

Small and Rural Churches

July 2017

Facebook for Small Churches

Jenny Shutt

Editor's Note: To read some of Jenny's wonderful posts, be sure to visit the St. John's Episcopal Church in Bedford Facebook Page - [@stjohnsbedford](#)

I'm the Parish Administrator for St. John's Episcopal Church in Bedford, Virginia. St. John's is small but vibrant. It's full of the kind of people you want to live next door to. Young people and old. Parents and grandparents, teenagers and toddlers. There's a little bit of every kind of person here.

I came to St. John's in 2008 looking for a part-time job that would allow me to tend to my (then) newborn son while also contributing to my family's financial well-being. When I started working at St. John's there was a website but no social media presence. It seemed like a good idea to keep up with the times and meet the people where they were: online.

Managing the professional presence on social media was not in my original job description, but as with any job, time marches on and the duties have evolved to reflect the changing times. I was never asked to "do" social media but someone has to do it, and there aren't a lot of options. So, you know, you just get done what needs to be done.

Setting the ground rules

I started enthusiastically. I set up a Facebook page. And a Twitter account. And an Instagram account. And...I soon realized I was going to have time for only ONE of those. I can't "do" Instagram from a desktop; it's just not designed that way. I don't really like Twitter as it feels like a hurricane in a bathtub in there. Too many voices and not enough complete sentences. So, I chose to focus on Facebook. I already had a personal account there, I understood how it worked, many of our members used it, and it was simplest for me.

Our church had no set policy about social media usage, and since St. John's has such a small staff, there continues to be no set "rules" other than my self-imposed guidelines:

1. Be kind
2. Don't post anything that portrays the church in a negative light
3. Avoid politics. At.all.costs.

The first year or so that the page was active, I did my best to follow the unwritten "Facebook rules of growing a page". That is, I kept the posts short and to the point. I always included a picture. And I tried very hard to maintain a consistent posting schedule with no long gaps between posts.

What I found was that:

1. I felt stressed if I couldn't post regularly enough
2. The page grew to only include people already associated with St. John's
3. There was no interaction at all on any posts
4. The page looked just like every other church Facebook page in existence. It was, in a word, a bit dull.

What works for you?

Like many small churches, there is no budget at St. John's for advertising of any kind, so I couldn't make use of Facebook's advertising to boost our page metrics and interactions. Instead, I began thinking about ways to make better use of social media as a tool. I looked at what several other really successful pages that I found interesting were doing. I also looked at what folks responded to on my personal page.

I also began to think about what I would like the St. John's Facebook page to accomplish. Was it going to simply be a vehicle for sharing coming events with the established congregation? Should it have broader appeal? If we were seeking a broader appeal, what would that look like? And how would I measure the success of the page?

Based on my (admittedly limited) research, I thought humor might work well. People like to laugh. I'm not terribly funny, but I do like to write, and so I started making up longer vignettes that tied in-however remotely-to whatever was going on at St. John's. I quickly noted that liking to write does not automatically translate to "good" writing. I ultimately focused on telling a story with each post. I included bad-dad puns (You know the ones: "have you heard of those new corduroy pillows? They're making headlines.") Yeah, I know, it's bad. But it also makes you smile. I included plenty of pop-culture references whenever possible to make up for the noticeable deficiency in actual jokes, and to give folks something to relate to. I let go of feeling as though I had to publish something regularly, and just did what I could, when I could, or when I felt creative.

Measure successes, incorporating feedback

In just a couple of months the page grew from under 100 followers to nearly 200, and it currently has a following of 269. While I wouldn't call that wildly successful, for a church with an average Sunday attendance of 77, that's not too bad.

Is the page successful? I don't know. I know our page metrics regularly rival those of other area churches with 2-5 times our following. I know we get more page visits and more interaction than we had before.

Success for our page isn't going to look like success for a Facebook page at a church with a congregation of 8,000, no matter how witty I am. And that's not really what it's all about anyway. I usually gauge whether or not the page is "successful" in any given week if I get just one like or share from someone who is *not* a member of St. John's.

Though most of the feedback I received was positive, several folks did not care for the new style. There was (and there continues to be) a minor generational disconnect, which is difficult to overcome. Some folks didn't like the first-person perspective, and others just couldn't connect because they had no idea who I was.

My writing style is very informal, and doesn't appeal to everyone. But then, social media is informal. It's the modern day equivalent of a backyard barbecue, but without the food. And like any good barbecue, there should be plenty of vibrant conversation, hopefully with people who aren't all exactly the same.

It was (and is) hard to address all the complaints perfectly, and it certainly caused me some consternation for a while. While I thought I was being amusing and injecting some fun, others thought I was being too casual. I did however, make a few adjustments.

