

Vestry Essentials

January-February 2018

The Vocational Vestry

Alissa Newton

What if we looked at service on the vestry as a vocation? I ask this question often when working with vestries or Bishop's committees as part of my consulting work with congregations. What is your vocational call to this vestry? How do your unique skills, gifts and passions fit with the work that God is calling your vestry and your congregation to do? Often these questions are met with blank stares from clergy and lay folk alike, because we are not used to thinking about the work of the vestry as part of our call to Christian life. Vestry is where we do other work, like deciding which ministry gets funding next year, listening to treasurer's reports and deciding about budgets. For some congregations, finding people to serve on the vestry is difficult, for others it is overly political or it features the same faces, cycling in and out, year after year. I remember one person saying to me at a retreat I was facilitating, "It's not like this is a *ministry* ministry. I mean, what we do is just make the other ministries possible." And yet, what if approaching vestry service as a vocational call deepened the spiritual experience and produced more healthy, faithful and effective vestry teams?

"Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need." Anyone who has been anywhere near an ordination process in the Episcopal Church has read, heard, preached or pontificated on this quote from Frederick Buechner. It's a line that resonates with those of us

looking to be engaged in meaningful work—this idea that perhaps the call of God in our Christian faith is a call into something that will be both satisfying to the person called and meaningful to the world we serve. Unfortunately, while we apply this concept liberally to the spiritual work of listening and responding to God in Christian community, it is rare in my experience to see it applied by vestries and Bishop’s committees.

But what if we did? What would change about the approach to leadership and management that vestry and bishop’s committees engage in if the practical and concrete tasks assigned to these bodies by our canons were framed in the language and spirituality of responding to God’s call? In my experience, this can take a vestry or Bishop’s committee from drudgery to purpose, from mere committee work to a group that not only leads and works well together, but is a site of transformation and development for individual members, as well leaders of this sort of transformation in congregations.

Here are three places to start:

As you prepare to elect new members, invite individual and spiritual discernment

If vestry service is part of a vocational call, then discernment is needed before, during and after an individual’s term takes place. This past year at St. Columba’s, where I serve as vicar, we began to pray and discern who may be called to serve on the Bishop’s committee in late summer, and we invited individuals to consider this call prayerfully over the course of several weeks. This may be way more (or less) lead time than some congregations need—but whatever the process of invitation and election to vestry, consider framing it as a spiritual discernment. This means using the language of discernment and call, offering opportunities for prayer and discussion to individuals considering the call to vestry leadership and holding elections in a way that recognizes the movement of the Holy Spirit in and through communal listening and action. This approach might also mean finding a way to commission your vestry for this work with

prayer—during a Sunday morning liturgy, for example, or at the annual meeting. This will not only influence the way new members see their work, but also send a message about how seriously and spiritually your congregation takes the work of administration, vision and finances.

Develop mutual ministry goals focused on the individual call of vestry members, as well as the work of the whole committee

One of the tasks that I am often asked to help new vestries with is the development of mutual ministry goals. In the Diocese of Olympia, where I work, this commonly means finding goals for the coming year that are necessary and important for moving the vestry's work forward *and* that require mutual effort by both vestry and clergy leadership. So for example, "vicar has coffee with each visitor" would not be a mutual goal, because it only requires action on the part of the vicar. In the same vein, goals that do not require participation or oversight by the rector or vicar would not be good candidates for a mutual ministry goal.

In this work, I focus on both the communal work at hand and the individual investment in each goal developed. Often I will ask vestry members to spend time in prayer and reflection to discern precisely how they plan to invest in the goals at hand. They are given questions like: "Which of these goals calls to me?" "How am I specifically called to invest my limited time and energy to help move these goals forward in the next year?" After some time alone for discernment, followed by discussion in twos and threes, they return and share what they have discerned with the group. The result is vestry members who have thoughtfully discerned and openly committed to particular tasks within the general work of the vestry. They can move forward with a greater degree of accountability and a stronger sense of individual purpose and ownership.

Recognize the sacramental/transformational potential of your vestry

As Christians in the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement, we believe that there is potential for Christ to fill all things and to inhabit each everyday moment in a way that makes it sacred. We live out this belief every Sunday around the table of the Eucharist, a mystery that feeds us spiritually and reminds us that in any place where two or three are gathered, Jesus is also there somehow. I believe that the vestry and Bishop's committee are primary sites for the transformation and renewal of our congregations and the individuals within them.

Much of what transforms and renews the people in our congregations are the dynamics of community—how money is dealt with, what happens when there is conflict, how crisis is dealt with, how practical decisions are made. These are all issues that often end up discussed, decided, prayed over and discerned by the vestry. Imagine what might change if we begin to truly treat our vestries and Bishop's committees as people doing sacred work, called there by God, and vital to sharing the Good News in our world. Imagine what it could be like for vestry members to experience their service as the chance to live out a vocational call and to grow deeper in their walk with God through their service.

It would mean vestry that is not a chore or a business, but a real part of God's gathered body. It would mean vestry as a wellspring of transformation for the individuals serving, the congregations being led, and the communities they serve. It would mean that serving on vestry can become one way to change the world.

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Resources

- Surviving and Thriving in Community by Br. Curtis Almquist, SSJE, Vestry Papers, May 2017
- Leadership in Community: A Dance of Mutual Love by Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE, Vestry Papers, January 2015
- Vestry as Body of Christ by Ken Howard, Vestry Papers January 2013

Five Things Every Vestry Member Should Know

Donald V. Romanik

We are living in an incredibly challenging time in our nation and in our world. Many people are disillusioned with what's happening in wider society and are looking for some sense of meaning and connection. As local faith communities, we can help serve this critical role as we attempt to preach, teach and live out the good news of the Gospel. But in order to do this as effectively and comprehensively as possible, we need to raise up, empower and deploy faithful and committed leaders who will ensure that our congregations are ready, willing and able to engage in this critical work of reconciliation. And, in our Anglican/Episcopal tradition, the primary group of leaders charged with this task is the vestry.

