

VESTRY PAPERS



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Christian Formation: Building the Church

by Linda Grenz

It's a typical Sunday morning at your church and you notice visitors coming in the door. You're eager to welcome them — and hope they'll become part of your church family. What do you do?

Most vestry members feel that their job is to greet the person or family — perhaps introduce them to others and make sure they get to coffee hour. You might even remember to ask their names and addresses to pass along to the church office. Having done that, you go home, content that you've done your job.

But have you? Will that visitor return? If he or she does come back next week, what will happen then? How will that individual or family become a part of your congregation?

Be intentional about adult opportunities

Most of us want our churches to grow — and that means incorporating new people into the congregation. But when we think about

the incorporation process, most of us focus on hospitality and forget about Christian formation — the importance of establishing an intentional process to help people of all ages grow in their faith and knowledge of God.

Episcopalians understand that children and youth need Christian formation. But we tend to forget about the adults. Once we've been confirmed...or certainly once we've left youth group...we're "done." We might occasionally attend the rector's adult forum. A few folks go to a weekly Bible study class or join an EFM group. But most adults do not see weekly, intentional study as important; few congregations convey that lifelong learning is an expectation for all Christians.

Just take a look at your congregation's budget. Most churches have a sizable

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*This Issue:
Christian Formation
Circulation 24,500*

Since the early church, Christian formation has imbued God's people with purpose and vision. Beginning at baptism, we are called to search out and experience a range of learning through Bible study, fellowship, everyday work and service. What can vestries do to help with this process? And how can Christian formation be the key to helping a congregation grow? Here our writers explore these questions and more.



Photo:



Why Get Fired Up?

by Bill Tully

Why get fired up about “Christian formation?” Why put our education as Christians high up on your agenda as a vestry member if you’re worried about the stewardship campaign, the budget and the proverbial leaking roof?

Simply because what we know about the faith and how we practice it may make or break our effectiveness as leaders.

Growth is a priority, large or small

What we’ve usually called Christian education or adult education — the trend now is to call it “formation” — is also usually thought of as “program.” You won’t get far without knowing and agreeing on *who* makes program in your parish.

The answer to this usually varies with size. Large parishes often have clergy or lay staff

parishes to grow as large as possible, and I assume growth to be a priority. That struggle is intensified when there is no clarity of purpose. Vestries are first and foremost governance bodies, with oversight and fiduciary responsibility, and with the solemn spiritual authority of advising and evaluating the rector and of selecting and calling a rector when needed. They are not primarily program committees.

People want to belong. They want relationships every bit as much as they want content.

So let’s assume an ideal here — midway between “corporate” and “family” sized parishes. Let’s assume that a key vestry responsibility is to champion the power and

Mailed six times a year, Vestry Papers encourages, inspires, and guides vestry members and other Episcopal leaders as they share in the spiritual, financial, and programmatic leadership of their congregations. The winner of nineteen national awards, Vestry Papers is published by the Episcopal Church Foundation. To subscribe, call 800-697-2858 or visit the Foundation online at www.EpiscopalFoundation.org



Photo:

who design courses and teach them, but you can tell a lot about a small parish if it supports a professional approach to education.

Some smaller parishes consciously construct a vestry to include people who can not only oversee programs, including education, but also run them. Some terrific vestries are like a multiple staff as much as they are like a nonprofit board.

It’s a struggle for large parishes to keep growing and smaller or medium size

necessity of Christian formation. That will mean at minimum some budget support. It may also mean helping the rector do the work of education itself. Just try to be clear about who’s who and what’s what.

Finally, a presumption I bring to all thinking about church leadership is that the church is called to grow. In particular, the Episcopal Church needs to grow in order to find a better balance between institutional survival and mission. *We could unleash real power to*

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Formation for Vestries: Where Equipping the Saints Begins

by Gary Herbst

If a church is going to grow, it better have the vestry on board, for it is the place where visions are fleshed out and the work of equipping the saints for ministry can originate. Christian formation of the vestry itself is a key part of parish formation.

