

VESTRY PAPERS

To Encourage and Guide Those Called by God to Lead Episcopal Congregations

St. Edward the Confessor in suburban Minneapolis burned to the ground last April after a young man threw gasoline-filled bottles at the structure late on a stormy night. We asked the rector to share tips with our readers on coping with such a loss.

Flames and Faith

by Judy Hoover

The phone rang at 4:35 a.m. on Sunday morning. "Is this the Rev. Judy Hoover?" I responded affirmatively although I was trying to clear my brain. "This is the Hennepin County dispatcher. Can you respond to an emergency?" I am a volunteer chaplain and sometimes on call to assist the police when there is an emergency.

I tried to justify not responding because it had only been eight days since my husband of 47 years had died, and I was exhausted physically and emotionally. I suggested another chaplain but she went on. "Who would you like me to call? Your church is fully engulfed in fire!" I called the senior

warden while hurrying to the church. Within less than an hour, at least half the membership was there, watching helplessly as the 35 year-old church burned to the ground level.

Five fire stations were called; TV reporters from five stations came immediately. One parishioner thought to bring the church directory, and those with cell phones made key phone calls. Our congressman, Jim Ramstad, came to stand with us. The Salvation Army brought blankets, food and coffee.

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Keep the Plaster out of the Soup

by Sarah Peveler

Last year, I asked five clergy -- evangelical and mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Jewish -- to record a short meditation from their own tradition that answered the question, Why should we spend money on our buildings when there is so much need in the world?

What could have been a lame joke beginning "there were two ministers, two priests, and a rabbi..." instead resulted in a moving recording in which they tackled the question from Scripture, tradition, and experience. They all agreed that we are called to be good stewards of our buildings, not because they are our material possessions *but because they are fundamental tools of our ministry.*

Confusing landmarks with presence

We Episcopalians do a good job of creating and designating landmarks. Historically, we've had the financial wherewithal to afford the best architects, building materials, and furnishings for our churches. The National Register of Historic Places lists Episcopal churches far out of proportion to our actual presence; the same holds true for state and local registers. Indeed, officials of the New Jersey Trust for Historic Preservation say that, if their preservation grants told the true story of the state's religious character, they'd believe that everyone was either an Episcopalian or Quaker.

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Buildings and grounds issues come before vestries with amazing regularity. And they can evoke a range of emotions — from frustration to passion. In this issue we look at church buildings as tools for ministry, and explore concrete ways in which to care for them.

*This Issue:
Buildings and Grounds*



Keep the Plaster out of the Soup

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We have, however, gotten our landmark buildings confused with buildings that mark our presence in community and therein lies the rub.

Marking place

Our churches mark *place*. From slender colonial spires that once guided ships into eastern ports to the bulky towers of our Gothic cathedrals, our churches dominate the urban landscape. Our forebears wanted to make a statement: "We are here!"

Tiny rural gems like the Bishop Weed churches in Florida and the Bishop Whipple ones in Minnesota catch us by surprise and with delight. Churches are visual anchors in a community whether they dominate the urban streetscape or sit in a grove of trees on a country road, often surrounded by a churchyard.

Our neighbors expect our churches to be there. They pause when the bells ring, they set their watches by the tower clock, and they are our building's guardians when we are not around. Many graffiti artists and burglars have been thwarted in their work by neighbors who "own" the church under siege even if they've never been inside the front doors.

Marking memory

Our churches mark *memory*. Whenever I visit Gethsemane Cathedral in Fargo, I am struck by how this modern building, resembling the grain elevators that break the North Dakota skyline, recalls those fearless Episcopalians who settled the unforgiving prairie. Artifacts from the cathedral train that crossed the state at the turn of the century have been incorporated into Gethsemane's design as have stained glass windows from the former downtown Fargo cathedral that was lost to fire. We need these memories to anchor us in our tradition and to link us to those who ministered before and those who will follow.

Marking ministry

Our churches mark *ministry*. Drive down Philadelphia's Germantown Avenue and look up. You will see a sign marking one church's presence in a desperate neighborhood: "We're in Germantown for good."

This bold proclamation celebrates 150 years of service and a successful \$2.5 million capital campaign to restore the parish hall that houses an array of social service programs.

Our churches open their doors selflessly to the community and every time one closes or removes deteriorating space from use, day care centers, Scout programs, and 12-Step meetings must find a new home. Partners for Sacred Places' ground-breaking national research on the public value of older and historic religious properties shows that congregations provide an annual average of \$140,000 of value to the community through the programs and services they house.

We've gone on the defensive about spending money on our buildings — to restore them or even keep them in good repair. To avoid charges of idolatry, we use our resources to feed the hungry all the while ignoring the plaster that is falling into the soup pot. As vestry members, we to rethink our priorities to ensure that our buildings serve our neighbors and us well.

