

VESTRY PAPERS

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EPISCOPAL
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'The Lord Broke Through'

by Richard H. Schmidt

Nearly forty years ago, I took my shiny new seminary degree to a county seat in eastern West Virginia. I served there as vicar of a small Episcopal congregation and soon bumped into some things I hadn't learned in seminary.

The local Community Action Agency asked to locate its Head Start program in the house

On the other hand, children were in need and we had a facility that could help them.

We could evict Head Start if things didn't work out. We knew many of the people involved and trusted them. All twelve vestry members were present that night. Around and around we went. People began to repeat themselves and stopped listening. Positions



next to the church soon after I became vicar. The church owned the house and used it on Sundays for classroom space, but it sat vacant during the week. I thought a Head Start program would be a splendid use for the church property.

Although as vicar I could have given permission for Head Start to meet in the house, I thought it prudent to gain vestry support. The vestry discussed the proposal for two and a half hours. Arguments on both sides were presented: The building would be abused. It would be unavailable for church use during the week. We would have no control over what went on in our facilities.

hardened. As the evening wore on, I realized that if a vote were taken, it would be split evenly, six for and six against. What would I do then?

A wise and respected older member of the vestry had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and had almost missed the meeting due to her illness. I had seen her grow visibly exhausted as the evening progressed. Finally, she said, "Why don't we pray?"

Praying had not occurred to me

A moment of awkward silence followed. Praying had not occurred to me, for I had

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*This Issue:
Sharing Spiritual Leadership
Circulation 24,500*

Although vestries and clergy have different responsibilities, sharing leadership in the parish is a worthy goal for both. But what exactly does that mean and how best to accomplish it? Here we explore, both practically and theologically, ways to embrace the true meaning of shared spiritual leadership.

*Inside:
Ways to Stay
Focused on Jesus*



“Vestry members are generally thought of as the leaders in their congregations, yet the work you are called to do comprises the least glamorous and most back breaking tasks that have to be performed by a congregation...There is an exquisite irony in this. But the exquisite ironies stand squarely at the center of Christianity. The weak are strong, the poor are strong, the poor are rich, death brings life. So servant leadership is in the best Christian tradition...”

*Colleen McMahon,
Meditations for Vestry
Members*

*Next Issue:
Vestry Meetings*

Bean Counters No More: Ministry is the Vestry's Business

by Pat McCaughan

Imagine a congregation where the priest isn't the only one making pastoral calls. Its vestry members train laity to weekly visit and encourage sick and shut-in members. And while clergy distribute Eucharist on Sunday mornings, the senior warden extends another kind of communion, holy oil in hand, offering healing prayers upon request.

Fading is the stereotype of church-business-as-usual, vestry as board-of-directors, and communities of “frozen chosen” relying on a book rather than the Spirit if asked to pray aloud. Emerging is a whole-person model of engagement leading to individual and corporate transformation.

Increasingly, vestries and congregations are embracing the reality that nothing in church canons prevents laity from assuming major roles in a congregation's pastoral and spiritual life.



What has ushered in the change? For the Rev. Peter Rood, rector of Church of the Holy Nativity near Los Angeles, discernment was key.

Introducing the African Bible Study method during vestry meetings — where a portion of Scripture is read three times, in three different voices and biblical translations, each time accompanied by a question focused on discerning God's will, individually and corporately — began a shift to a more balanced focus.

Eventually, the changes sparked collective passions and inspired individual quests which in turn fueled transformation. “When

you focus on what the Spirit is asking us to do, it completely transforms the meeting and has transformed the vestry,” he says.

A third of the vestry's members have joined a parish contemplative prayer group; others are involved in an environmental sustainability support group.

Christine Budzowski, a vestry member at Holy Nativity, said faith became real for her via the environmental group. And it also led her to actively engage the church's neighbors and surrounding community because “it became a non-threatening way to bring people who aren't familiar with us into the church.”

Pastoral care, on the other hand, was the road into a new experience for Catherine Day, a long-time parishioner and vestry member of St. George's Church in Laguna Hills, California. She is regularly in touch with bereaved families and those recently released from the hospital, arranging meals for them; she also trains and supervises the congregation's Stephen Ministers, a ministry of presence to those facing life transitions and difficulties.

