

VESTRY PAPERS

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To inspire, affirm and inform Episcopal leaders in their work

Cultivating a culture of discernment

by Blair Pogue

The leadership and oversight of faith communities is critically important. Yet churches too often have vestry members functioning as operations managers, or advocates for a particular committee or project, rather than as spiritual leaders called to focus on the big picture.

The role of vestry members is rarely understood as that of encouraging and cultivating ongoing congregation-wide conversations about what God might be up to in the church and neighborhood. But when vestry members are recruited for their leadership gifts, and when their role is defined as the congregation's spiritual leaders working as a discernment team with their clergy, the results tell the story.

As Patrick Kiefert points out in his book, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era*, the old ways of doing things no longer work. Strategic five and ten year plans no longer

make sense because we have no idea what our community or world will look like in five or ten years. What is needed is continual, faithful listening to God's leading and our changing world. *In such a climate, the most fruitful way a vestry and congregation can operate is like a sailboat — rather than a corporate board — alert and nimble enough to move quickly so they can catch the changing winds of what Kiefert calls the "Holy Gust" or Ghost.*

Vestry and clergy as a discernment team

At St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, we've been on a journey of re-envisioning the role of the vestry over the last five years. And while our vestry still fulfills its canonical responsibilities for overseeing the budget and buildings, the canons' distinction between authority over

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*This Issue:
Discernment & Imagination*

To what extent is the breath of the Spirit blowing in your congregation? Are there steps you could take to better experience the process of creative discernment? Understood as the ability to detect and respond to the Spirit through prayerful reflection and imagination, discernment is an essential tool for both congregations and individuals in the 21st century. Here, four writers hit the topic of discernment from several angles.

*Inside:
Discerning youthful calls*





Vestry Papers was honored to receive two Polly Bond awards from the Episcopal Communicators this spring for high standards in religious journalism. Over the past nine years, Vestry Papers has received over thirty awards from the Associated Church Press and the Episcopal Communicators. Look for an expanded e-presence in the fall.

Discerning individual gifts on the vestry...

by John de Beer

I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, in all humility and gentleness. (Ephesians 4:1)

How do you understand your purpose as a vestry member? The parish elected you. Does this mean that God has called you? How do you know what God wants of you during your term on the vestry – or in the rest of your life? To think about these questions I like to visualize God's call as a bridge connecting me with the world.

This framework builds on James Fowler's work in *Weaving the New Creation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

The Love of God

The Creator knows each one of you by name, formed you in your mother's womb, and calls you as partners. (Psalm 139)

Don is in his eighties. For much of his life he has been thinking, I don't know what God wants of me. What is my purpose in life? Finally I said to him, "It seems to me that before you can hear God's call you need to trust that God loves you." In the following weeks he became less anxious and even agreed to be nominated as a vestry member. By his own report he is less reactive and more open-hearted. He welcomes young couples who are coming to the parish. His newfound serenity was only deepened by a recent heart attack.

Gifts

What you do well and love doing are gifts from God. (1 Corinthians 12:1-12)

Catherine was senior warden when I first came to St. Mark's. Her gifts in project management, communication and leadership development had been crucial in helping the parish weather a stormy period. She was an invaluable partner as I began to implement KLESIS, the formation program designed to strengthen the sense of call of each person in the congregation. She mobilized the vestry to be a recruiting team for the first six week course, and forty-three parishioners stayed for two hours each Sunday after the service (our average Sunday attendance is seventy-five). Catherine continues to strengthen pastoral care and our outreach into the wider community.

Passions

Your passionate response to the needs of the world can guide you to what God wants for you. (Exodus 2:11 – 3:10)

Shirley is the current senior warden. During the last months of her husband's life, she visited him faithfully in a local nursing home. She learned to advocate for him, making sure that the staff gave him the care

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A culture of discernment

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spiritual matters (rector) and temporal matters (vestry) seems less and less helpful.

In order to be faithful to God's leading, we have invited vestry members to understand their role as that of a spiritual discernment team.