My own parish just finished \$3 million dollars of restoration and repair work (as one vestry member put it, 100 years of deferred maintenance!) We struggle with our operating budget each year; it is an easy call to put off dealing with drainage problems when our programs are growing by leaps and bounds. Or so it seems, until the church school classrooms in the undercroft are flooded yet again.

Worthy of the call

As vestry members, we are the physical stewards of our buildings. They represent one of the greatest assets we have, not only in terms of their financial value but also by what they allow us to do to serve others. Our community knows us by our buildings and how we use them as tools for our ministry. We are called to be good stewards for the present and for the future. Let us be worthy of that call.

A vestry member of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Sarah Peveler is also the Director of Special Projects of the Philadelphia-based Partnership for Sacred Places, a national non-profit, non-sectarian organization promoting the stewardship of older and historic religious properties.

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*Partners for Sacred Places offers training, publications and consulting resources for congregations on building maintenance, fund development and building use. Check out its website at www.sacredplaces.org for 150 articles on building-related topics. Special publications: *The Complete Guide to Capital Campaigns for Historic Churches and Synagogues* and the just-released *Your Sacred Place is a Community Asset Tool Kit*.*

Maintenance Helps Mission

by Christopher L. Webber

Rightly, the Episcopal Church is attempting to emphasize mission and noting that we often focus our efforts on maintenance.

As a vestry member, you are familiar with the problem. Here are some suggestions.

Remember that doing maintenance is still vital, but that it needs to serve mission not *displace* it. In fact, we can't do mission if we haven't done the maintenance. People are not drawn to a dilapidated, run-down church.

The Property Committee can gain some excitement about mission if it begins to ask how our buildings can serve our mission. What can we do to make the buildings look more attractive? What can we do to make

them more useful to the community?

Are the buildings accessible to the handicapped? Is church school space attractive and workable? Asking these questions can change vestry meetings from the dull and constant work of maintaining buildings to a far more interesting and worthwhile concern for mission and growth.

Do "buildings and grounds" take over the agenda? Don't let them. It is important to have a roof over the worshipping congregation, but it isn't the only important matter. If it's important to do something, it's important to do it well — and that requires good committee work.

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I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."
Psalm 122:1

Hospitality Matters: Seeing Our Buildings Anew

By Eliza Linley

Episcopalians have moved beyond the era when, as the old joke went, evangelism meant unlocking the door on Sunday mornings. But how often does force of habit make us blind to our worship environment — without regard to design flaws and neglect that give a negative message?

If we believe that hospitality is a Gospel mandate, it is part of the mission of the church to look at our buildings with fresh eyes, to take an inventory, and to take care of the things that need attention. In terms of facilities, hospitality translates into four categories: safety, accessibility, comfort and attractiveness. Let's look from the outside in, with Sunday morning as the focus.

The Approach

- ✚ Is the church pleasing to look at? Besides general maintenance, does the landscaping enhance the building or hide it? Does shrubbery encroach on entry walkways, signs, exterior lighting or windows? Attention to detail and bright plantings near the entry draws attention to it, and to the changing church seasons.
- ✚ Are walkways and entries clear and easy to negotiate? Or have roots, settlement or frost heaves created broken slabs and safety hazards? In facility triage, safety needs have highest priority. If they can't

be fixed immediately, slippery walkways and steps should be highlighted with tape, paint or non-skid coatings.

- ✚ Is it clear where to park? While spaces for the disabled are mandated by law, not all churches remember to mark a few convenient parking spaces "reserved for visitors."
- ✚ Are signs clear and well-coordinated? Or is the church sign that was so nice twenty years ago in need of replacement or new paint? Can new parents find the nursery? Are restrooms and offices clearly marked?
- ✚ How hard is it to enter by a wheelchair, crutches, or a stroller? It's not enough to provide access if it can't be found, or if you need assistance to negotiate it.

The Entry

- ✚ Visitors should be able to see inside the building as they approach. At the very least, a pair of wide-open doors into a well-lit entry helps.
- ✚ The entry area or narthex needs to be attractive and constantly monitored to keep clutter down. Does the visual serenity of your entry enhance a sense of calm and reverence? Or is it the repository of lost umbrellas, galoshes, hats and coats, dusty hymnals, errant crayons, out of date postings, dying plants, and boxes? Be ruthless.

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- ✦ Post things elsewhere. Leave space for the visitors' book, bulletins for one service only, copies of the church newsletter, and large-print prayer books and hymnals.