“[The pastoral caring and the vestry work] all seemed to work together; I can understand both sides of it. I can be on the vestry and understand where the holes are, what the needs are. The times we just focused on money seemed to take the heart out of the congregation.”

For Maria Gouyd, 65, senior warden at St. Michael's Church in Riverside, California, offering healing prayer through the Order of St. Luke ministry every Sunday during communion sends a message that “this is a place where everyone is concerned about other people and their well-being, something more than just a place to come to on Sunday.”

Her prayer ministry has also deepened her own spirituality. “Initially, verbal prayer felt very difficult,” she recalled. “So when I went up to the communion rail myself, I'd pray for God to speak through me for whatever the person needed.”

Now, even children in the community get involved: “The kids come back and ask for prayers for their pets and one fifth grader asked for prayers for a good week. Another, in the third grade, comes and touches the people as we pray for them. It's taught

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Bean Counters No More: Ministry is the Vestry's Business

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them to recognize the power and importance of prayer.”

For Ruth Record, also a St. Michael's vestry member, stepping up to help one homeless person three years ago led to a full-time outreach to the homeless, CAYA — Come as You Are. It now feeds as many as 250 area homeless each week, in addition to offering Bible study.

“God said ‘feed my sheep’ and that's what we're doing, and we don't cram the Bible down anybody's throat,” Record added.

Discernment is key for the mother of three who said more than anything, she was willing to follow the Spirit's nudgings. “We just have to do what God has called us to

do. You can't master anything until you become a servant. It's transformed our entire community.”

The goal is balance — and as author Edwin Friedman (*A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*) says, “healing and a striving toward wholeness.”

Each vestry and congregation will find its own way. The important aspect is to seek and discern and to enjoy.

The Rev. Pat McCaughan is associate for parish life at St. George's Church in Laguna Hills, California. She also serves as senior correspondent for the Diocese of Los Angeles and the Episcopal News Service.

Ways to Stay Focused on Jesus

by Pat McCaughan

- **Be a non-anxious presence**, especially in the midst of conflict. This is especially important as a leader. Keep communication open and honest, but don't amplify fear and anxiety.
- **Be patient.** Sometimes God moves us to point B from point A, not so that we will continue to point C, but so that we can see point Z. Progress is not always linear. Leadership sometimes means knowing that the right direction may not always stay the right direction. Know when to turn.
- **Engage your passion and support** others doing likewise. Vestry members are asked to be intentional about the integration of the spiritual and secular. At its best, this means integrating one's passions and talents with the world's needs.
- **Don't leave your brain at the door.** The church tries to walk the line between contracts and covenant; between law and promise. There is wisdom in the practice to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”
- **Try something you've never done before.** Risk failure and hope for success. Vestry people are in a position to see the bigger picture. They can be more aware of more resources and a longer time frame. Take advantage of this privileged view.
- **Share your passions with others.** If you observe spiritual gifts in others, tell them. They may not have recognized them, or might be too afraid to trust them. Leadership is about giving people permission to be the people God calls them to be.
- **Pray and then get out of the way.** Prayer is a gift, whether offered silently or aloud. Don't expect clergy to be the designated prayers at every occasion; do expect prayers to be answered, however surprising those answers may seem. Leave room for grace. Make time and space for the Holy Spirit to weigh in on any given situation.
- **Exercise the Spirit's gifts**, those St. Paul describes in Galatians 5:22-23: “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”
- **Be concerned about the lives of your priests** — financially, emotionally, and spiritually. Too many congregations have had at least one bad priest in their history, which makes it difficult to trust them. On the other hand, every priest knows a priest who has had a bad experience with a “clergy killer” congregation.
- **Finally, remember Pope Gregory** who knew who was in charge with his nightly bedtime prayer, “God, your church needs you. Now, I'm going to bed.”