Before I became President of the Episcopal Church Foundation (ECF) in 2005, I had served on vestries (or their equivalent) in a family-size parish as well as the cathedral in the Diocese of Connecticut for almost twenty years. I also served as warden (or its equivalent) in both congregations, including times of transition. My vestry service was interesting, challenging and rewarding—and at times, frustrating, exhausting and overwhelming. Nevertheless, the total experience has shaped my overall leadership style and has been a critical formational

component in my role as head of an organization that supports vestry members and other lay and clergy leaders of Episcopal congregations of all sizes and shapes. I look back on my vestry service with fondness and gratitude.

While ECF provides a myriad of tools and resources for parish leaders, especially vestries, I thought it might be helpful to articulate five things that I think every vestry member should know, whether brand new or a long-time veteran. These ideas are based on my own experience and observations as well as my contacts and interactions with faithful vestry members from all parts of our beloved Episcopal Church. I trust you will find them both helpful and provocative.

1. *You are engaged holy and important work.* Contrary to the traditional concept of the role of vestries, it's not just about the budget, the buildings or the boiler. Vestry service is a whole lot more. In essence, the vestry, in partnership with the rector or priest in charge, is responsible for overseeing the spiritual, missional, strategic, administrative and fiduciary aspects of the congregation. While particular individuals, especially the clergy, are charged with specific roles and responsibilities, the work of a vestry is a team effort with mutual accountability. It is holistic and comprehensive.
2. *You represent the entire faith community.* Despite your personal involvement in specific ministries or programs, e.g., choir, altar guild or outreach, as a vestry member you must represent the entire congregation and cannot serve as an advocate or spokesperson for a particular constituency, activity or special interest group. When making tough decisions, you need to consider the total needs of the congregation from a missional and strategic point of view, especially when it comes to issues of budgets or allocation of resources.
3. *Don't leave your brain at the door.* When you serve on a vestry, you should bring the totality of your prior experiences to the table, whether personal, familial, spiritual or vocational. Don't be afraid to share your expertise or insights, especially in complex or technical areas. Your feedback is important. At the same time, realize that as part of a

team you must listen to other voices even those who may not have the same background or point of view as yours.

4. *Use this experience to enhance your own spirituality.* While you have important business to conduct, your primary role is to discern and implement what God is calling your congregation to be and do in a particular time and place. And this can only happen if the vestry, as a whole as well as its individual members, engage in regular and ongoing spiritual practices that include worship, prayer, Bible study, retreats and sharing individual faith stories. Your vestry experience should be a unique opportunity to become more spiritually grounded and help advance your lifelong journey toward discipleship.
5. *Remember that you're not alone.* Vestry service should not be an isolating or lonely experience even when dealing with critical issues or serious conflict. First of all, remember that God is an important part of the equation. That is why spiritual practices should be a regular part of vestry meetings and other gatherings. You also have each other—fellow parishioners, who, like you, are contributing their time, talent and treasure for the good of the community. Trust in yourself and each other. You also have outside resources to assist you with your work, including other parishes, diocesan officials and yes, the Episcopal Church Foundation (ECF). As you live into your mission, remember that ECF is here to walk alongside you on this important journey of faith and commitment.

I also want to suggest that vestry service needs to be personally fulfilling, life-giving and fun. It is an awesome responsibility to lead a congregation, especially in times when diminishing numbers and resources often create anxiety and stress. But these are also times of incredible opportunities for innovation and new ways of being the Body of Christ. All of us have very busy lives and lots of demands on our time and energy, but if you can bring a sense of joy and wonder to your work on the vestry, you will be doing a great service for yourself, your family and the entire congregation.

Donald V. Romanik is president of the Episcopal Church Foundation. He is a strong advocate and proponent of lay leadership and the ministry of all the baptized and frequently writes and speaks on topics relating to leadership and resource development for Episcopal communities of faith.

Resources

- Q&A with Donald Romanik on What New Vestry Members Should Know an ECF online Q&A session, February 1, 2018
- You're a New Warden: Now What? by Donald V. Romanik, Vestry Papers, January 2009
- Lessons From a Senior Warden by Anne Rudacille Schmidt, Vestry Papers, January 2017
- Vestry Covenants and Norms, includes examples of norms and covenants from various Episcopal congregations
- Vestry Resource Guide, an ECF publication on vestry service and leadership (Forward Movement, 2015)

Vestry Covenants

Susan Pinkerton

St. Swithen's church parking lot: It is late in the evening after a long vestry meeting. The meeting went overtime due to an emotionally charged discussion about a recent bequest—a grand piano from the estate of an elderly member, an unexpected but graciously received gift. Early on it became evident that several vestry members have differing views about how the piano should be used. Sally, a long-time choir member serving her third year on the vestry, calls out to Henry as he walks to his car.

Sally: Henry, do you have a few minutes? I'm furious how this meeting went tonight. I can't believe that our senior warden suggested donating this beautiful piano to a nursing home. What a ridiculous idea! He has no appreciation for our music program. Just because he can't carry a tune does not give him the right to discard an incredible gift. He's out of touch with what this church really needs. If you let him know that some people are upset, he'll listen to you.

Henry: Hi Sally. I had no idea you were angry about tonight's discussion. I'm not sure the warden will listen to me, since I'm a new vestry member. Why don't I send him an email to let him know how you feel? See you Sunday.

Sound familiar? "Parking lot conversations" are as much a part of church life as the Sunday morning coffee hour. However, these informal, private conversations can do great harm. They may seem innocuous, but things begin to surface when there is anxiety in the congregation's leadership. It is no longer about the piano but about more substantive, unresolved issues that have been festering—and sometimes for a very long time.

Unfortunately, Sally has put Henry in a sticky situation by asking him to speak to the warden about how upset some people are. It is likely that nothing will come of this conversation but hurt feelings and mistrust.

As spiritual leaders, we are often caught off-guard, finding ourselves in awkward situations and unsure of how to handle them. Practical tools and guidelines, like the vestry covenant, can help us navigate these sometimes turbulent waters in our congregations.

A valuable tool for your vestry toolbox, a vestry covenant can help members:

- Explore the dynamics of their relationships with one another

- Facilitate healthy and open communication
- Eliminate the negative behaviors that derail necessary and robust conversations

In recent years, many vestries have adopted the vestry covenant as their standard for healthy leadership. These covenants provide the cornerstone for building a trusting and viable community of spiritual leaders.