To this end, our vestry began a regular practice of prayer, and at least twenty minutes of "dwelling in scripture" at the

to has evolved from an occasional activity to our primary calling and focus. In order to enable our vestry to focus on the larger, more complex adaptive challenges our faith community faces, we raised up a management team composed of people in our church with expertise in business and human resources. They are able to take many operational items off the vestry's plate so the vestry can focus on big-picture issues. We also tried to bump

When we listen attentively to scripture in community, the Holy Spirit shows up.



beginning of each meeting. This involves listening to a biblical text and sharing where our imaginations are "caught" or "captured" by a particular passage. When we listen attentively to scripture in community, the Holy Spirit shows up. It does not require a biblical expert; over time the biblical stories become our stories.

While some vestry members initially looked at their feet in awkward silence, within a few months everyone was on time to vestry meetings so as not miss out on what others had to say. When we began to relate the biblical texts to budget discussions, we knew that we were in a new place.

Our understanding and practice of communal discernment of what God is up

as many property matters as possible to a property team. While the vestry is ultimately responsible for allocating funds for maintenance of the buildings, we knew that we did not need to waste precious time deciding things like what color the parish hall should be, but rather to keep ourselves focused on a "big issue" at each meeting.

Our deepest desires and gifts

Keeping the vestry on track with prayer, dwelling in the word, and engaging in group discernment about major issues and challenges is bearing fruit. St. Matthew's recently emerged from an eight-month congregation-wide wondering process led by our vestry, aimed at discovering where God was leading us in mission. The question members of our community were asked was, "When the people of St. Matthew's bring together their deepest desires and greatest gifts, what is the future God is calling forth among us?"

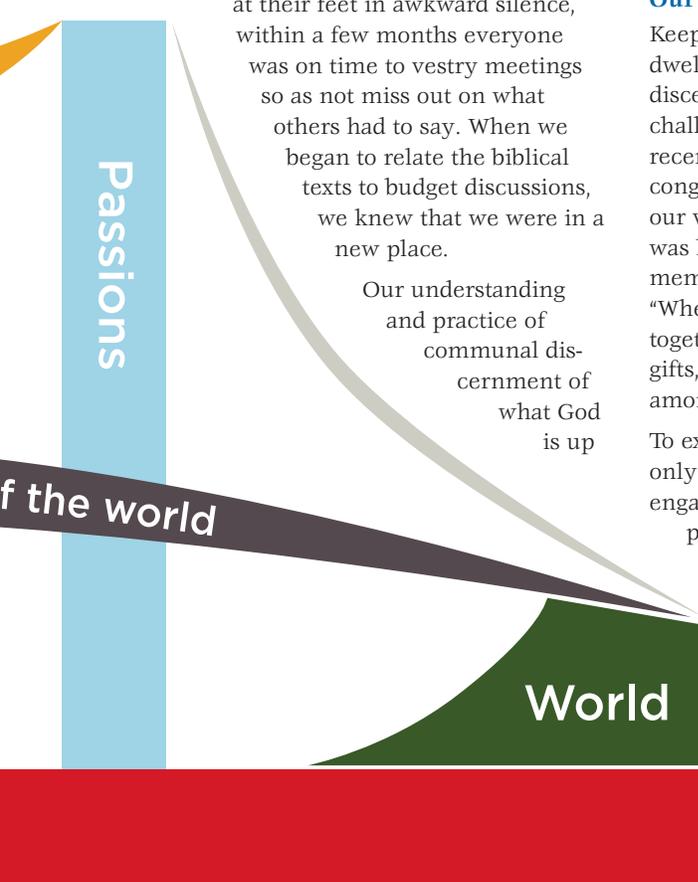
To explore this question we had groups not only dwell in scripture together, but also engage in playful activities. Artists painted pictures of the future they believed God was bringing forth; our youth group and staff took pictures of what they thought God was up to; parents of young children shared their favorite children's story that revealed something about God; our hospitality team planned a menu embodying the future God is bringing forth; and people

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Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness...Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, "You are accepted."

