

Lambeth spouses will listen to each others' stories, develop personal skills

Seventh of a nine-part series on the Lambeth Conference and the Anglican Communion.

By Mary Frances Schjonberg

The Lambeth Spouses Conference, which will run concurrently with the 2008 Lambeth Conference of bishops, will not be a women's tea party, says Jane Williams, whose husband is the Archbishop of Canterbury.

For one thing, continuing a trend begun at the 1998 conference, there will be a small number of husbands among the spouses. That conference marked the first time that the Anglican Communion included women bishops, the first being Barbara Harris who was consecrated in 1989 as a bishop suffragan in the Diocese of Massachusetts.

Overall, the two main aims of the 2008 Spouses Conference will be "to learn from each other and to resource ourselves to be God's people for God's mission," Williams said during a January announcement of the spouses program.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has invited more than 800 bishops to July 16-August 3 conference at the University of Kent in southeast England.

"Bishops' spouses are as varied as the spouses of people in any other profession would be, but we do have some things in common: like our faith, and the pains and pleasures of living with and supporting a bishop," Jane Williams said.

She noted that many bishops' spouses don't get a chance to meet with each other because of distances and a lack of resources. For some, this will be their only opportunity to travel outside their own country.

The Lambeth Spouses Conference 2008

16 July - 4 August 2008
University of Kent in Canterbury, England

Pray for....
...your bishops' spouses
...their churches
...the people they serve

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"So we want to make the most of what will, for most of us, be a once-in-a-lifetime chance to equip ourselves, in the company of others who really know what we need," she said. "Our program gives time for quite a lot of telling our stories and learning how to listen to each other."

Philip Roskam, spouse of Diocese of New York Bishop Suffragan Catherine Roskam and one of six husbands who attended the 1998 conference, said that his time at Lambeth was "very educational." Not having traveled much outside the United States and Europe at that time, Roskam said he often marveled that he was talking to spouses from all over the world.

Larry Waynick, married to Diocese of Indianapolis Bishop Catherine Waynick, agreed. "The most outstanding thing was to actually see and touch the vast diversity that exists in the Anglican Communion," he said. His Bible study group in 1998 consisted of two spouses from Africa, one each from New Zealand, India and England plus himself and another spouse from the Episcopal Church.

Williams said that such time can deepen what she called the spouses' "family knowledge" of each other—knowledge that "builds our advocacy for each other, our prayer for each other, and our action for each other."

The spouses' days during the 2008 gathering will be divided between small and large-group discussions. Nearly every morning will include small-group Bible study based around Jesus' "I am" statements in John's gospel.

Waynick recalled that his 1998 group really was the "gathering of a small community" in which he learned about the differing expectations placed on bishops' spouses and how other Anglicans practice

their faith. Many issues of the day were discussed, but in his group "there was never any controversy—nothing ever got political."

Large-group discussions will explore how to be effective in the role of bishop's spouse, how to uphold close relationships, how to respond to the leadership challenges spouses face, and how to address the health and personal-development issues of themselves and others.

"We plan to look at some of the huge issues that face us all, and that diminish God's people and make it harder for others to hear God's good news," Williams said. "For example, the effects of ecological change, the challenge of health care projects, or the way in which gender violence affects our communities. For some of these themes, we will be joining the Bishops' Conference, because these are not 'women's issues'. The whole people of God need to be challenged and have their needs heard and ministered to in these areas."

The Rev. Mary Frances Schjonberg is Episcopal Life Media correspondent for Episcopal Church governance, structure, and trends.

Lambeth Prayer

Pour down upon us, O God, the gifts of your Holy Spirit, that those who prepare for the Lambeth Conference may be filled with wisdom and understanding. May they know at work within them that creative energy and vision which belong to our humanity, made in your image and redeemed by your love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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