*A tip for Sunday morning:
Try to think about worship
and give thanks for what is
going well. Save Sundays
for celebrating the Good
News, both in your heart
and in your conversations.
Stay away from the
negative, especially
directly before or after
the service in rector/
laity conversations.*



'The Lord Broke Through'

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been too busy defending my position. No one felt comfortable opposing prayer, but I expect I wasn't the only one who didn't have much confidence in it just then. But we went around and around the table, each person asking for guidance, awkwardly and hesitantly in most cases. When the last one had prayed, someone said, "I think we can vote now." I wasn't sure about that, but everyone wanted to go home, so we proceeded to vote. The Head Start program was invited to meet in the church's house. The vote was eleven to one, and the one dissenter stormed out of the room and said he'd never return. He had been the largest contributor to the church's operating budget, but the other eleven said they weren't going to worry about it, and the following fall, pledges were up, even without that man's participation.

Prayer is something more than escapism

I got what I wanted that evening, but I hadn't done it myself and couldn't have done it myself. I had tried to win the day through my own force of persuasion, and all I had done was polarize the vestry. It was then I realized that prayer is something more than other-worldly escapism.

Despite what I learned that night, in later years I rarely suggested prayer to the vestries of the congregations I served. I felt that if I'd done so, I'd have been written off as a head-in-the-clouds idealist not to be taken seriously. Apart from a brief, formal opening invocation, vestry meetings typically consisted of hassles over money, property, and church politics during which no one gave a thought to praying.

Only in my last parish did prayer become part of the vestry agenda. That was also — and I think this is no coincidence — the parish where the vestry focused on mission and ministry rather than arguing.

We used the Psalms as a way to enter into prayer. At the beginning of each vestry meeting, we read a psalm or portion of a psalm, slowly, pausing a beat between verses. We then spent four minutes in silence as we each selected a word, phrase, or sentence from the psalm which spoke to us. Then each commented briefly on why those words had stood out for us and where we connected with them, either personally or as a parish or in the wider world. This not only focused the vestry on spiritual realities, but also gave each person a means to disengage from the concerns of the day and focus on what God wanted us to be and do together. We then prayed briefly and extemporaneously for one another, the parish, the wider church, and the world. After that, budgets, programs, and disagreements were handled amicably and without rancor.

Why did I so often neglect in later years the lesson I had learned in that little church in West Virginia? Why was I so skittish about praying with my vestry? Block-headedness, probably. But the Lord finally did break through to me, and by the end of my years in parish ministry, I often experienced vestry meetings as a blessing.

The Rev. Dr. Richard H. Schmidt is editor and director of Forward Movement Publications in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Featuring photos of congregations throughout the Church enriches each issue of Vestry Papers. If you have clear, well composed pictures which are 300 dpi (dots per inch) we would like to consider them for a future issue. Please send photos on a CD to Toni Daniels, ECF, 815 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017.



Beware a Theology of Entitlement

by Caroline Fairless

A young woman who has asked for a spot on a vestry agenda comes right to the point: "I speak for those of us who don't like the changes in the worship service."

A discussion follows, lengthy enough for the woman to become impatient. She then tosses out the zinger that is sure to knot the stomachs of all clergy and vestries. "These people have been here a long time. They are old and some are sick. Don't they deserve to have the kind of worship they want?"

It is a question that crosses the bounds of mere fear and resistance and longing. It is a question that falls within the embrace of a theology of entitlement.

And before a vestry can begin to address its response — which has, by the very quality of its being spoken aloud, placed the group on the horns of a familiar dilemma — two things are of critical importance:

- to examine the question itself;
- and to know the role of the vestry.

Look again at the question posed to the vestry. "Don't they deserve to have the kind of worship they want?"¹

Someone(s) in this congregation is entitled to what she wants, how she wants it, and when she wants it. Maybe she's sick, maybe she's been here a long time, maybe she's old, maybe she's wealthy. Whatever the reason, someone or other is entitled to have things the way she wants.

Spiritual disabling of the community

That is the underlying assumption that challenges our vestries: in our desire to honor age, longevity, fragility, a traditional way of doing things — or even money — can be swayed by the needs and desires of a few. Spiritual disabling of the community is often the result.

When entitlement is operative for the entitled few to have their way, it requires that others be disenfranchised. When entitlement is an active force, the body of Christ is unable to function according to the precepts of Jesus. In short, entitlement is antithetical to the teachings of Jesus.

