

Partners in Ministry: Living into Our Baptism

# Third diocesan ministry conference inspires spiritual exploration

• **By Sharon Rasmussen**  
Diocesan Communications Director

“Baptism does tell you the truth about yourself, but you spend the rest of your life learning who you really are.”

This remark by the Rev. John Westerhoff early in “Living into Our Baptism,” a Partners in Ministry conference April 21 at St. John’s Cathedral, Knoxville, framed the day’s theme.

Westerhoff and his wife, Caroline Westerhoff, both noted theologians, were speakers for the event co-sponsored by the cathedral with the diocesan Office of Ministry Development. About 20 churches were represented among the 85 or so participants, who included Bishop Charles vonRosenberg and his wife, Annie vonRosenberg.

Kerry Ruff, the cathedral’s youth music director, launched the event with several songs, and the cathedral sub-dean, the Rev. Canon Thom Rasnick, added to the light tone by having participants snap their fingers to the familiar Addams Family theme, as the background for a prayer.

Cathedral Dean John Ross and conference coordinator Chip Finn made brief remarks, and Finn introduced the Westerhoffs.

Both speakers’ books were available at the satellite store of Chapter & Verse Bookshop in the courtyard during a catered lunch by the Lunchbox and following the conference, and many attendees asked the Westerhoffs to sign their books.

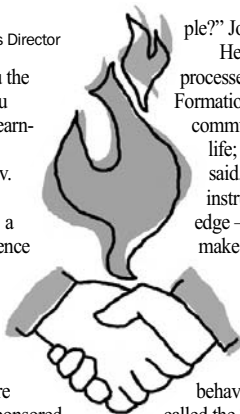
After a short question-and-answer period at day’s end, Rick Govan, diocesan ministry development facilitator, made brief comments, and the bishop added his thanks to the speakers and to the cathedral hosts.

This was the diocese’s third “Partners in Ministry” conference. The fourth is planned for April 2008 at the cathedral.

For this conference, the Westerhoffs employed a format of oral teaching interspersed with storytelling, with John describing the key concepts and Caroline illustrating them using stories from her books

## Christ-like people

“How do we take someone who is a Christian by baptism and make them, over their lifetime, *Christian* – Christ-like peo-



ple?” John Westerhoff asked.

He went on to describe the three processes that are typically used. Formation is the process of engaging in a community and practicing that way of life; it is the dominant process, he said. The other two are education or instruction – how we acquire knowledge – and training, which helps us to make moral decisions.

As an illustration of effective teaching, he said Jesus went out seeking students, then he taught by asking them to identify with him, to observe his behavior and imitate it. “The book is called the “Acts” of the apostles, not the “talk” of the apostles,” John said.

A good teacher’s actions do the teaching. Experience is formed as students imitate the action; learning is achieved and then is applied to future actions, in a circle.

He talked about the way people come to learn, and advocated life as a pilgrimage, “doing things *with* each other – which fits into practicing a Christ-like way of life. This process over a lifetime aids us in understanding our baptism,” he said.

Caroline Westerhoff told a story sited in an airport, in which wearing a sign of faith became much more.

“More than wearing a cross, or a clerical collar, the seal of God is not a brand fixed on us, but sticks rubbed together to light the flame of our souls, a bright beacon lit for weary and confused travelers,” she said. “In baptism, the mark of Jesus may be Christ-brands, which only show when someone needs them to, like lemon-juice letters revealed by a hot iron.”

## Community of faith

The community of faith has a central role in living into our baptism: ‘being that priesthood of bringing God to the people and the people to God,’ John said. However, we must live “a self-critical life, seeing how we’re doing, looking at what’s influencing us,” periodically anticipating a need for a course correction.

While a self-critical life is essential in order to live in community, we need to remember that God’s new covenant with us changes the relationship from confession/penance to reconciliation – “putting emphasis not on what *we* do, but what *God* does.” Because how can we turn away from one who is willing to suffer for us? “The cross



photos by Sharon Rasmussen

Above, Caroline and the Rev. John Westerhoff listen to a question during the diocesan Partners in Ministry event at St. John Cathedral on April 21. The theme was “Living into Our Baptism,” and the Westerhoffs employed a presentation format of teaching interspersed with storytelling.