Paul Tillich





*My business is not to
remake myself, but make
the absolute best of
what God made.*

Robert Browning

Discerning individual gifts on the vestry...

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that he needed. She also developed a heart for the other residents of the nursing home, many of whom had no advocate. Now she is a state ombudsman, assigned to nursing homes to monitor the care provided. Shirley is a great role model — she responds passionately to God's call inside the parish and in the wider community.

Committed

Your freedom comes through choosing to be prisoners of the Lord. Your hearts are made to be captivated by God; only when you allow this to happen do you find your true vocation and live in a manner worthy of your calling. (Ephesians 4:1-16)

it, found that they had gifts in relating to teenagers and that these teenagers claimed a piece of their hearts. The birth of their first child caused them to take a sabbatical; Justin to his great surprise finds himself on the vestry and committed to advocating for the youth.

Community

You become true individuals only in community, in relation to God and neighbor. In community you discover your gifts and your call. (1 Corinthians 12:14-31)

In recent years St. Mark's vestry has paid careful attention to making vestry meetings safe and supportive. We have a written



**Grounded in community and in the love of God,
we find our calling by attending to our gifts and passions.**

Justin and Juliette were the only young couple who were at all regular in worship at St. Mark's. They were "volunteered" to be leaders of the youth group. They stuck with

agreement about how we will treat each other and we take time to reflect on scripture, to share what is happening in our lives and to pray together. The community we are becoming gives a sense of confidence to vestry members as they discover their gifts and respond to needs inside and outside the congregation. The wider circle of parishioners are being drawn in to the sense of safety and respect that the vestry models.

Grounded in community and in the love of God, we find our calling by attending to our gifts and passions. The commitments which follow transform our own lives. May your term on the vestry be worthy of nothing less!

St. Mark's Cathedral, Seattle, Washington



John de Beer (pictured at left) is rector at St. Mark's, Burlington, Massachusetts. The adult curriculum that he created with Sarah Dylan Breuer is found on the St. Mark's website: (www.saintmarksburlington.org/adulted.php). John (connect.john@gmail.com) and Dylan (dylan@sarahlaughed.net) are both available for vestry retreats and adult formation consultation.

Discerning youthful calls

by Brian N. Prior

When asked, "When did you know you were called to ordained ministry?" I always begin with the story of Mrs. White. She was the matriarch in our small church. In third grade one Sunday after church as I was taking off my acolyte robe, Mrs. White walked up to me and blurted out, "Make sure you invite me to your ordination!" Confused and dismayed, I ran up to the priest and shouted, "What's an ordination and how come my older brothers didn't have to do it?"

camper, I learned how to facilitate small groups, lead Bible study, even plan and lead worship. The cathedral — which at the time did not have many young adults — quickly incorporated me not only into worship leadership and faith formation but also stewardship.

Each one of these explorations and the subsequent encouragement from both clergy and lay leaders were further seed planting



Community of the Holy Spirit, Brewster, New York

Years later while in the midst of the discernment process, it became clear how much Mrs. White's proclamation was a seed planting experience for ordination. And there were many other, albeit not as blatant, seed planting experiences in my childhood and young adult years: church, summer camp, and the cathedral I attended in college.

Being part of a small church afforded me a myriad of opportunities. From a young age I served as a lector and a chalice bearer. I even mowed the church lawn. Likewise, as a

experiences in the discernment for ordination. Given the opportunity and encouragement to involve myself at all levels of the church enabled me to gain an understanding of what my gifts for ministry were.