Biblical examples of leadership often involve covenants and have been around since the days of Abraham, Moses and Noah when God used them to establish a relationship with God's people. Jesus himself is the fulfillment of the New Covenant. He is our model for leadership and how to do this good and holy work of building healthy, life-giving relationships.

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus uses parables to teach the importance of loving relationships. He models what we call "good communication skills," by being truly present and listening to those around him. Paul's letters to struggling communities are powerful reminders of what it means to live as Jesus lives. They encourage us as leaders to be "an example to believers in speech, life, love and purity" (1 Timothy 4:12).

Covenants provide for accountability while building relationships based on love, trust and respect. Both are essential in creating a safe environment that fosters trust and confidentiality, whatever our differences.

So how does a vestry go about making a covenant that is not just another well-meaning project that ends up on the shelf collecting dust? Below are some suggestions to consider in drafting your vestry covenant:

- Love one another, speaking the truth in love
- Treat each other with respect, despite differences

- Deal with conflict by speaking first to the individual
- Strive for unity in seeking God's will in all things
- Be a living example of faithfulness through study, worship, giving and prayer
- Respect confidential issues

Just as important as the covenant itself is the process of drafting the document. The entire vestry should be involved and each member encouraged to contribute his or her ideas. It is a good practice to review the covenant annually and ask for input from new vestry members. The overall goal is to create a culture of openness.

This process takes time, and there will be mistakes along the way. Persistence will pay off as vestry members experience the value of working together, setting an example for each other and the entire parish as they strive to be the living Body of Christ. And it begins with simply loving our neighbors as ourselves, as Jesus taught us.

If St. Swithen's had a vestry covenant, the parking lot conversation might have gone a bit differently:

Sally: Hi Henry. I'm not happy with the way the meeting went tonight. I think I will give the warden a call tomorrow to discuss it. This is an important issue for me.

Henry: I can see that you are upset. I am sure the warden will appreciate your letting him know how you feel. Thanks for sharing your concerns. See you Sunday.

***The Rev. Susan Pinkerton** is Rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in West Hartford, CT. After graduating from Berkeley School of Divinity at Yale University, Susan entered ordained ministry following a successful career as a trial attorney. She has served on staff at Trinity Wall Street in Manhattan; St. Mark's on Capitol Hill in Washington DC; the Church of the Holy Spirit, Lake Forest, Illinois; and as interim rector at St. Paul's, Peoria, Illinois, the former Cathedral of the*

Diocese of Quincy. Susan also serves as a transition consultant for the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. As a “military brat” who has lived all over the world, Susan claims Washington, DC as her hometown. When time permits, she enjoys being with her three adult daughters and their families, including her three wonderful grandchildren. Traveling internationally, kayaking and reading are favorite pastimes.

Much of this material is taken from “Vestry 301: Communication & Vestry Covenants,” a presentation given on April 1, 2017, at the Diocese of Connecticut’s annual Spring Training and Gathering

Resources

The Vestry Resource Guide - This tremendous resource to help newly elected vestry members learn their responsibilities includes a sample vestry covenant. Published by the Episcopal Church Foundation, it is available from Forward Movement Publications. www.forwardmovement.org

How to Hit the Ground Running - A Quick Start Guide for Congregations with New Leadership. This convenient, step-by-step workbook for a new rectors, wardens and vestries in congregations in transition covers the period from one month prior to a new leader’s arrival through the first eighteen months of the new ministry. www.churchpublishing.org

- Vestry Covenants and Norms, includes examples of norms and covenants from various Episcopal congregations
- Vestry Covenants: A Great Start to 2017 an ECF webinar led by Miguel Escobar and Brendon Hunter, January 24, 2017

- No More Parking Lot Conversations by Nancy Davidge, Vestry Papers, May 2011
- Norms & Covenants: Tools to Strengthen Your Team by Nancy Davidge, Vestry Papers, January 2016
- Covenants in Congregational Life by Thomas Brackett, Vestry Papers January 2011

Top Ten Resources for Vestry Members

Brendon Hunter

Are you a new or returning vestry member this year? Looking for tools and resources to help you and your fellow vestry members? Here is a list of resources for your vestry toolbox that we at the Episcopal Church Foundation (ECF) believe to be particularly helpful.

1. Vestry Resource Guide

The Vestry Resource Guide is the essential guide for leadership in an Episcopal congregation, no matter what the size, location or demographics are for your church. Chapters include the ministry of the vestry, vision and strategic thinking and clergy transition. Included are some helpful templates for job descriptions, a commissioning liturgy and suggested *Vestry Papers* articles that share how congregations have lived out the topic being addressed.

The *Vestry Resource Guide* is available in print and e-book and in English and Spanish.

2. Your congregation and community demographics

The Episcopal Church provides a great resource through the Office of Research with statistical data on every Episcopal congregation. There, you can find a handy chart that shows your congregation's average Sunday attendance (also known as ASA), baptized membership and pledge and plate numbers for the previous eleven years. The information is taken from your annual parochial report. You can also download your community demographic data there. A

free report, provided each year by the Episcopal Church, the Community Profile provides demographic information based on a three-mile radius around your church. Some congregations will find it more useful than others, but why not see what you can glean from it?

3. Vestry Papers

Subscribe to *Vestry Papers* and receive free articles, tools and resources for congregational leaders, written and composed by your peers in throughout the Church. In January and February, the focus is always on vestries, and the September and October issue is always on stewardship. [Click here to view previous issues.](#) The Vital Practices digest, sent out each month, features a topic related to congregational life and offers a curated list of the best resources from the archives of ECF Vital Practices. [Click here for the digest archive.](#)

4. Your parish by-laws, diocesan canons and state nonprofit laws

Do you know if your congregation has by-laws? If you don't, try asking another congregation in your diocese and state for a copy of theirs. Contact your diocese for the most recent version of your diocesan canons, too. Why is this important? Your congregation must abide by your state's nonprofit laws and diocesan canons. Typically, diocesan canons cover most, if not everything, needed to comply with state nonprofit laws. Get to know what's in your by-laws, and consider whether it's time to update them to reflect the current reality of the congregation.