I occasionally include a more formal-sounding post to reach those who prefer that style, or simply because the topic requires it.

While I love sharing puns and jokes, I reined it in a tiny bit. There's a very, very fine line between hilarious and "inappropriate when it comes to jokes and church. Navigating that line is bit like walking a tight rope over a surging sea of hedgehogs. It won't kill you if you fall, but it will certainly be unpleasant.

Make it personal

What I enjoy the most is sharing personal stories from around the parish. My favorites are when I can shine a light on someone in the parish who has gone above and beyond in their service. We had a bird trapped in a drain pipe outside my office one day and I was able to use that as a post to highlight two of our dedicated members who rescued it from certain demise. It was one of our most-liked posts. Second only to a post about pie.

Special Events (or regular events) happening around the parish also make good posts. We don't have special events every week, but those obviously make great posts. I like to come up with new ways to invite people to worship at St. John's during our regular worship services too. It gets me thinking creatively about what others might find appealing about our parish.

I stuck with the first person perspective though for a couple of reasons. While I recognize that writing in the first person probably makes me sound self-involved, it serves my purposes by allowing the reader to get to know me personally, and it is that personal connection that hopefully draws readers back again. Like most novice writers, it's also "easiest" for me. When I'm constrained by time, whatever is simplest and flows fastest is what ends up on social media.

I also started "signing" my posts. Because the Rector also posts on the page, and because several people asked, I started including my first name at the end of each of my posts as a way to connect better with my readers. I also regularly include information about me in my posts and sometimes throw in a picture so that people can get to know me, and put a face to the page.

As with any job, there are times when things are less busy and other times when the hours fly by. I use the slow time to make notes about ideas for posts. Though I'm generally much more creative in the spur of the moment, I do find having a few ideas prepared makes things faster. Most of my posts take no more than 10-20 minutes to compose. If I'm really struggling, I usually just decide it isn't meant to be

and move on with my day. I often use posting to Facebook as a mid-morning break from my usual routine. The creativity allows me to come back to my other duties with energy.

Finding a voice for your page that works for your congregation can be a challenge. But it can also be fun, engaging and worthwhile. Try it and see.

Jenny Shutt is the Parish Administrator at [St. John's Episcopal Church](#) in Bedford, Indiana.

Resources

- [Episcopal Communicators](#) website
- Episcopal Communicators [Facebook page](#)
- [Anglican/Episcopal Rural Churches Facebook Group](#)
- [Using Instagram Effectively for Church](#) by Charis Bhagianathan, Vestry Papers, November 2016
- [Social Media Campaigns](#) by Charis Bhagianathan, Vestry Papers, November 2016
- [Follow-up: St. Paul's Open Letter to Presiding Bishop Curry](#) by Linda Buskirk, ECF Vital Practices Blog

Sent Out Two by Two

Kimberlee Auletta and Sarah Kooperkamp

Editor's Note: This article is written in first-person narrative by the authors, accurately presenting their experience in their own voice.

In 2013, newly ordained and a mother of two children under four, Kimberlee Auletta was appointed to serve three-quarter time as priest in charge of a church in the South Midwood section of Brooklyn, New York. In 2014, Sarah Kooperkamp, with a newborn and having served as an associate priest, was appointed to serve three-quarter time as priest in charge of a church in Windsor Terrace Brooklyn. Over the next two years, the two spoke two to three times a week about the challenges they faced in their under-resourced, under-staffed, struggling churches with great potential – the challenges of loneliness, building repairs, low budgets, dysfunctional church-family systems that had been left to flourish under prior priests, and disempowered, unhealthy lay leadership. They thought back to their time together at Union Theological Seminary and the collaborative spirit that was fostered there; they talked about their desire for discipleship and transformation in their own lives and in the lives of their parishioners; and they couldn't see, being so exhausted and overwhelmed, how being solo pastors would let them get beyond the challenges that were crippling them to the joy of spreading and living out the Good News.

And then in Winter 2016, while Sarah was on maternity leave and as Kimberlee left her parish, they were given a gift.

Kimberlee: I knew for my own health, my relationship with my husband, and for my children, I had to finally leave the parish I was at. I knew I didn't want to be a solo pastor again. More importantly, I wanted to work collaboratively to build a church of disciples. Sarah and I had been talking for over two years about how much more fun, joyful, creative and productive we would be if we could work together. After being alone for three years, I knew whatever I was giving up being the one "in charge" would be worth it in order to work with someone who I deeply respect and felt I could partner with for many years to come.