Invite youth to participate fully

Subsequently, I have consistently made it a priority to provide others, especially young people, with the same opportunities for involvement and exploration. I encourage you to do the same. Ask young people to be

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Calling Congregations is an initiative of the Fund for Theological Education and awards up to sixteen grants a year for congregations to explore vocation. Projects center around four areas: creating space for the exploration of Christian vocation; asking self-awakening questions; reflecting theologically and establishing vocation enriched opportunities. Contact www.thefund.org/programs/congregations_grants.phtml



Journey in Faith, offered by Episcopalian-based LeaderResources, seeks to connect Christians with the sacred in their daily lives, helping them to grow with others in their church by building deeper community, a stronger faith and the skills to minister in the world. A multi-year, multi-facet program that seeks to renew and revitalize congregations. leaderresources.org/journeyinfaith

Vestry discernment begins with the soul

by Will Thompson

Demands and expectations placed upon a vestry are many. As a result, vestry members often believe that they (along with the clergy) are responsible for the health and well-being of the church and need to attend to and “fix” whatever problems that arise.

This approach leads to very little room for reflection and discernment. I suggest turning everything upside down. Nuts and bolts issues are more effectively and efficiently addressed when vestries focus first on key questions having to do with discernment and key values.

Here are three centering points that lay a foundation for that process:

Tend to the soul

A white explorer in Africa, anxious to press ahead with his journey, paid his porters for a series of forced marches. But almost within reach of their destination, they set down their bundles and refused to budge. No amount of extra payment would convince

Shield the joyous

This phrase comes from An Order for Compline in *The Book of Common Prayer* (page 124):

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.

Most of us are familiar with and well-practiced at addressing most of the other needs identified in this prayer. Very few work at “shielding the joyous” as fervently as we “tend the sick, give rest to the weary,” etc. I think of this practice as more communal and public.

Jesus said, “I came that you might have life and have it abundantly!” Living from the place of hope, faith and joy requires courage and boldness — and not doing it alone.

St. Mark's Cathedral, Seattle, Washington



them otherwise. They said they had to wait for their souls to catch up. (Charwick, *The Soul of the World, A Modern Book of Hours*)

Tending to our souls on a daily basis is crucial for peace of mind and clarity of purpose. When we live at the pace of our souls, life has more meaning and clarity.

I think of this practice as being daily, quiet and personal.

The answer to “how” is YES

Here is where we begin to move into the territory with which vestries are more familiar and comfortable. Yet, if we jump into the “fix it” mode without bringing our souls and our joy with us, the result is likely to be superficial and temporary.

Discerning youthful calls

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acolytes as well as lectors, lay readers and chalice bearers. Encourage them to serve on vestries, outreach, faith formation committees and all other aspects of congregational life. Invite them to be full participants in the life and leadership of the church.

The outcome of involving young people at all levels of the church has been the formation of a generation of deeply committed young people — and they are some of the brightest clergy I know. They are a group of individuals who have discerned both their gifts for ministry and their passion for service to God.

Too often there is a hesitation to invite and encourage young people to become involved in the life of the church. Being an acolyte and helping in Sunday school is commonplace but serving on the finance or outreach committee is much less likely. The rationale is that young people have neither the desire nor the ability to serve outside the traditional roles of worship or faith formation. In my

experience, however, many young people are not only interested in these areas, but have a high level of competency and creativity that can truly invigorate the life of the church.

Have you considered ordination?

It is paramount to provide a wide range of experiences for young people to engage in the full life of the church. These opportunities can provide critical seed planting for the foundation for discernment. And don't forget to say the words: "Have you ever considered ordination?"

The Rt. Rev. Brian N. Prior was consecrated as the ninth bishop of Minnesota in February of 2010. A veteran of church camps and other gatherings for young people, he and the Diocese of Minnesota will host the national Episcopal Youth Event for some 1500 young people in June of 2011.



*Why are you here?
What do you do best?
What are you passionate about? What do you value? What are your priorities? LifeKeys, a widespread spiritually-based program, explores the above areas in a Christian context.
www.lifekeys.com*

Vestry discernment

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Asking powerful questions is the most efficient and effective way to uncover the core values of a community (purpose, vision, aesthetics, community, creativity, possibility, abundance). Identifying strengths, enthusiasm and passion are more effective (and fun) than focusing on what is wrong, or reminiscing about "the good old days."