5. Basics of parish finance

Whether or not you're the treasurer of your congregation, it's important to understand the basics of your congregation's finances. Watch the video of Basics of Parish Finance and read Basics of Church Financial Reporting - Part 1 and Part 2 for an orientation to the essentials of parish finances. The vestry has the legal obligation to present and pass a budget annually. Typically, a treasurer's report is presented at each vestry meeting, either by consent agenda or at the end of the meeting.

6. Vestry norms and covenant

ECF recommends that every vestry establish norms and a covenant. Norms refer to procedures. A covenant is concerned with behavior. A few examples can be found at this link on ECF Vital Practices. Also consider doing an Internet search on “Episcopal vestry norms” and “Episcopal vestry covenant” for ideas and potential templates for your own congregation.

7. *Manual of Church Practices in Business Affairs*

This guide, issued by the Episcopal Church, sets the standards for business practices for all Episcopal congregations. Chapters include internal controls, taxes and audit guidelines. At the back of the manual, there is a useful guide for document retention, so be sure to check this first before deciding whether or not to shred those old files in the parish office.

8. History of your congregation and community

You may be surprised at what you can learn about your congregation today from its history and its community. Why do you do certain things? Where did certain traditions come from? Why are some things readily changed while others cause consternation? All are contained in your congregation’s history. Consider ways to share the history of your congregation, its milestones and leaders from years past. Who had the vision to plant your church where it is? Who gave the generous gifts that beautify and enrich the sanctuary? The National Episcopal Historians and Archivists also has publications if you’re looking to start an archive or publish a history of your congregation.

9. Diocesan Safe Church policies

It’s important that all employees and leaders in your congregation are aware of and have received safe church policies and training from the diocese. Safe church generally refers to sexual misconduct training for both children and adults. Each diocese has its own set of requirements, but typically all vestry members are required to receive safe church training. Your insurance, whether from Church Insurance or another agency, may also require this.

Consider updating your by-laws and orientation materials if this requirement is not already noted.

10. Job descriptions

Clear expectations start with descriptions of the responsibilities of vestry members, including those with specific roles like the treasurer and senior warden and extending to the congregation's staff. Is there a personnel file with a signed copy for each staff member? Has everyone running for the vestry received a copy of the job description before deciding to run? Some resources that can be helpful are this article on the role of the rector or vicar and the *Vestry Resource Guide* for specific roles like senior warden. You can also check with other congregations, whether by Internet search or calling a neighboring congregation.

A bonus eleventh resource:

11. Bible and *Book of Common Prayer*

Last but certainly not least, every church leader, whether ordained or lay, needs to be engaged with the Bible. Consider having a Bible study at the beginning of each vestry meeting. It can be as simple as selecting a passage from one of the scriptures from the Daily Office for that day. Forward Movement's Daily Prayer, Satucket's The Lectionary and Mission St. Clare provide easy access to these readings. Also consider how your personal devotional practice might help ground you as a leader in the Church. Keep a copy of the *Book of Common Prayer* handy and draw from the great assortment of prayers that begin on page 814 for vestry meetings. You can also access the *Book of Common Prayer* online at this link.

What are your essential vestry resources? Comment below or send us an email. If you have any questions or need to find a specific resource, please contact us at the Episcopal Church Foundation, 800-697-2858 or ecf@episcopalfoundation.org.

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Resources

- Vestry Orientation an ECF webinar presented by Miguel Escobar and Brendon Hunter, January 14, 2016
- Top Ten Traits of a Terrific Vestry Member by Linda Buskirk, ECF Vital Practices Blog, February 9, 2017
- Top 10 Resources for Vestries by Bronwyn Clark Skov, Vestry Papers, May 2009
- My Top Ten: Vestry Responsibilities by Scott Evenbeck, Vestry Papers, September 2003

What Do You Think You're Doing?

Laurie Brock

God, apparently, is not a fan of solo artists.

Moses is over-functioning—hearing all manner of complaints from the people of Israel, solving their problems, planning a youth group mission trip, and all while creating the perfect, orthodox yet contemporary, lively and exciting but also contemplative, worship service that will satisfy everyone. That's when Jethro, his father-in-law, asks him, "What do you think you're doing?"

Moses has a perfectly logical answer. His answer is the answer I've heard for decades in the church: "Well, because stuff needs to be done and I have to do it. If I don't do it, no one will."

Jethro is not convinced, and neither is God. Jethro tells Moses, “The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.”

The work of God is joint effort

We are part of a community, a group, brought together in life and love to do the work of God in the world. While we all have our individual gifts, the work of the church, the assembly of the people of God, is ours together.

Our culture, however, has a different image. The enduring myth of the solitary cowboy who tangles with the Wild West and saves the day might make for entertaining movies, but it is unhelpful and even dangerous for our faith communities.

And yet, how often do we in our churches look to someone, or a group of someones, to save us from our challenges and conflicts. We look to *someone* to grow our church, balance our budgets, bring in more young families, energize outreach—to do whatever we’re convinced will fix the thing about which we’re anxious.

And often enough, a ‘someone’ shows up to try. We call a new rector or we hire a new staff member. Or we elect a new, energetic person or persons to vestry.

Yay! Now all shall be well, and we can go about our business while that person saves the day.

“Not so fast,” the voice of God catches us before we get out the door and into the parking lot.

Living our faith is not about delegating the work to someone else, but about joining together—all of us together—to do the work of God in the world, in our communities, and in our churches. *We* are responsible for the work.

Moses is not the only leader to over-function

Vestries are the elected leaders of a congregation with stated responsibilities to oversee the church’s financial and property matters, but also, along with the clergy, to be the congregation’s leaders. Many vestries pick up the mantle of Moses, and not in the great leader way, but like the Moses confronted by Jethro, who was trying to do everything. These vestries try to do it all, from worrying about the budget to planning the music for Sundays to taking out the trash.