The Sanctuary

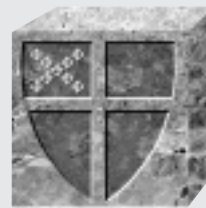
- ✦ Can everyone see clearly? Quality lighting can really "pop out" a handsome old building. New lighting may also be more energy-efficient. A good lighting consultant is well worth the expense. It is not always necessary to replace old fixtures - it may be possible to augment the system and relamp instead.
- ✦ Does the seating work for everyone? Is space allowed for wheelchairs? Do little people have to peer over pews? Some churches have made the front row of seating into kid-friendly soft cushions on the floor. If seating is so uncomfortable as to be a hindrance to worship, consider replacement.
- ✦ How are the acoustics? Bad acoustics discourage people from singing. Sound does not turn corners. An acoustical consultant can help find solutions, including more resonant surfaces, baffles, and sensitive amplification.
- ✦ Is the floor covering dangerously worn? Torn, frayed or bunched carpets are a safety hazard. Old softwood pews can splinter - repair them.
- ✦ People with chemical and environmental sensitivities are miserable in buildings where there is perfume, incense, or poor

ventilation. Some churches ask parishioners not to wear scent. If incense is used for a special service, can the sanctuary be fully opened and ventilated in time for the next event?

- ✦ As in the entry, strive to minimize visual clutter. One cross is enough - more diminish the primacy of the symbol. Think hard about how much "stuff" you need. Less is more.
- ✦ Is your color scheme stuck in a '60s beige syndrome? Paint and finishes can be brought up to date, brightened, and made richer for a comparatively moderate outlay.

In short, church is like home. When it is warm, inviting and safe, we all feel better. When company is coming, you want them to feel neither intimidated nor discouraged, but at home. And at church, company is always coming. The welcome our buildings extend should mirror God's love. Our church facilities should be places from which we go to do the things the Gospel asks us to do. Is this too big a charge? Maybe that's okay. Keep the larger goal in mind, and a task list that may seem daunting starts to look more like an opportunity for faithful, even joyful ministry. After all, the church is God's house. Can we do any less?

The Rev. Eliza Linley is a priest, architect and liturgical artist in Berkeley, California. She is chair of the Architecture Commission of the Diocese of California and serves on the board of the Episcopal Church Building Fund.



The Episcopal Church Building Fund in New York (800-334-7626) has been helping Episcopal churches build and renovate church structures since 1880. Loans are available; some \$10 million is out now through a revolving loan fund. Two helpful resources are a workbook, Church Sites and Buildings, and a video, Churches for Common Prayer. The Rev. Charles N. Fulton III, ECBF President, will lead a diocesan-sponsored workshop on building if six or more parishes participate. The Fund will also review architectural plans upon request. Website: www.churchbuilding.org

Editor's Note

In preparation for this issue, I talked with Rod Webster, senior vice president and general manager of the Church Insurance Company. Some findings: 74% of parishes and 82% of dioceses are insured by the Church Insurance Company (CIC) or its new sister company, the Church Insurance Company of Vermont. Both are owned by the Church Pension Fund. (www.cpg.org)

Rod said that most claims are due to lack of maintenance - a roof that rots through lack of repair, an injury due to a cracked sidewalk, a fire from lack of proper wiring, etc. Keep up with the maintenance, he says. And get someone who knows what he or she is doing. He cites a recent case where an uninsured worker, and apparently under qualified, was removing lead paint on a window casing with a blowtorch and burnt the church down. Nice work.

Two popular services are free of charge. One, an appraisal team will measure, photograph and diagram church buildings in order to provide an accurate assessment of replacement costs. Copies are filed with the parish and the diocese. Two, an engineer will walk through the buildings, note potential hazards and often give immediate advice on repair priorities and cost-effective ways to fix problems. A written report follows. Sounds like a

Maintenance Helps Mission

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You say your congregation is too small and there aren't enough people available to form a committee? Then divide the vestry into working groups and use meeting time to work separately.

After opening prayer and Bible study and review of the minutes, send half the vestry off to one side of the room to work on property and finances and let the other half work on mission and outreach. Allow an hour for committee work and then come together for committee reports and action. It really isn't necessary for every member of the vestry to discuss the ins and outs of every gutter and leader. Let half the members do that and then come to the full vestry with a recommendation. That way, mission and outreach won't get submerged in the pressing issues of money and maintenance. Try it! It works! You will get more done and you won't let maintenance trump mission.

Help is available

Learn that help is available. There is a diocesan office which can very often provide advice and even money. Vestries often find themselves confronting a particular problem for the first time. Roofs may last fifteen or twenty years and more; few vestry members are likely to have been around the last time the roof began to leak. But around the diocese are other parishes which have dealt with the problem more recently — maybe last week.