At left, Beth Anderson, Chapter & Verse Bookshop manager, waits on a customer in the cathedral courtyard, while at rear, Francis Lloyd of Good Samaritan, Knoxville, and Wanda Haralson of St. John Cathedral examine the available books. Many conference participants asked the Westerhoffs to sign their books that were purchased at the conference.

is changing me, bringing me into relationship. We can be reconciled; we can live in harmony.”

However, differences can and do explode, sidetracking the possibility of harmony. Occasional statements were made about continuing controversy in the church, such as: “Schism is worse than heresy – when we seek not to be reconciled – it’s rejection of community,” but warning that, “Coercion will not fashion the reign of love God desires. We are free to absent ourselves.”

## The Reign of God

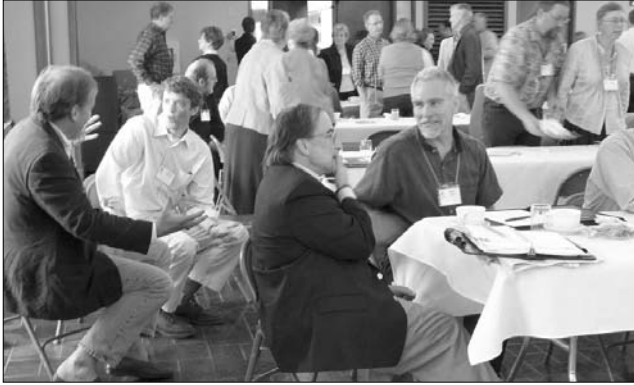
Participants were advised to “Act as if God’s reign, which is to come, is already

here in its fullness. . . . The reign of God is domination-free – there’s no hierarchy.”

In that just world, “everyone is of equal worth. No one has the right to be heard because of their office. No one has power over anyone else.

“Now, we think of justice as people getting what they deserve. But God’s justice is restorative, not retributive. People get what they need, not what they deserve.”

And peace comes with justice: “peace – not just absence of violence and war, but the presence of suffering love; peace can never come through the use of might.”



Ministry conference participants chat during a break. One of the event's benefits that was mentioned in evaluations was the opportunity to talk with others and to meet people from other parts of the diocese.

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Instead, "learn to float: Cooperate with the water. We need to get to where we have nothing to lose."

Carolyn read a piece called "Outstretched Arms," which is a "posture of hospitality – and deliverance ... Arms that are outstretched cannot punch or flail."

### Creating community

The Rev. Canon Stephen Askew commented that much of the Westerhoffs' thoughts assumed a sense of community, "which we've lost – unless we are somehow under attack. How do we create community?"

"Community must have a common story. It is that that binds us together," John Westerhoff responded. "Common rituals bind us too; common authority, knowing where to look for direction ... and a common end that's not just about your own survival."

### Baptismal ministry

Carolyn Westerhoff talked about the nature of baptismal ministry, which is "service of God every moment of every day with all we have and are."

She noted that the 1979 Book of Common Prayer "radically moved baptism to the central position. Baptism is the primary sacrament by which we all are ordained to ministry." And if it is baptism that ordains us to ministry, it has to be possible for every person.

She said that over time, she'd narrowed her list to only six dispositions for ministry. First and above everything else, she said, we must be disposed to be present, to live in the moment.

After this, the others aren't in any particular order:

- ◆ Disposed to be compassionate – to suffer with, to be present with someone.

- ◆ Disposed to be vulnerable, which is a willingness to be wounded on behalf of another, to let imperfections and roughness show; it involves

trust, forgiving and the emptying of one's self.

- ◆ Disposed to be hospitable – to the point of truly welcoming the enemy as a guest.

- ◆ Disposed to be ordered, which is really a kind of subversion, to be able to discern God's order. "You can't know the will of God unless you don't care about the outcome," she said. This disposition includes flexibility, creativity and listening for the voice of the prophet.