This is called over-functioning, an attempt to do everything for everybody and be all things to all people. When I’ve worked with church vestries, I’ve often seen this pattern of vestry behavior in congregations where attendance and leadership fall into the category of family or pastoral sized churches. Many of these vestries serve churches with a part-time or volunteer

clergy leader. To meet expectations, they find themselves responsible for more of the day-to-day operations of the church. After all, we have to have Sunday worship and do outreach and have a children's ministry and a youth ministry and a full choir and eight Bible studies and Vacation Bible School, and...

And I always ask, "Do you?"

Over-functioning is a response to anxiety, and as our churches shift and change, we can become anxious. The church of our childhood is not the church of the here and now. Our faith has changed from its inception. We follow a living God. Trying to hold together a church modeled on yesteryear inevitably produces anxiety, because we often find ourselves responding to the needs of ghosts of the past instead of engaging the disciples of the present.

Figure out God's call for today—and then share responsibility

A reality for the church of the present is that we are not called to do everything and we are not called to keep every ministry the church has ever done on life support. We are called to do the things God is calling us to do as disciples, where we are now. And we are called to share the responsibility.

What are your church's responsibilities? As a vestry member, answering this question means (inspired by a wonderful insight from Twelve Step Spirituality) making a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves as a faith community as we are now instead of who we were in the past. Some questions a vestry can ask to make this fearless inventory include:

- **Identifying the community in which your church is located.** Has the population shifted? What are the demographics? What are the needs of a community? What outreach ministries are other churches in the area doing that likely don't need to be duplicated?
- **Assessing the resources of the church as they are now.** Has church attendance increased or decreased? What about clergy leadership? What about the budget—how has it changed over the last decade? What are the needs of the people who are worshipping with us now, not those who worshipped with us in the past?
- **Taking a fearless look at ministries.** How long have they been in existence? Are the same people involved or are new people invested in them? Are we continuing to do these ministries because we've always done it this way?

Jethro and God realize something Moses doesn't. If he's the only one doing everything, he's not allowing anyone else to engage in ministry. And when the vestry of a church does everything, they aren't allowing the wider congregation to be disciples. Their over-functioning is preventing disciples from living out their own Baptismal Covenant, and that is not a role of the vestry.

God is not a fan of solo artists. God wants all of us to be engaged and active in ministry. Vestries, as elected leaders of a congregation, are in a good position to recognize that the task of discipleship is not to be done alone, but with all who have promised to share the Gospel.

The Rev. Laurie Brock serves as the rector of St. Michael the Archangel Episcopal Church in Lexington, Kentucky and is delighted to serve in a diocese and parish where she can cheer for the Alabama Crimson Tide in football and the Kentucky Wildcats in basketball. She blogs at [Dirty Sexy Ministry](#) and is the co-author of *[Where God Hides Holiness: Thoughts on Grief, Joy and the Search for Fabulous Heels](#)* (Church Publishing). She frequently shares her quirky, snarky views on faith and popular culture on Twitter at [@drtysxyministry](#), but don't follow unless you can laugh at yourself and your religion. Otherwise, you'll just be offended. When she's not doing priest things, she is riding horses or texting other fabulous women priests about which *True Blood* character would be the perfect clergy spouse.

Resources

- Giving Up Sabotage for Lent - for a more in-depth reflection on group and individual responses to anxiety, including overfunctioning.
- Moving Back into the Neighborhood - a workbook with ways to discover how God is present in your neighborhoods and how you can join your neighbors.
- Studying Your Congregation and Community - the Episcopal Church's demographic information about dioceses, churches, and communities. A worthwhile site to visit.

Learning To Be the People of God—In Two Languages

Sandra Montes

This article is also available in Spanish [here](#). Este artículo está disponible en español [aquí](#).

When I was 18 years old, I was invited to be part of the vestry. At that time, we had an English-speaking congregation and a Spanish-speaking congregation. I quickly realized that I had been invited only because I was one of the fully bilingual people in my church. I would have liked to have known the Episcopal Church and the role of the vestry better. Today there are more churches with mixed vestries (English/Spanish). And, thank God, there are many resources. I asked a few people with experience on mixed vestries to name some issues they faced and describe what has been helpful.

Building relationships across cultures is key

In some congregations, English speakers seem to be more engaged and arrive at vestry meetings on time. Latinos do not always arrive on time, and sometimes forget they have meetings and miss them. In other churches, the English-speaking members are elderly, and it is

the Latinos, who are more dedicated, active and involved. Sometimes Latinos cannot attend meetings because they work at night, have small children or have no way to get to the church.

Most congregations find that a mixed vestry is very difficult at first. The English-speakers—even those who were not opposed to including Latinos—are used to controlling the meetings, making decisions and doing things as they've always been done. But, as the Rev. Dr. Miguel Rosada of St. Luke's in Jacksonville, Florida, says, "When we get involved in prayer, humor and friendship, it can be a great blessing." The Rev. Bill Laucher of St. Alban's in Houston, Texas, agrees. He says the most important thing is to take the time to get to know each other better, especially when you are an Anglo priest serving in a Latino community. He suggests that the vestry have a retreat where they can spend the first few hours sharing personal stories, so they can see that even though they are from different cultures, they are people and have much in common.

Translating materials and discussions fosters full participation

The Rev. Martir Vasquez of St. Andrew's in Glendale, Arizona, says that in his more than 12 years of bilingual meetings, vestry members found that translating the minutes and agenda was best for the development of the meeting—even though meetings ran longer. Every four months, his vestry does not have a business meeting. They have a Bible study instead, and it is more interactive. "To practice tolerance and patience," he writes, "the current vestry has representation from three cultures: Anglo, Hispanic and Navajo. A member who is not bilingual sits with a person who translates simultaneously."

The Rev. John Rawlinson says that his vestry meetings and minutes have been bilingual since the church's first mixed vestry. If it is done in one language, it is done in both, is their firm policy. "We are the people of God, in two languages" is their mantra. In the beginning, he often had to raise his hand and say, "Pause, translation" in English or Spanish. Little by little, translation became normal, as the English speakers learned that their Hispanic members had good ideas and useful experiences that could serve the entire congregation.