In annual retreats, after sharing spiritual journeys with each other, take to time to look ahead at the goals that you would like your church to work on to be more effective in evangelism, in sharing the good news of Jesus with the world around us.

In addition to well defined goals and timelines from the retreat, consider starting vestry meetings with a study on some book about growing churches and personal evangelism, such as the good '70s vintage book *Assimilating New Members*, or the newer *So You Can't Stand Evangelism, A Thinking Person's Guide to Church Growth*.

Consider changing your agenda format. Move the treasurer's report is moved to the end of the meeting, so it doesn't shape the focus of the gathering. Have the clergy tell about visits they've made during the last month, especially to church visitors and new members. In this way everyone is brought up to speed about these folks and can learn who they are so they can extend a welcome when they meet them.

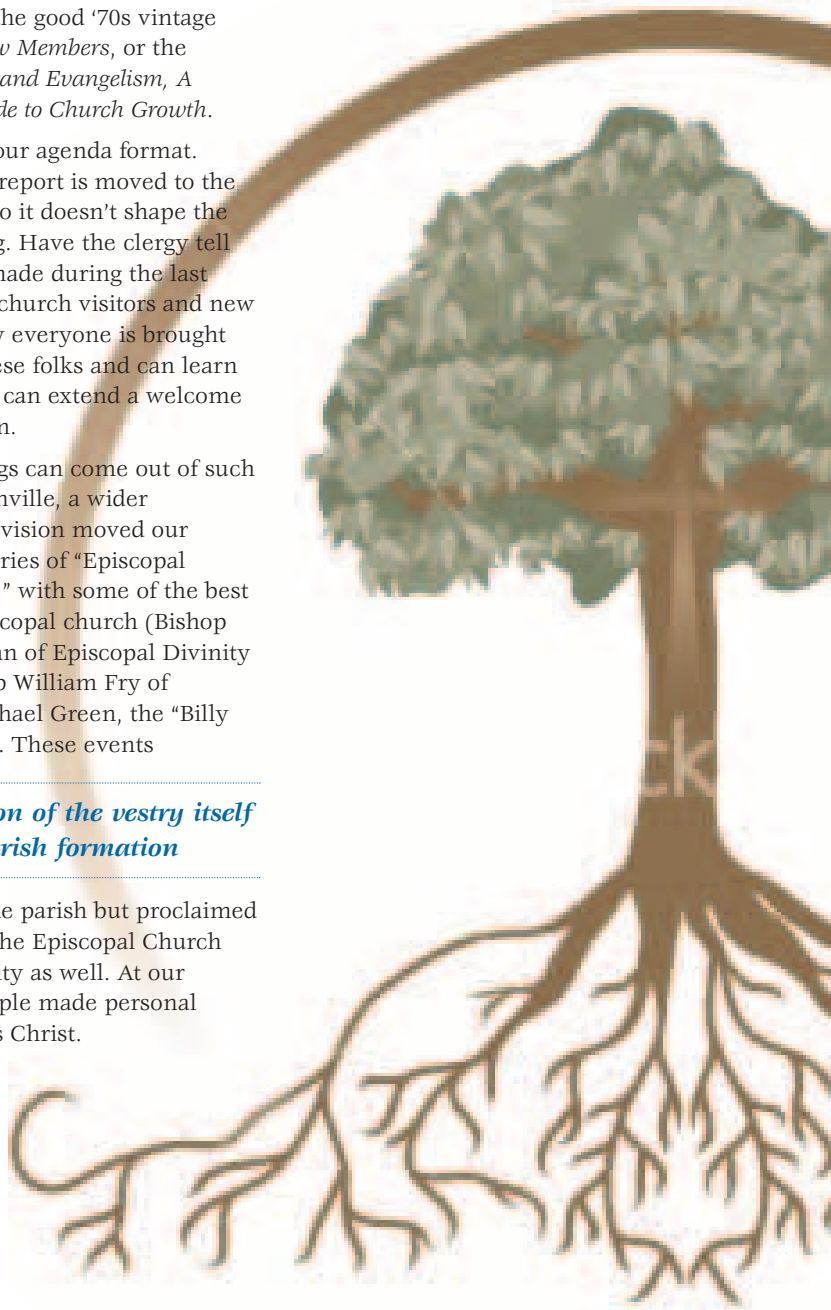
Some surprising things can come out of such moves. Here in Greenville, a wider community-oriented vision moved our vestry to present a series of "Episcopal Community Revivals," with some of the best preachers in the Episcopal church (Bishop Steve Charleston, dean of Episcopal Divinity School; retired Bishop William Fry of Colorado; Canon Michael Green, the "Billy Graham of England"). These events