- ◆ Disposed to be outrageously humble, to keep things in perspective, to laugh and to play.

- ◆ Disposed to be detached. "About what do you care too much?" she asked. "You must simplify – your life, your belongings. Remember, Jesus sent out the disciples stripped down. ... Be mobile, pruning for new life to burst forth."

Carolyn said someone had asked her where love was in all this. "I think love just kind of drips all through it," she said, noting that finally, our response is thanksgiving – or perhaps thanksgiving is actually a seventh disposition, she mused.

Mike Keene of Resurrection, Loudon, asked why being present can be such work.

"Because it's intimate, deep, an affirmation," Carolyn said.

John added, "That's true with God, too; we tend to talk to fill in the blank. But, the closer you get to someone, the less you have to say."

Following a story that used the biblical characters of Mary and Martha to illustrate the value of balance in life and ministry, Carolyn quoted the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's music director as saying, "I do my best outer work when I'm caring for my inner spaces."

She closed the day with the thought, "May we be holy and whole."

For more information about baptismal ministry or this ministry conference, please contact Rick Govan, diocesan ministry development facilitator, at [rgovan@etdiocese.net](mailto:rgovan@etdiocese.net) or 423-698-1222.

## A Journey to Vocation

# Chattanooga rector relates parish's experience with shared ministry

◆ By the Rev. Carter Paden  
Rector, St. Peter, Chattanooga

When the idea of Shared Ministry was broached at St. Peter's, we thought at first that it was a program designed to help our priest meet the needs of our parish. Helping the priest and the parish seemed a worthy goal.

Being busy and engaged and organized people, we thought that we could move ahead rapidly, organize, make a few changes and all would be well. We thought that if we could just identify the needs, find willing people, and put them to work, then the program would work and all would be well. However, as we began to explore the concept of Shared Ministry, we realized that what we first imagined Shared Ministry to be was just the "old pattern" of having a few over-functioning, exhausted and empty people who were very busy and another larger group of disenfranchised, disconnected and empty people who consumed a little bit of church on Sunday morning and then hurried off to work, golf, soccer, the lake, etc.

Over the first few months, we learned that Shared Ministry is not a "program." It isn't ultimately about supporting the priest or the parish – although those are lovely by-products. Rather, Shared Ministry is our Baptismal Covenant with God. It is what being Christian means.

Christ called each of us to be ministers by right of our Baptism. God has given each of us gifts and has given each of us a passion for what he needs us to do. If we use our gifts to nurture one another, then the kingdom of God becomes apparent in our midst.

This change in thinking required a paradigm shift for us. We no longer see the church as a pyramid with the bishop and priests at the

top carrying the responsibility for everyone's Christian growth and formation.

Christ actually called us friends and abolished any hierarchy in forming his community of equals. We are a web of life, interconnected and responsible for each other. It is mutual ministry where all participate in making decisions and each individual is important to the whole. When we ignore this truth, then our communities perish.

Thus, the first step was a slow one. We had to grow in our faith first and to get in touch with our own spirituality and giftedness. This took several months, meeting every other week for two hours. We read "I Have Called You Friends," and then we entered into an exploration of Benedictine spirituality. We are now ready to engage the parish by helping each person to discover his or her own gifts and also to find what they love to do.

We are distributing a small booklet on discovering one's spiritual gifts, and after these have been collected and scored, we will return them so that the results can be affirmed by others. Hopefully, we can begin also to establish some connections for these gifts to be exercised and shared. This is not church stuff that is fit in on Sundays, this is about our real life of servanthood.

We are hoping that by the fall, we will have helped enough people discover their giftedness that the overflow will result in a self-sustaining community of empowered Christians. Already our pastoral care for one another has increased as several people have been released to minister to each other.

We are building slowly, and the concept of Shared Ministry is slowly making its way into the congregation.

We look to see many marvelous things as God works through us for his glory.

St. Peter, Chattanooga: 423-877-2428

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