Karen Phillips Cassedy, Senior Warden at St. Matthew's/San Mateo in Hyattsville, Maryland, explains that her vestry has been bilingual since 2011, when the church joined with a Spanish-speaking congregation. Although Cassedy is not bilingual, she observes people during meetings to see that everyone understands. She says when somebody doesn't understand, they stop and translate discussions into both languages, so the whole board is clear about the conversation. "Although it takes more time, it is worth it," she says. "The rewards of having a bilingual board are great. We can get to know each other thoroughly and feel like a community when we work together."

Mildred Briones Reyes used to attend St. Matthew's/San Mateo, and her mother serves on its vestry. She explains that the church's bylaws had to be rewritten to be inclusive, because they did not have a model to follow. With a warden representing each of the church's two congregations, it is very important that they work well together. It's been a learning

opportunity for the congregation's Latino community, who now ask questions or request that something to be repeated, when they do not understand what has been said.

Encouragement and good advice from leaders in congregations with mixed vestries

The Rev. Ale Trillos of St. Andrew's, Yonkers, in New York, gives us five tips:

- Create a mutual agreement, and return to it whenever necessary
- Translate all documents before each meeting
- Speak slowly
- Be aware of the time; if possible, use alarms
- Do the collects/prayers in both languages

The Rev. Juan Monge of All Saint's in Lakewood, New Jersey, says that to have a bilingual vestry you have to: be patient, remain open to new things, never stop learning or teaching and, above all, pray without ceasing—before, during and after each meeting. He says that a pastor never ceases to be a teacher and has to keep his or her eyes and heart open to the needs of the congregation. "I'm always attentive to the issues that can hurt us," he says, "and I look for resources and tools that can teach us ways to overcome them."

Almost all the people I heard from shared these recommendations:

- Translate minutes and reports, and distribute them before the meeting.
- Even when people are bilingual, a bilingual summary of what was discussed and agreed should be given.
- In general, Latinos often cannot attend vestry meetings because of their work schedules or because they do not have childcare. If you want to have a bilingual vestry, try to have the vestry meeting at a day and time that will work for all members and provide childcare.
- Our cultures are very different (even in the Latino community), so provide many opportunities to get to know each other through activities like meals, retreats and Bible studies.
- Most Latinos come from the Roman Catholic Church, where they have not had the opportunity to give their opinions or to make decisions that affect the church community, so you have to give them many opportunities to learn the way the Episcopal Church functions.
- Communication is key, and the vestry should know how to contact one another (email, telephone, social media) so that the whole vestry feels comfortable, included and listened to.
- Remember that you are doing God's work. Always return to the mission that God has for the entire Church.

Sandra Montes is ECF's Spanish Language Resources Consultant. She serves the Church as musician, translator, speaker, consultant and writer. Sandra taught for 21 years in public education and has a doctorate in education.

Resources

- [Multilingual Leadership and Multicultural Churches](#) by Sandra Montes, Vestry Papers, July 2015
- [Lift Every Voice](#) by Anna Olson, Vestry Papers, January 2015
- [Struggling to Become a Multicultural Church](#) by Miguel Escobar, ECF Vital Practices Blog, June 7, 2011
- [The journey & struggle to become a multiethnic, multicultural church: Anthony Guillén & All Saints Episcopal Church, Oxnard, CA](#), a video by James Ault

Today's Vestry Challenge: Keep It Simple and Nimble

Randy Ferebee

Editor's note: This article is an (edited) excerpt from Randy Ferebee's book, [Cultivating the Missional Church: New Soil for Growing Vestries and Leaders](#).

At a 2010 meeting of the Episcopal Church's Executive Council, Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori said "We need a system that is more nimble, that is more able to respond to change," calling for "a more responsive and adaptable and less rigid set of systems."¹

As the church evolved, it took on more and more of the marks of an institution. Structures and rules were put in place to govern the behavior of those who banded together in congregations. This evolution was often marked with a movement from simplicity to greater and greater complexity. In Acts 6 we have the story the church uses to support the ordination of deacons. There was a need, and in short order the apostles set apart seven men to minister to the need. Today the path to ordination as a deacon, be it a vocational deacon or a deacon who is preparing for ordination to the priesthood, is complex and elaborate.

Take any process that the local, diocesan, or national expression of church engages over time, and the normal track is that the processes move more and more in the direction of complexity and regulation.² In the governance function of the vestry, it is helpful that all process be as nimble, responsible, and as useful as possible. Remember the axiom "keep it simple"? The best approach is often the most straightforward and simple path.

Finding a true and simple path through the governance thicket

Some, perhaps much, of the vestry's encounter with inherited governing processes might not be, as yet, nimble and responsive. It is necessary to consider what the church's laws, called canons, expect and how vestries honor their responsibility. Leadership bodies who are redefining themselves to be effective in this new age are finding ways to honor the important truth conveyed in the law by returning to or discovering ways that are more straightforward and less cumbersome.

Though there may be local or diocesan variances in governing law, vestries are "selected,"³ according to the national canons, to tend to the temporal (or worldly) affairs of the church alongside the clergy who are to tend to the spiritual affairs of the church. This distinction is clean only on paper. In reality, both worldly and spiritual things are the concern of all leaders.

The worldly functions include tending the buildings and grounds, maintaining proper stewardship of all funds, stewarding annual giving and spending, making reports to the diocese and governmental entities, care of the temporal needs of a rector (or equivalent), auditing all financial and physical assets at least annually, and, when necessary, calling a new rector or vicar. The vestry is also responsible for keeping and preserving the minutes of its meetings; this is normally designated to a secretary or clerk. The vestry is the legal representative of the congregation.

Any of these actions that can, should be delegated to others who have a special calling or expertise. The vestry gratefully receives their gifts of time and talent, and then takes necessary action. In doing so the vestry utilizes a classic Anglican bit of wisdom called "subsidiarity." A simple definition is that the vestry takes on only those tasks that cannot be performed effectively by others. An example is having a person skilled in finances manage an audit or bookkeeping or cost estimating, and report to the vestry for any needed action. When delegated, the vestry should trust the person(s) to whom the ministry has been entrusted.

The vestry in its governing responsibility is accountable for compliance with all applicable rules and regulations. These include the national canons (laws) of the Episcopal Church, the canons and policies of the diocese, and the bylaws and formal or informal policy of the local congregation. So that these responsibilities do not surprise anyone who serves on a vestry, an annual review of all governing rules should be engaged by the vestry, normally upon the seating of new members.⁴ These principles should be readily available at any meeting.