Christian Formation of the vestry itself is a key part of parish formation

not only energized the parish but proclaimed the rightful place of the Episcopal Church in the local community as well. At our last event fifteen people made personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

All of this can happen when the vestry is serious about its own formation, as it takes up the task of bringing the kingdom of God to the local community. Have no fear, the Holy Spirit will provide what is needed. We need only to be open and willing to try to new things.

A priest for thirty years, the Rev. Gary Herbst has served parishes in Texas and Alaska. He is now rector of St. Paul's, Greenville, Texas, a growing congregation (from thirty-five to one hundred in average Sunday attendance in five years).





Why Get Fired Up?

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serve if we weren't so anxious about paying the bills and equipping and maintaining buildings.

There's also a neat complement to the numerical growth when we talk about education or spiritual formation. We are also called to grow in spiritual depth. We do that by learning more, practicing more and serving more. *How* we do those things depends on being formed and taught to do them.

A rock-bottom minimum education program in a parish would be some sort of conscious

annually; in fact, offer it as often as you possibly can. Nothing is a greater turnoff — or more common impediment to growth — than to greet enthusiastic newcomers with, “Yes we have a course for you, but you’ve just missed it. How about a year from now?” What business or organization do you know that would tolerate such a lag time in incorporation?

Second, put your clergy and top lay leaders (including vestry) on the front lines as teachers and welcomers. People want to belong. They want relationships every bit as much as they want content. Or, to put it another way, the lifesaving content of the gospel is most compelling, and in fact, can only be transmitted by people who are giving themselves as examples.

Your deepest possibilities

Don't overlook your deepest possibilities for the formation of leaders. Around the vestry table we unlearn some particularly magical thinking. The church may be the house of God's Holy Spirit, but it isn't the Kingdom of God on earth. All the marks of human finitude and human sin are present. Or, as Pogo said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

Wrestling with finite resources and the big dream of answering God's call to mission takes us right down to the foundations. Coming to know both our own gifts to lead and also acknowledging our limitations brings close the “who am I and who is God” question, surely a starting point for both education and leadership.

The gospels give us a glimpse of Jesus who taught occasionally by storytelling and preaching, but who taught even more powerfully by the challenges he gave, the call he issued, and the work he did with the disciples.

Just think how he would have balanced the leaking roof, the annual campaign, the healing of souls, and the call to respect the dignity of every human being.

The Rev. William McD. Tully is rector of St. Bartholomew's, New York City, where principles and practice of church growth and radical welcome are packaged into an annual Reinventing Church conference.



Photo: St. Bartholomew's, New York City

The Rev. William McD. Tully, rector of St. Bartholomew's, New York City.

preparation for baptism (including parents and sponsors) and some sort of (at least) annual inquirers' or newcomers' course.

People want to belong

With these, my parish tries to keep two fundamentals in mind:

First, offer the introduction to the faith experience (in whatever format) more than

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education budget for Sunday School and a reasonable budget for youth ministry. But the adult education budget in the average Episcopal Church usually is zero! And even the best churches tend to have less than \$500 allocated for adult faith formation.

Provide an easy entry

We need to provide our newcomers with an easy entry into the community. Where does that visitor go when he or she comes back? How do you help that person become a part of your church family?