Sarah: I had thought after being an associate priest that I wanted to be in charge. Or that I wanted some autonomy. And I did like many aspects of being the solo priest-in-charge at Holy Apostles, but I also felt like I wasn't fully functioning. I knew I could be a better priest and have a more balanced life. I felt like I wasn't able to plan, to teach, to think big. I wasn't even praying enough. I realized that my problem

hadn't been autonomy; I came to see that what I had really wanted was collaboration. When Kimberlee and I thought about working together the thing I worried most about was my own ego. I was already here at Holy Apostles and I wondered if I really could share and give up my own sense of "I am helping grow this church" and "I am the priest."

Bishop Lawrence Provenzano listened to their proposal about being co-Priests-in-Charge, each continuing serving three-quarter time so that they could be the priests, moms, partners, and people they hoped they could be and believed God wished for them. Bishop Provenzano was willing to invest and take a chance on this new shared model of ministry.

Five months in: More fun, more prayer, more time for Jesus

Kimberlee: I get excited almost every day coming to church now, especially Sunday. There is a lot to do but it doesn't feel overwhelming. I feel that I am working hard but it's so much more rewarding. We have more time to brainstorm, to plan, to talk about God's call for our community and to pray. Praying is central to our partnership. Jesus is central to our partnership. While that might seem basic, when I was alone, it was easy to forget that and just get caught up in the busy-ness and the business of church.

Sarah: Since the day I arrived here three years ago, Holy Apostles has been a welcoming, Spirit-filled place, just waiting to welcome people from the neighborhood and beyond. But I had never had the time or energy, dealing with building issues and just week-to-week tasks, to help the congregation turn that welcoming spirit outward. And now I am not alone in a basement office hoping that a parishioner might drop by just so that there would be someone to talk to. I am engaged in constant creative conversations where new ideas develop and new thoughts occur to me – ones that I can follow through on with a partner. I am able through talking and praying to better understand what God is doing in my life, and more ready to share that good news.

Decisions big and small

Sarah: But who is in charge? People wanted to know when we began. God! Jesus! We gave all kinds of great answers. Both of us! And that's really been true. We get to talk a lot and figure it out together. It feels a lot less random than decisions used to feel for me. I still go home thinking of work--but it is less dreading carrying the weight and more a feeling of wanting to continue the discussion. The hard stuff is still hard but I don't feel overwhelmed by it or alone in it anymore.

Kimberlee: When I was alone, decisions were much more difficult to make – or I made them in a vacuum. Folks, especially our clergy colleagues, had a hard time understanding that Sarah and I were going to make decisions together, that one of us didn't have the final say but that we were going to work through and model what partnership really is. It's not always easy and we don't always agree, but I always trust that we make space for each other and for God to be heard in our process.

Ultimately, Sarah and Kimberlee hope they are modeling the type of shared ministry for their parishioners they believe Jesus calls us all to.

Kimberlee Auletta and Sarah Kooperkamp are co-Priests-in-charge at [Church of the Holy Apostles](#) in Brooklyn, NY.

Resources

- [Equal Partners](#) by Donald Romanik, Vestry Papers, July 2013
- [From Challenge to Opportunity](#) by Susan Elliott, Vestry Papers, May 2016
- [Shared Leadership](#) by Beckett Stokes, Vestry Papers, July 2014

- [By-laws & Shared Ministry, Part 1: Unburdening the Vestry](#) by Greg Syler, ECF Vital Practices Blog
- [By-laws & Shared Ministry, Part 2: The Difference Between Vestry and Congregation](#) by Greg Syler, ECF Vital Practices Blog
- [Bylaws & Shared Ministry, Part 3: Entrusting and Empowering Parish Staff](#) by Greg Syler, ECF Vital Practices Blog

Church Administration and the Diocese

Martha Goodwill

Only three people attended the last diocesan workshop I hosted. I expected ten, which would not have been a big group, but would have represented at least half of the churches in our diocese that are using QuickBooks. In the end, the group of three was small but mighty because we learned a lot from each other. I was able to answer some basic accounting questions, but the help they provided each other was the real support.

My job title is Parish Administration Resource. What is that? Well, I am a resource for parish administration. Any questions that a church might have about the financial side of managing church operations, I am their resource. I, as well as everyone on the bishop's staff, serve the churches in our diocese. Our goal is to make the administrative responsibilities of the church less burdensome and to be their support so they can go about the business of being church to each other and to the world. Through this work, I have been blessed to know so many clergy and laity who are devoted to the Episcopal Church, to our Diocese, and to their parish. Many of our parishes are struggling and through my job, I can help get them financially stable enough to remain viable.

Learning from each other

Our staff offers many workshops to our churches throughout the year. For me, I always start my workshops off by saying to everyone, “We learn best when we learn from each other.” I am prepared with information to share, but the questions asked and the answers given by the attendees are what make the workshops truly useful.