In general, the overtly governmental functions should claim only a small minority of the vestry's meeting time. It may be helpful to appoint someone as a process observer to monitor meetings and time discussions in order to bring all vestry work into balance. "A congregation easily becomes an end in its own mind—recruiting people to an empty discipleship of committee service, finance, and building maintenance. Institutional maintenance is a necessary, but

ultimately secondary, function of a congregation. If souls are not transformed and the world is not healed, the congregation fails, no matter what the treasurer reports.”⁵

The real work of the vestry

If the vestry is not a board of directors managing the temporal affairs and keeping the rules and regulations as a primary function, what should a vestry be? Beyond the governance of a congregation lies the larger horizon of where God is calling those in your faith community as they are formed as disciples of Jesus Christ. Congregations are unique and gifted collections of people endowed with abilities and talents that, when aggregated, offer God both voice and hands to accomplish the ongoing work of making whole that which is broken.

The major work of the vestry, which transforms governance into a generative, sense-making experience, is to create a frame of reference through which leaders process all governing issues and challenges. The output of such a process both builds health in individual members and energizes a congregation to move forward with a growing capacity for participation in the reign of God.

Much of the time the vestry spends together has this purpose: How do we make God present in our families, our neighborhood, our town, and our world? As each vestry discerns its own unique answer to this question, it opens the ministry to everyone while helping to create a meaningful path through the complex adaptive changes every community needs to negotiate.

1 Mary Frances Schjonberg, “Presiding Bishop Warns Executive Council of ‘Suicide by Governance,’” Episcopal News Service (Oct. 24, 2010).

2 This is true in virtually every human process, not just the church!

3 Note well that the word used for choosing members of the vestry in our national canons is selected. This word use is intentional. Vestries have canonical permission to explore many options of bringing leaders to service as members of the vestry.

4 A suggestion: in advance of this discussion give each member a succinctly worded document that contains all governing rules.

5 Dan Hotchkiss, *Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), Kindle Edition 477–79.

Randy Ferebee is a retired priest in the Diocese of Western North Carolina. Currently he is helping restart an Episcopal Church in Myrtle Beach, SC. He is a founding director of Epiphany Institute + Consulting and was instrumental in helping the Episcopal Church Foundation establish an alliance with Kanuga Conference Center to offer the annual Church Leadership Conference. Dr. Ferebee is the author of Cultivating the Missional Church (Morehouse/Church Publishing, 2012).

Resources

- Cultivating the Missional Church, Randy Ferebee (Morehouse/Church Publishing, 2012)

- Vestry Orientation, an ECF webinar led by Donald Romanik and Brendon Hunter, January 11, 2017
- A Suggested Order of Meeting (for Vestry Meetings), ECF Vital Practices tool
- Reframe Vestry Meetings by Randy Ferebee, Vestry Papers, January 2013

Church Finance: Where Endurance Matters

Robert Button

Some folks see serving their church in a financial capacity as boring or mundane. Many who love our wonderful liturgies and extraordinary music on Sundays have no desire to deal with the 'gory details' of budgets and finance. What they may not realize is the satisfaction that comes with knowing that your service is necessary and its results lasting.

I'm serving on my church's vestry for the second time in ten years. Between vestry terms, I was parish treasurer for seven years. Over these almost thirteen years I have seen the value, importance and, yes, the spiritual fulfillment of dealing with the day-to-day operating problems and financial challenges faced by an Episcopal congregation.

During this period, we have engaged in a major capital campaign to expand our church plant, built and installed a magnificent new organ and established an outreach fund. We took on substantial debt to complete this campaign, which a second capital campaign paid off. We have also installed a new rector and seen our annual budget grow to almost \$2 million. Being part of all this has brought emotional highs and lows, as well as intellectual and spiritual challenges. But above all, I am amazed at the quality and humility of the people with whom I have served.

If you are currently serving (or considering serving) as a vestry member or treasurer, here are some thoughts on financial topics that you will likely encounter over time.

Stewardship and budgeting

There is always the age-old challenge of creating and funding the annual operating budget. How do you inspire people to pledge to that budget with the same enthusiasm they display for an exciting capital campaign? Don't we give impassioned speeches each year about the electric bill, the air conditioning units that may fail at any time and the potentially leaky roofs? Our messaging suggests that the place will fall apart without your pledge. Then the next year comes around, and it turns out that the electricity has stayed on, the air conditioning kept working and the roof didn't leak after all.

We are at some level the child who cried wolf (though we could always have an ‘air conditioning free’ Sunday in August to drive home the importance of maintaining that system). There is no magic answer except to continue communicating how important it is to fund the church’s day-to-day operations. Mundane as it may seem, funding operations is a catalyst for fulfilling our mission to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Beyond the current moment, if we do not maintain our facilities, young families will look for a better environment for their children, imperiling the long-term future of our churches.

The annual budget is a challenge as well. No matter how much your revenue grows, expenses can appear to grow even faster. I have seen up close the challenge in church budgeting, which is to come as close as possible to breaking even. If revenue exceeds expenses by too much, you may have short-changed valuable ministry options. If expenses exceed revenue, you will have to use limited savings—or even borrow funds—to bridge the gap. With a \$2 million budget, missing the mark by just three percent either way is a swing of \$60,000, a daunting amount for even financially blessed congregations.

This is why it is critical to have a committee of knowledgeable, dedicated people to monitor budgeted vs. actual results for the line items on your church’s monthly statements. If you have a financial or accounting background, you can offer no greater service than to volunteer for this sometimes thankless and often invisible job.

Capital campaigns

The good news is that it is often easier to raise large sums quickly for exciting new projects like an organ or a new building than for routine operations. The bad news is that you will likely need every penny raised as costs rise higher than anticipated. Financial and budgeting abilities are as essential as fundraising skills in capital campaigns. Monthly reports that give pledged amounts, amounts actually received, current expenditures budgeted, and current actual expenditures are imperative.