Peter Block (*Community: The Structure of Belonging*) suggests there are five "conversations" that are needed in order for health and growth to occur:

- n What is possible?
- n Ownership (from the ground up)
- n How is dissension welcomed?
- n Commitment
- n Gifts

Examples of powerful questions are:

- n How much risk am I willing to take?
- n What have I done to contribute to the very thing I complain about or want to change?
- n What is the "no" or refusal that I keep postponing?

- n What forgiveness am I withholding?
- n What is the gift that I still hold in exile?

Once these three "warm-up" practices are in place, the "hard work" of the vestry isn't so hard. The focus is not on plugging the leaks or resolving the latest conflict. When leaders are tending to their own souls, living from their joy (and supporting others to do the same) and being curious (with powerful questions), discerning the future of the larger community becomes less burdensome and more healthy.

*The author of The Power of Play: The ABC's of Living with Wonder and Exuberance, Will Thompson is an Episcopal priest and licensed clinical social worker. After years of working with individuals and groups in clinical and parochial settings, he tired of seeing clergy and church leaders become cynical and burned-out in their work and decided to "play" with them. His business is divided between individual coaching, virtual leadership training and wellness presentations.
www.theclergycoach.com*



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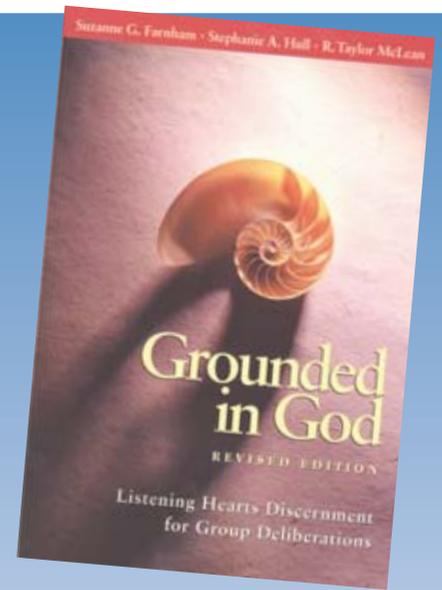
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Resources

Listening Hearts Ministries holds a vision of the church as a community of faith, eager for God's guidance, alert to signs of the Spirit and alive with the prayer of deep listening. For twenty years, Listening Hearts has provided a range of programs, publications and services that teach the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities. Retreats, workshops, discernment training, and training of leaders.

www.listeninghearts.org



EDUCATION FOR MINISTRY

Education for Ministry (EfM) is a program of theological education to equip lay people to answer the call of every baptized person to ministry. Learning tools of informed theological reflection help participants examine their lives and the broader culture in light of the Gospel call to service.

www.sewanee.edu/EFM/index.htm

CONNECT? COMMIT? COVENANT!

KLESIS is an adult curriculum of Christian formation that helps participants move from being "outsiders" — wondering how they connect with the church to people — to discern and act on their calling, both individually and in community. Two outcomes are anticipated: spiritual growth and community growth. Each of the three programs in KLESIS (Connect? Commit? and Covenant!) engages participants in small group work. www.connect-course.org

Culture of discernment

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constructed visions of our church's future with Legos.

Through these exercises and theological reflection on what emerged, the gifts and passions of our community and an emerging future are becoming clear. We also had fun and were energized along the way. Our next step will be to learn how to keep the conversation going and to take our "wondering" conversations out into the community to learn from our neighbors.

The reality of a vestry as spiritual leaders, working with their clergy as a discernment team, has made all the difference.

The Rev. Blair Pogue, rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, developed an interest in group discernment and equipping vestry members to be the spiritual leaders of their congregations while serving as Associate Rector for Adult Christian Formation at Church of the Holy Comforter in Vienna, Virginia. She is currently a Doctor of Ministry candidate in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary in St. Paul.

Learn more of the dynamics of St. Matthew's discernment process at:
www.episcopalfoundation.org/tools-and-programs/leadership-tools/vestry-papers