Our small churches generally have part-time priests and part-time or no staff. Because of this, parishioners must fill in some of the gaps in many areas of church operations. The diocesan staff can support small churches uniquely by being their help desk. We offer workshops on audits, parochial reports, budgeting, website maintenance, and communications – almost any area where we see a need. We also offer an annual vestry retreat, where vestries can meet together as a church but also benefit from hearing about best practices in other churches. And, all of us are available for questions by phone or email at any time.

Not alone

The most valuable support the diocesan office can provide, however, is in helping our small churches realize they aren’t alone in their part-time circumstances. When these church leaders come together, they build their own support community. They share best practices with each other. They network so they have others of whom to ask questions. Sometime I feel that the participants at our workshops are just waiting for the next break so they can have the time to talk to their peers. Yes, we provide useful information, but the real learning comes from interaction with those doing the same job in another church.

The diocesan office is always there to answer questions and provide resources, and to underpin the operations of the church. My hope is that by being the support, the church will be free to go into the world and do the work that God has called us all to do.

Martha Goodwill has worked for the [Diocese of Southwest Florida](#) for four years as Parish Administration Resource. In this role she supports the parishes in her diocese by being the resource for all parish administration questions. Martha is also the Diocesan Coordinator for Education for Ministry.

Resources

- [Who Can You Call?](#) by Chris Meyer, Vestry Papers, May 2014
- [Administrator's & Treasurer's Lunches](#) by Nancy James and Ann Turne, Vestry Papers, November 2015
- [Forms and Publications](#) from the Church Pension Group
- Manual of Business Methods in Church Affairs, [English](#) and [Spanish](#)

Reimagining Leadership in Small and Rural Churches

Kelsey Schuster, Susan Daughtry and Karen Olson

In the Episcopal Church in Minnesota (ECMN), we're seeking to change the narrative on leadership by living into the ministry of all the baptized.

For us, that means welcoming a sense of holy creativity and communal discernment to the process of choosing a ministry model that fits for each faith community.

The first step in this process is communal discernment. This discernment is deeply rooted in uncovering the gifts and missional work of each faith community, and using holy listening to sit with the question of how God might be calling them collectively into action in their community.

We rely on asset-mapping to help discover the gifts, resources, time and talent that God has given each individual and the faith community to steward. In the midst of that process is an opportunity to think creatively about how the life and work of the church needs to be pastored, and how that faith community will meet its needs for lay and ordained roles.

Christ Episcopal Church in Austin, Minnesota has lived out this discernment process. They had been drawing heavily on their endowment in order to sustain the employment of a full-time rector for the church, and it became obvious that this was going to be unsustainable if the practice continued.

So, Christ Church engaged in a discernment process in which they identified their gifts and developed a model of ministry that was based on those gifts and that helped the church live out its ministry and mission.

The model they use relies on non-stipendiary leadership – a priest that engaged in formation and ordination locally, along with a team of lay leaders. The lay leaders organize several commissions that include a broad group of individuals in the church to oversee and lead the mission and ministry work.

In order for the team at Christ Church in Austin to live out this model, they needed to be able to access formation and ordination processes that addressed the barriers of time, geography and economics. They couldn't be expected to quit their jobs and move away for that formation; it needed to happen while they were still living in their community and ministering with their church.

The work of the [ECMN School for Formation](#) centers on building opportunities for teams like Christ Church to get the skills they need to do the ministry they are called to do. The School for Formation contracts with professionals and experts from around Minnesota and around the country to offer courses, workshops and resources that are available online to everyone in ECMN.

Churches of all shapes and sizes benefit from this local formation, but it's particularly useful for those who are doing their ministry in small communities, far from the opportunities available in metro areas.

By offering courses online, the School for Formation is able to mitigate the amount of time and energy we expect leaders from smaller and more rural faith communities to invest in order to access the resources they need. By offering opportunities to gather together with leaders near them for in-person workshop days, we help to create a thriving network of local leadership, one that supports and shares resources between faith communities.

We are aware that more work needs to be done as we continue to discern the needs of leaders in faith communities across Minnesota and address barriers to formation. Yet we are on the road, journeying towards becoming the church that God is calling us to be in the places that we have been planted.

Kelsey Schuster is the Missioner for Communication, Susan Daughtry is the Missioner for Formation and Karen Olson is the Missioner for Ministry with the [Episcopal Church in Minnesota](#). Their work centers on providing resources that support faith communities across the state, and strengthening the connective tissue that binds us together.

Resources

- [Episcopal Church in Minnesota \(ECMN\) School for Formation](#)
- [Episcopal Church in Minnesota website](#)
- [Shared Leadership](#) by Beckett Stokes, Vestry Papers, July 2014
- [I'm Excited to See the Potential in the Rural Church](#) by Peter Doddema, ECF Vital Practices Blog
- [Preparing for Lay Only Leadership](#) by Heather Barta, Vestry Papers May 2015