Vestries and spiritual welfare

What about the second question, the role of vestries? Picture me, a second year seminarian, attending a session at the former College of Preachers in Washington D.C., and meeting, for the first time, a seminarian

from the Diocese of Iowa who, clearly (and with pride) had done his homework in the area of constitution and canons.

"In our diocese," he told me, "the first and most significant obligation of a vestry, is to attend to the spiritual welfare of the parish."² Apparently it impressed me, because in the more than twenty years that have followed, I've not forgotten it.

How would our various vestry experiences, for lay and ordained alike, differ from current practice, if the spiritual health of the congregation were our primary obligation?



And what bearing might that have on the question of entitlement?

This is worth repeating: Entitlement is antithetical to the Good News of Jesus. Period! Here's the irony: scratch the surface theology of any congregation anywhere, and you can expect agreement with that assertion, even as the behavior gives lie to it and undermines it.

So how does it happen that so many of our congregational decisions, particularly a small congregation's decisions, are based on a theology of entitlement, where those entitled are clearly the monied, the ones with longevity, the founding matriarchs and patriarchs, usually Anglo, never the children, never the teenagers, never the educators, never the imaginative, never

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Sometimes the most fun happens before the big services. Try helping get the church ready for Christmas. Lay down some straw for the Christmas pageant. Hang some greens on the door. Make sure the star lights up over the altar. It might be a nice change of pace.



Direct us, O God, in all our doings with your most gracious favor, and further us with your continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy Name, and finally, by your mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

-Book of Common Prayer, page 832

Real Sharing, Real Leadership

Just how does shared spiritual leadership take place? And what is it that a vestry member is supposed to do, anyhow? What follows is a suggested job description for all vestry members, (reprinted from the Vestry Resource Guide, published by the Episcopal Church Foundation). Detailed job descriptions for officers of the vestry can be found in the new Vestry Resource Guide. (Available from Forward Movement Publications, (800) 543-1813 or www.forwardmovement.org)

All vestry members should strive, to the best of their abilities, to:

- Have a love of God and demonstrate a commitment to following the way of Christ;
- Be active in and knowledgeable about the congregation, its programs and governance;
- Be fair, interact well with people and strive to earn the respect of the members of the congregation;
- Purposefully strive to “check one’s ego at the door”;
- Purposefully strive to be a servant of the people without the need to be the “most important person” in the congregation; or the need to be the one with the right answers to everything;
- Have enthusiasm and vitality for this ministry.

All vestry members should be able to make the following time commitments:

- Vestry meetings, committee work;
- Vestry retreat(s);
- Weekly worship services (rotating occasionally if more than one);
- Congregational events: coffee hours, meals, fundraisers, adult education programs, etc.;
- Diocesan meetings, as necessary;
- Annual meeting.

All vestry members are responsible for:

- Pledging financial support early in the stewardship campaign;
- Offering talents to support the congregation’s ministry;
- Praying daily for the rector, leaders and members of the congregation;
- Being active ministers of the Gospel in daily life and work;
- Bringing one’s whole self to the table; being present — mind, body, and spirit;
- Risking openness with one’s ideas, beliefs and desires.



Beware A Theology of Entitlement

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the newcomers? How does that happen; what does it cost? And how do our vestries collude?

Vestries collude with the best of intentions, the operative criteria being ideals such as honor and respect and a sense of the way things are supposed to be. Add to that list a desire to keep peace, held up as a potential stumbling block to a congregation's spiritual health.

Keeping peace may be dangerous

Keeping peace can be the better face on "making nice." And that is always dangerous to the vision and mission of a faith community.

Yet "making nice" as a vestry response to an assertion of entitlement, whether it's about worship, a food pantry, sanctuary or use of a new building, cannot be said to serve the spiritual well-being of a congregation.

Are the role and duties of most vestries ordered and prioritized in the way of the

Diocese of Iowa and those other dioceses which have caught this particular vision? No. Could they be, and ought they to be? Yes.

It would require significant re-imagining and re-visioning of vestry handbooks and the canons of the dioceses of our Church. It would require a different focus for education and formation.

But for better and worse, in this schismatic time of division and litigation and seemingly unabated turmoil, what better role could the vestries of our denomination embrace but that of the spiritual health and well-being of the congregations they serve?

