Deacons, Mission, and New Church Starts

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It’s a joy for me to be an observer at the annual conference of the North American Association for the Diaconate meeting at the beautiful Seattle University here in the Pacific Northwest. A couple of hundred participants were addressed this morning by Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori on the topic of mission.

Those who persist in believing that the Presiding Bishop (or the Episcopal Church) now defines the mission of the Church exclusively in terms of the Millenium Development Goals will be pleased to know that her framework for today’s presentation were the Five Marks of Mission defined by the Anglican Consultative Council. (Google “Five Marks of Mission” to see them listed).

I think I was most struck by the PB’s challenge to the deacons (and the Church) to be about the mission of this 3rd Millenium Church in new ways. For example, rather than deciding on “new church starts” by demographic analyses, income predictions, even ethnicity, how about having deacons (and others) tell us where the gospel most needs to be heard and establish new communities of faith there!

Young people, she correctly pointed out, are less concerned about a “spirituality of place” and more interested in a “spirituality of practice.” New church starts and indeed the Church of the future may be less concerned with buildings and more concerned with incarnating God’s mission.

I’ve been following the so-called “emergent church” movement lately and that certainly seems to be among the distinctive characteristics of these young people. In any case, as a longtime supporter of the diaconate, I was energized by the thought of these
devoted deacons — who are in their ordination vows pledged to “interpret the needs of the world to the Church” — providing much-needed guidance to bishops and dioceses seriously interested in planting new churches which can actually be communities engaged in “restoring all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

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