

Deacon Formation That Works: 2009 Deacon Directors' Conference

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The natural beauty of the Duncan M. Gray Camp and Conference Center and the gracious hospitality of the Mississippi deacons provided the perfect setting for the 2009 Conference of Archdeacons

and Formation Directors. “Deacon Formation That Works” was the



result of the foundational work done by a team of deacons supported by a Constable Grant.

Drawing on research conducted by the Episcopal Church Center and NAAD in 2008 and their vast and varied experiences in deacon formation, the team developed a list of principles that they felt are common to quality deacon formation programs. Effective programs are:

- competency based, holistic, integrative, collaborative, flexible and innovative
- focused on adult learning, oriented toward life-long learning
- clear in their focus on leadership development
- clear in their focus on theological reflection with praxis (doing ministry) within a peer group
- community based
- relevant to the diaconal identity and the Baptismal Covenant
- relevant to Christian mission, contextual (taking the learner and the diocesan context into consideration)
- clear in providing assessment opportunities that are always done in the context of learning
- clear about the practice of discernment
- clear in their focus on the place of spirituality. It was this list that shaped the discussions that took place at the conference.

During the sessions, participants had an opportunity to share practices in their programs that they felt were successful and then discuss how these practices related to the principles of deacon formation that were presented. Working in small groups, participants were presented with a variety of scenarios (e.g., “A deacon-in-formation needs to have a field learning experience in a congregation that is not the one from which she is being sponsored for ordination. The nearest other Episcopal church is 80 to 100 difficult miles away”) and were asked to brainstorm ways in which the problems presented in these scenarios could be addressed.

Additionally, Open Space groups formed around topics of interest to conference participants focused on a number of issues (e.g., assessment during and at the end of deacon formation programs, post-ordination formation, Baptismal ecclesiology, alternatives to Clinical Pastoral Education, etc.) and gave participants the opportunity to discuss a variety of variables that impact diaconal formation programs as well as lifelong learning for all deacons.

The conference provided excellent content, ample time for structured and informal dialogue, the opportunity to worship together and a charge: “What might we articulate as gifts to the church based on deacon formation that works” and “How might we best share those with the church at large and with each other?” As directors of deacon formation programs we have the opportunity to continue to develop quality programs that reflect the evolving and challenging role of the deacon as well as the reality of our varied dioceses. The conference provided participants with practical resources and a human support system necessary for the continued development of quality deacon formation programs. As with any good conference, the final session was not an end, but rather, a beginning for the work ahead.