops were expected to initiate the exchange.

“Now, coaches establish the relationship,” Bishop Matthews said, “They do an onsite visit and continue to make regular contact. Coaches may serve as mentors at times, but for the most part, their focus is on personal goals rather than in response to situations. New bishops may at times also use spiritual directors and other mentors as well as their coaches to help in the transition,” he said.

Bishop Suffragan Rayford High of Texas said the program has enhanced his relationship with his “class” of bishops—those consecrated in 2003. This is especially helpful because, as bishop, he explained, a former parish priest no longer has the direct connection with the “large family” of a congregation for support. That can be very isolating.

Beyond the peer support with other new bishops, the coaching program has helped High address specific issues in his relatively new role. Sometimes it’s as simple as setting priorities or discerning a protocol for receiving phone calls from vestries and parishioners. “David [Jones, Bishop Suffragan, Virginia] has reminded me that I’m not there to solve every problem, but to enable participants to come up with their own solutions,” he added.

Three residencies set priorities for leadership development

Annual residencies supplement the coaching program and each addresses a different priority. The first is identity, the second is organizational and vocational discernment, and the third is about mission or implementation. According to the Rt. Rev. Duncan Gray, Bishop of Mississippi, priorities were set using research data gained in the New Bishops Research Project which concluded in 2003.

Looking at their personal identity during this inaugural residency, new bishops will use daily worship, bible study and a series of meditations to consider their ordination vows. Using a different “lens” each day, participants will first reflect on their personal and public persona as a bishop; their spiritual/emotional and physical health; power and authority and finally the diocese and community in which they serve.

Bavi Edna "Nedi" Rivera, Bishop Suffragan of Olympia, found a dramatic change in how people responded to her new identity following her consecration January 22, 2005. Rivera said she is no longer able to “think out loud” as she did previously. “[As a bishop] people seem to take me seriously immediately and I have to be very careful of what I say,” Rivera said.

The role of bishop also raises other personal issues. “How do I manage family [and marriage] in this new role?” Rivera asked. The residency and her coach, Bishop Mark Andrus of Alabama, will be able to help with this question and others.

The Rt. Rev. James Mathes, newly consecrated in the Diocese of San Diego, is enthusiastic about the program. “There is a sense that I have someone to walk with me,” he said.

Benefits reach beyond program

Beyond the practicalities, the “culture is changing because of programs like this,” said the Rt. Rev. Dean Wolfe, Bishop of Kansas. For five years, the Bishop of Spokane, James Waggoner, has mentored Wolfe. “Jim has been thoughtful, experienced, candid and he has challenged me with good questions,” Wolfe said. “It is changing the way the House of Bishops relates to each other. There is not as much isolation in the job and there is more communication beyond differences in ideology,” he said.

The Rt. Rev. Joe Burnett of Nebraska said the program has provided strong bonds and has been “enriching and transformational on the whole body.” Each class of new bishops builds on that strengthened relationship. “It becomes a strength of common experience,” agreed Bishop James Kelsey of Northern Michigan.

The anchor for the program could be the proposed Title III revisions on “episcopate.” If this proposal is passed at the General Convention in 2006, The College of Bishops program for New Bishops would become a requirement for continuing education for new bishops.

Bishop Neil Alexander of Atlanta, one of the coaches, summed up the strength of Living Our Vows: “Previous programs were about how to survive. This one is how to thrive.”