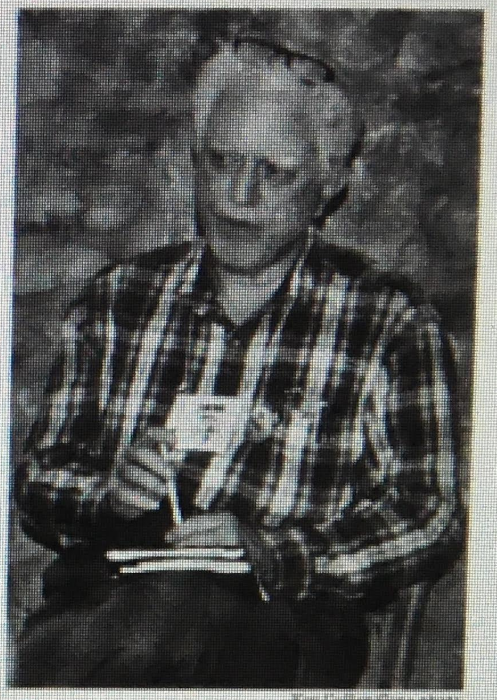
Acquired Wisdom

Elder Leaders in the Church Ask How They Can Pass on What They've Learned



Kay Collier-Slone photo

Loren Mead, founder and longtime director of the Alban Institute, called the meeting at Kanuga.

The names of participants in the Nov. 2 "A Next Hurrah?!" gathering at Kanuga Conference Center in Hendersonville, N.C., read like a Who's Who from some exciting years in the Episcopal Church. Co-convenors were the Rev. Loren Mead, founder and long-time director of the Alban Institute, and the Rev. Bill Yon, former director of the Association of Creative Change.

They were joined by colleagues such as Flower and Charles Ross, developers of Education for Ministry; Bob Gallagher, head of the Church Development Institute; George Peabody, researcher, author and teacher of power at George Washington University; Billie Alban, teacher of human resource management and organizational development at Columbia University Extension; and the Rt. Rev. Bill Spofford, retired Bishop of Eastern Oregon.

They gathered at Kanuga to take a serious look at the need for basic leadership skills training in the church today, and how they might pass the skills they are still practicing coast to coast on to a new generation in the church.

The four days were filled with the sharing of a collective history, from which the participants could look at when and why the focus of the church shifted; what was learned from the experience and what situations and issues in today' s church would benefit from a re-focus on training leaders.

In the 1950s, as the Episcopal Church focused on Christian education and introduced the Seabury Series, a specific need arose for training both lay and clergy leaders. The national church had grant money to fund the training, and set large numbers of clergy and laity to the National Training Laboratories for week-long training workshops.

It was the intent of the national church to train as many leaders as possible, to facilitate the kind of atmosphere and interaction most conducive to the building of community. The combination of understanding of human behavior and skills in helping people accomplish tasks, set and meet goals provided all levels of the church with training leadership, both clerical and lay.

There was good news at Kanuga:

Four "second generation" participants joined the elders, giving the meeting a true sense of being poised for the future.

Participants pooled knowledge of active training events taking place across the country and began to plan for ways to keep the church informed of opportunities.

There was excitement around integrating new learnings and technologies to the resources already available to provide the best possible training for the new millennium.

"The church has put its energy into extra-parochial resources which result in highly committed people," Mr. Yon said, citing those who return from renewal experiences motivated to "do something" in their parishes. If that level of commitment is not matched with competency — the skills required to develop a plan and see it into actions — the results can be destructive and divisive rather than constructive and supportive of the community, he said.

Participants looked at the state of the country and recognized that the church is one of the last remaining community organizations, and thus has an opportunity to be a place where rules and values of a new era can be influenced.

The Kanuga participants paid their own expenses and took time from their personal and professional schedules to reflect on the matter of leadership training, past, present and future. Current issues, diversities and ambiguities in the church were discussed in the light of the resources once available for conflict management, interim pastorate training, human interaction, group development and management. Through this discussion it was made clear that the church has on hand resources to assist in bridging generations and negotiating space for the Holy Spirit in worship with different styles and needs.

Kay Collier-Slone