The Rev. Caroline Fairless is an Episcopal priest and director of Children at Worship ~ Congregations in Bloom. She is the author of several books and educational resources. For more information: www.childrenatworship.org.

¹ For a clear and concise discussion of the emergent church, see *The Practicing Congregation* by Diana Butler Bass.

² See Iowa canon 25, Duty of the Vestry, Section 1 and Section 2, and note that the expected duties regarding legal and fiduciary duties are not named until Section 6.

For the full text of this article, go to www.episcopalfoundation.org and click on the Vestry Papers link.



*Have a blessed Advent
and joyous Christmas
from the staff of Vestry
Papers.*





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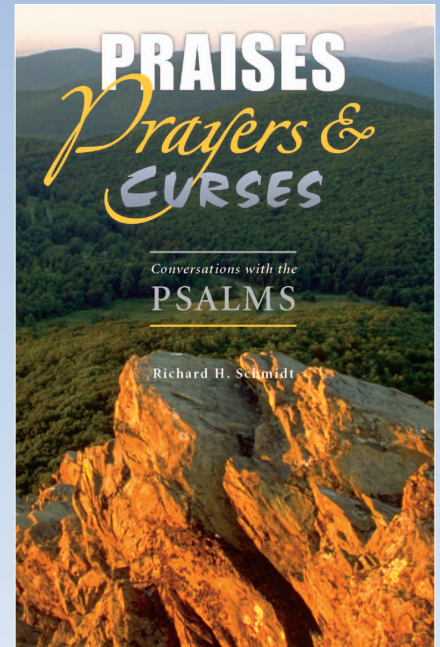
Reader's Corner

"Faithful living has a tentative quality to it. We must do our best and provide for the future, but always remember that what we anticipate may not come to pass, and if it does, it will almost certainly be with surprising twists," says Richard Schmidt in his award-winning book, *Praises, Prayers & Curses*.

Whether those twists are in parish life or in the life of the reader, this 311-page book is an apt guide, offering a short meditation on all 150 psalms in the Bible.

"The Psalter contains every possible human emotion, from the lofty to the base, from the noble to the disgusting," says Schmidt. "Whatever I am feeling, I can always find a psalmist who understands. The psalmists have become my companions, both in sadness and in joy, in anger and in gratitude. Whatever happens to me, I can always say, 'I am not the first to have walked this way. The psalmist has already been here.'"

Schmidt's book may be read individually or in groups. Suggestions are also given as to how vestries might begin meetings with a psalm and have a brief theological discussion before getting into the work of the evening.

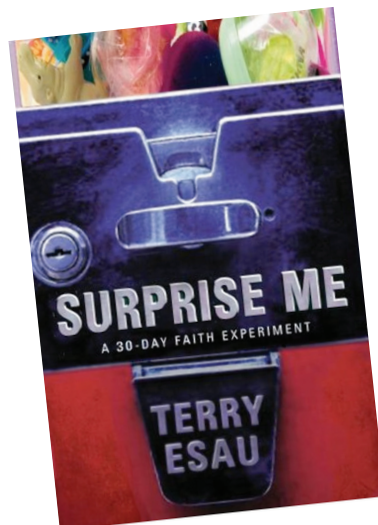


"Let your soul dance around the words and phrases and do not restrain your mind from wandering where it will," says Schmidt. "Sometimes the most unlikely connections prove the most fruitful for meditation."

Available from Forward Movement Publications. \$15.95. (800) 543-1813 or www.forwardmovement.org

Other Good Picks

Meditations for Vestry Members by Colleen McMahon. This honest little book has become a classic for vestries. Makes a good gift for new members. (Morehouse)



Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons by Frederick Buechner. Spend fifteen minutes a day with this compendium of meditative sermons by one of the best-loved figures in contemporary Christianity. (HarperSanFrancisco)

Surprise Me, God: A 30-Day Faith Experiment by Terry Esau. Approach your spiritual life with a new commitment: Invite God to surprise you each day. Join the author as he reflects on his experiment and encourages readers to do the same. (NavPress)

The Friendship of Women: The Hidden Tradition of the Bible by Joan Chittister. Explore the meaning of sacred friendship through the stories of biblical women. (BlueBridge)