Internal control and audits

Good financial stewardship is an absolute requirement, and separating the various duties as much as possible is key. The treasurer *reports* on the finances of the church. Others should be designated to actually *handle* the money—making deposits, counting cash from the offering and signing checks. More than one person should be involved, especially in the disbursement of funds. Proper internal controls ensure that donations are used as intended and that the long-term financial health of the church is on solid ground.

An audit should be conducted annually. If your church is large enough to warrant additional oversight, a public accounting firm should be retained. The vestry should carefully review the audit report and implement its recommendations where possible. If your diocese facilitates the sharing of knowledge among congregations, I recommend taking advantage of this resource. I

wonder how much reinventing the wheel might be avoided if church treasurers and business managers shared ideas on a regular basis.

The long view

Without proper financial stewardship, your church wouldn't simply be different— it wouldn't exist at all. Working with your church's finances is unlikely to be a flashy sprint, but to steal from the Epistle, it can make you a marathoner, who runs with endurance the race set before you. So dive in and crunch those numbers with passion. You won't be sorry, and neither will your parish!

Robert Button is a vestry member at the *Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration* in Dallas, Texas. He works as a Senior Project Manager at Thomson Reuters and is a Certified Public Accountant.

Resources

- Lessons from a Rookie Treasurer by Tyler D. Schleicher, Vestry Papers, May 2014
- Manual of Business Methods in Church Affairs published by the Episcopal Church
- Accounting Software: Finding the Right Fit by Phyllis Jones, Vestry Papers, May 2014
- Basics of Church Financial Reporting - Part 1 by Jerry Keucher, Vestry Papers, March 2017
- Basics of Church Financial Reporting - Part 2 by Jerry Keucher, Vestry Papers, March 2017
- Fearless Finances - Parish Budgets an ECF webinar presented by Donald Romanik and Jerry Keucher, October 13, 2016

Misa Magdalena is the answer to prayer

Sarah Lamming

This article is also available in Spanish here. Este artículo está disponible en español aquí.

For seventeen years, Martha came faithfully to St. Mary Magdalene's Church, where I serve as priest-in-charge, in the Diocese of Washington. For seventeen years, she knelt down and prayed to the Lord that the church would start a service in Spanish. Since the 1980's, St. Mary Magdalene has been a multicultural congregation with members from over twenty countries,

but up until this past year, the majority spoke English as their primary language. Throughout those seventeen years, Martha was the only member from Guatemala and the only person whose first language was Spanish, despite the growing number of Latinos in the surrounding community.

In 2017, Martha's prayers were answered.

From quiet service to leadership

First, the Diocesan Missioner for Latino and Hispanic Ministry, the Rev. Sarabeth Goodwin, was invited to plant a new Spanish-speaking community at St. Mary Magdalene. The seed group for Misa Magdalena held their first service on New Year's Day, 2017. Then in March, we learned that the Diocese of Washington had received a grant from the Episcopal Church to help launch the new ministry. Misa Magdalena grew quickly, from an average of 15 people each week to over 50.

Martha would not have predicted that she would accept a leadership role when this Spanish language service finally began. When I first arrived at St. Mary Magdalene's, she was the quiet lady who knelt in the fourth row from the back at the 10:30 am service. Now, she is an advocate and vestry liaison for our new Spanish-speaking community.

Martha had been asked to serve on the vestry twice in the past. Each time she refused, believing that the members of the vestry would not understand her English and that it would be difficult to understand what was going on. Instead, she offered to serve on the Altar Guild and then as a counter, ministries that allowed her to serve the church without having to speak up too much. She was also a member of the Thrift Store volunteers, a Daughter of the King and taught Sunday School for a number of years.

When Misa Magdalena was launched, she was asked again to serve on Mary Magdalene's vestry. This time, she said yes.

Positive structural changes and mentoring assist the transition to vestry leadership

Some internal changes were needed to ensure that her voice would be heard at the table. The first steps were to address some structural and governance issues. The bylaws required vestry members to also chair a committee or ministry area. I wondered if this might be limiting the growth of potential ministries and preventing new people from stepping up to serve on the vestry. From what I was able to learn, the nine vestry positions mostly rotated among a core group of fifteen people. Once we set aside the committee chair requirement, the door was open for new people to serve.

It was also important that Martha not be the only new member on the vestry. Instead, there would be a group learning together. The senior warden, who had helped steer the church through a challenging time, was stepping down and wondering how she could be helpful in new

ways. The executive committee decided that she could serve as “wisdom bearer” for the vestry and mentor its three new members. In that new role, she has gone through [ECF’s Vestry Resource Guide](#) with Martha, highlighting important sections. She also calls Martha before meetings to talk through agenda items and provide some context for the ways the vestry operates.

This mentoring has been transformative for Martha. The vestry practices the model of mutual invitation. Each person who speaks invites someone who has not spoken to speak next, so that everyone is heard. Martha was reluctant to participate in discussion at first, but her voice grows stronger at every meeting. Through the mentoring she has received, her willingness to bring her whole self to the vestry and the joy we experience in serving together, we are all thriving.

God’s plan, all along, for Martha and for St. Mary Magdalene

Years ago, feeling alone, Martha tried to join another Latino Episcopal church in the diocese. The priest there told her to return to St. Mary Magdalene, that God had plans for her. Those plans continue to be revealed in beautiful ways.

Martha wanted one of the other founding members of Misa Magdalena to be the Latino representative on the vestry, and maybe in time he will take on that role. But this is her time. That she is known in the congregation, continues to attend both English and Spanish services and has served in a variety of roles, gives her insight into the church and has enabled her to be a bridge builder in the growing relationship between the two communities. The [Vestry Resource Guide](#) gave her a tool kit to help her understand the vestry’s role in governance, and her mentor gave her confidence and helped her see that she has a place in the leadership of this church. Through additional [ECF training days](#) and support from the Diocese of Washington, she is becoming a faithful member of the vestry and helping guide the church into the future.

The Rev. Sarah Lamming is Priest-in-Charge at the Episcopal Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Resources

- [Vestry Resource Guide](#) (Forward Movement, 2015)
- [Leadership from the Pews](#) by Maria Eugenia Giraldo, Vestry Papers, May 2015
- [Trust the Process](#) by Jade Mohorko Ortiz, Vestry Papers, January 2017