The diocese is likely to know about it and be able to put you in touch with someone who can tell you what they learned. In fact, there may be someone on the diocesan staff who already has the information you need or can point you to builders with a good track record, architects who have worked on Episcopal churches, specialists in stained glass, heating systems, lighting, and so on. As Jesus told the first vestry: "Seek and ye shall find." (*Matthew 7:7*) Sometimes, in fact, you may find that the diocese has funds available. I recently discovered that my diocese has a fund to assist parishes planning to build in our deanery. Hardly had I asked when the check was in the mail. Jesus also said, "Ask and ye shall receive." Try it! What can you lose?

A strong working relationship

All this assumes, of course, a strong working relationship between rector and vestry.

As a vestry member you can build that relationship outside meeting time. Take time to chat; find excuses for social contact; let the rector get a more complete picture of who you are. Pray regularly for him or her. Don't let vestry work become a separate, semi-secular activity apart from the whole life of the community. Offer to take initiatives: Would it be helpful if I got some folks together and made an inventory of our buildings? Could a couple of us search the files to see when work was last done? What if I set up a file on that so we would know where to look next time? Clergy seldom say no to specific offers to help.

Keep control of property problems; don't let them control your parish life. Be pro-active, not reactive. Keep records. Anticipate needs. Take an inventory. Look for problems. Create a reserve fund. Pray about it. Expect miracles; they do happen!

While the vestry is charged with the duty of maintaining the buildings belonging to the parish, the rector is given the use of them "for the purposes of his ministry." The symbolic giving of keys in the service for the Celebration of a New Ministry signifies that the rector, on his or her own authority, may decide who may use the buildings and when. The rector is given this authority to ensure that he or she is able to conduct services, provide an educational program, and reach out to the community without hindrance. Nonetheless, in a healthy rector and vestry relationship there will be consultation and cooperative planning to avoid the unnecessary divisions and to gain the broadest possible support for new programs. From *The Vestry Handbook*, Revised Edition, by Christopher L. Webber, reprinted with permission from Morehouse Publishing.

The Rev. Christopher L. Webber has served inner city, suburban, rural and overseas parishes. He is the author of The Vestry Handbook and many other books, and is now working with several parishes in Connecticut.



Do an inventory and photo project for insurance purposes. Take photos or make a video (or both) of the special items in your church. Use a ruler and good lighting so the actual size of the items is easy to gauge. Identify any fine points or significant features. Update periodically and keep at least one copy off site.



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We wept together and reminisced. We laughed about the things we always wanted to change and we spoke of rebuilding as soon as possible. The convener from a nearby church called and offered their building for a service later in the day.

Some tips

So what have we learned since then? A multitude of lessons, too numerous for this page. Here are a few:

- + God is with us and will be our strength and our salvation, no matter what happens.
- + Get the area cordoned off as soon as possible as it is a major liability risk.
- + Call your insurance company *ASAP* for emergency funds and an adjuster to begin the process of evaluating the loss.
- + After a disaster like this, there is a sense of loss of control and a power vacuum in the congregation. Everyone who has always wanted to change something comes forward to assert themselves. Occasionally there are potentially divisive disagreements over things that do not warrant the attention or emotion that is evoked. This is what happens when the entire congregation is suffering from grief and loss all at the same time.
- + Immediately put parishioners to work making lists of all the contents of the building. A better idea is to have them do it **NOW** when there is no loss. Take pictures or video shots of the church inside and outside.
- + Anyone in the congregation who has personal property on the premises must have a record of what it is and its value. (We had a Steinway on loan. Fortunately, I had asked the owner to cover it with her own insurance, as it would not have been insured under our policy.)
- + Clergy should have a listing of personally owned vestments and their books. These should either be specially listed in their homeowners' policy or they will not be covered as they are considered "business or professional" properties. (Bad news for me, as I lost about \$10,000 worth of books.)
- + Gather the congregation together soon to talk about its loss and what it wants to preserve.
- + Make arrangements for grief counseling for those who are in pain. Children and youth should be included in some form of recognition of their sense of loss. (Many of our acolytes were devastated by losing their crosses.)
- + Many people step forward to offer help and contributions. Everything from old family organs to free services may be offered. Be sure what is offered is something you really need or want.
- + Store insurance coverage away from the church; duplicate it and put it in two places, one a safety deposit box.
- + Financial and parish records should be backed up or duplicated and stored off campus. We had our financials off site, but the parish records were not.
- + Set up a system for thanking people for their prayers, contributions and concern. (One parishioner has sent over 150 thank you notes on our behalf. I have sent over 300 that were memorials for my husband.) It is a big task.

There are many more learnings but this is what occurs to me right now. I just keep reminding myself that all things work together for those who love God and keep moving forward.

St. Edward's is working to rebuild, and is exploring construction on its original site or moving to a new location with added out reach possibilities.