

Church women of Tennessee dioceses meet ‘on the mountain’

• **By Emily McDonald**
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Issues sure to have dramatic and long-lasting impact on the church were among those discussed during the Episcopal Church Women’s annual Spring Conference, held April 25-26 at DuBose Conference Center in Monteagle.

The upcoming Lambeth Conference of bishops was the subject of several questions asked of Tennessee’s diocesan bishops, the Rt. Rev. John Bauerschmidt (Tennessee), the Rt. Rev. Don Johnson (West Tennessee), and the Rt. Rev. Charles vonRosenberg (East Tennessee), during the traditional conversation with the bishops. In addition, keynote speaker Phyllis Tickle, author and nationally recognized authority on religion in America, described characteristics of what is termed the emergent (emerging) church.

The two-day conference included an opening service at Otey Memorial Parish Church in Sewanee and music under the direction of Nashville-based Sherry Paige, whose career has included the music, entertainment and communications businesses. The event drew more than 70 participants from Tennessee’s three dioceses.

Conversation with the bishops

The first question was posed to the bishops by moderator Nancy Tanner, a communicant of St. John’s Cathedral, Knoxville. She asked their reactions to the Archbishop of Canterbury’s decision to withhold a Lambeth invitation from the Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson, the openly gay, partnered bishop of New Hampshire.

Bishops Bauerschmidt and Johnson said they were not surprised, and Bishop Bauerschmidt added that “it will create difficulties for the bishops in the Episcopal Church.”

“It is interesting that the archbishop always reserves the right to invite whoever he wishes, but I would be happier if all bishops would be asked,” Bishop vonRosenberg said.

In a follow-up question, Bishop vonRosenberg was asked why Bishop Robinson was going to Lambeth anyway. “I have no doubt that there will be press and others focused on him,” he replied. “He is interested in telling his story in any venue he can find.”

The bishops were asked what they felt was the most important subject to be discussed at Lambeth.

“There are not issues to be solved but relationships to be built,” Bishop Johnson said. “The model is sitting around the table and talking *with* rather than *at* one another.”

Lambeth “is very much focused on building relationships and also on looking at what does it mean to be a bishop,” Bishop Bauerschmidt said.

“It is important that we don’t decide



photo by Katie Piper

EVERY 500 YEARS, “THE CHURCH IS COMPELLED TO HAVE A GIANT RUMMAGE SALE, AND WE ARE HAVING ONE NOW. WE ARE GOING THROUGH REFORMATION OR RE-REFORMATION WITH FULL KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT’S HAPPENING.”

Phyllis Tickle, author,
in her keynote address at the ECW Spring Conference

things at Lambeth.” Bishop vonRosenberg said. “In the Episcopal Church, governance is handled by the provinces,” not by Lambeth. “But there are things we can learn from one another,” he added.

The three bishops said they looked forward to learning from their fellow bishops and sharing stories.

The companion relationships of the three dioceses was the topic of another question. The Litoral Diocese in Ecuador, which includes the Galapagos Islands, is the companion diocese of his diocese, Bishop Bauerschmidt said. “A standard feature of our life in Tennessee is mission, and we have an annual medical mission to Ecuador.”

The Diocese of South Dakota and the Diocese of East Tennessee invite each other’s bishops to their diocesan conventions, and he attends the annual Niobrara Convocation in South Dakota, Bishop vonRosenberg said. The dioceses also have participated in orientation and anti-racism training, camps, exchanges and a prayer calendar.

When the companion relationship was established, the Rt. Rev. Creighton Robertson, bishop of South Dakota, told Bishop vonRosenberg “to come and learn about us, not do for us.”

East Tennessee also continues an informal relationship with its previous compan-

ion diocese, Haiti.

The Diocese of West Tennessee has had a companion relationship with Haiti for a number of years, although it hasn’t been formalized, Bishop Johnson said. “It is a moving experience to go there and see people in that setting.”

Among other topics during the conversation were Pope Benedict’s recent visit to the United States; the ownership of church property; the Appalachian ministry in East Tennessee; and shared ministry between Episcopalians and Lutherans.

Keynote addresses

Speaker Phyllis Tickle, 74, began her first presentation by talking about the last decade of her career as founding editor of Publishers Weekly’s religion department. “They didn’t have a religion department until 1992,” she said. “Religion in the (publishing) industry was not important until the late 1980s.”

Increasingly, her job grew to look at the culture in general and take what was going on in religion back to publishers and the public.

Tickle, an Episcopalian, said she realized that “what I had learned in the marketplace had relevance in the pews. It was a way to talk about faith separate from my religion.

“Religion is a social construct that is

At left, Phyllis Tickle talks with East Tennessee ECW members Arline Caliger, center, and Ellen Hartsfield, right, at the spring conference of all Tennessee Episcopal Church women. Tickle, a noted author and reporter for the religious press, talked about the emergent church in her keynote addresses.

built to fit a society,” she said. “It institutionalizes why we are here.”

Every 500 years, Tickle said, “the church is compelled to have a giant rummage sale, and we are having one now. We are going through reformation or re-formation with full knowledge of what’s happening.”

A new form of religion is developing that Tickle calls “the Great Emergence,” which is also the title and topic of her new book. It is tentatively scheduled for a fall release by Baker Books.

She said the emergence began in 1852 with Michael Farraday’s theory of electromagnetic conduction and listed other relevant events and their dates, concluding with the launch of the personal computer and then the World Wide Web, between 1975 and 1995.

“Within the next 18 months, over 20 million Americans will have a religious experience in a non-location,” she said. “The Net also makes a very level playing field,” but because there is no hierarchy there are a lot of difficulties.

Today there is an effort to try to separate non-Christian spirituality from Christian spirituality, which is primarily a Western phenomenon. “Two-thirds of Christianity is no longer in the West.”

She said Worfhart Pannenburg divided Western Christianity into four distinct parts: liturgical, mainline, conservative and Pentecostal/charismatic/renewalist.

Sixty percent of American Christianity is called the Emergent Church because it comes from all four parts. Tickle then talked about who is within that 60 percent. The “hyphenateds,” for example, combine aspects of Anglican, Baptist, Methodist and other denominations with the emergent church. The Anglo-Emergents are “the nearest to having a corpus of first-century religion without any baggage.”

No matter what type of emergent church, however, a big part of it happens on the screen. “I cannot over-emphasize the importance of cyberspace; you can evangelize there,” she said.

“We are not here to save the Episcopal Church,” Tickle said. “We are here to serve the Kingdom of God. Anglican leaders are trying to talk about where we fit in. They want to make more Christians and enable them to gather more Christians, not get more Episcopalians or parishes.”

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