Research shows consistently that there are three simple things any church can do to grow in faith and numbers. And your

The startling reality is that even the best churches tend to have less than \$500 allocated for adult faith formation.

probably know two of them. First, invite people to attend church. Over 80 percent of all newcomers attend your church because a member invited them. Less than 2 percent come because the clergy invite them.

Second, visit every newcomer within forty-eight hours and bring a simple gift — homemade bread or cookies, a small bouquet, or, my favorite, and Episcopal bear (it's cute, lovable, and puts the Episcopal "brand" into the home. Someone needs to deliver the gift, offer a brief (two-three minute) welcome and invite the visitor to return the following week.

But third — *and finally the best way* — to incorporate newcomers is to have them join a small group.

Small groups allow people to bond with one another. And one of the most powerful motivators on Sunday morning are the relationships you have with the people at church.

Aim for diversity in groups

My rule-of-thumb is that every congregation needs to have at least one adult education opportunity for every twenty-five people in church. So, if your average Sunday attendance at all services is 150, you need six adult education opportunities.

Aim for diversity, not for the one popular program that everyone will love. You are better having six different programs with six to fifteen people each, than one with fifty to seventy-five attendees. One large group, low-involvement event (like the Rector's Forum) is important for those who are most comfortable in that setting. But the other five options need to be small groups where people can bond with each other and grow in faith and knowledge.

There are a host of great small group programs available; many of them are reasonable in cost and can be led by the group members or a moderately skilled leader. Gather twice the number of programs you need and see which ones appeal to those in your congregation. Ask the participants to help pay for the costs — people value what they pay for more than what they get for

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Hand each vestry member a treasure trove of practical advice and tips on how to be a leader in the congregation with the new and improved Vestry Resource Guide from the Episcopal Church Foundation. Preorder now for shipment in early spring. Forward Movement Publications, (800) 543-1813.



Photo:



Formation Through Total Ministry

by Dick Snyder

In congregations that have adopted — or are considering — a program of Total Ministry, (sometimes called mutual ministry, or ministry of the baptized) the church is working at becoming a *ministering community* rather than a community gathered around a minister.

And in this model the role of the vestry is crucial because serving on the vestry is as surely a ministry as preaching, or teaching (whether Sunday School or public school or home school), or helping serve meals at the soup kitchen.

It is always an interesting exercise to take stock of the ministry now being performed in a congregation. Often even obvious examples of service to others are overlooked until someone identifies it. And often the ministry in the world being performed by members of the church is not recognized as ministry by those actually doing it.

We can answer the question “Where is your church?” with a street address. But we can also respond by saying: “My church is more than a building; it’s the people that matter. Some are teaching school. Some are working in the hospital. Some are at home and sick.”

We are the church

The realization that we — all of us — are the church can lead us to begin acting in new ways. And those congregations that have developed this model have often found a renewal of energy in outreach and social justice projects. As people begin to recognize and exercise their ministries through intentional reflection and formation, a

natural result is for energy to be focused on the needs in the community.

The vestry can, and should, be a central part in this process of formation of ministers within the congregation:

- By participating in the leadership of the committee structure to help members identify and develop their own gifts;
- By NOT doing everything that needs to be done, but asking someone new to get involved;
- By assessing the strengths and gifts of their members and encouraging their use within the larger community.

As people begin to study and work together, and get to know each other better, they are likely to become more interested in the mission of the church, and less concerned about the maintenance of the church.

That doesn’t mean that maintenance is unimportant. But it does mean that as we respond to God’s call to us in baptism that our concern, our interest, will be in helping those around us who are in need of that help.

It’s a model that St. Paul tried to teach us. And it can provide a fulfilling, spirit-filled adventure for all of us on the journey.

The Rev. Richard Snyder is priest-in-charge of St. Michael’s in Brigham City, Utah, and communicator in the Diocese of Utah. Basic information about the concept of Total Ministry is available through the Congregational Development Office of the Episcopal Church and its website.

“The Church is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones.”

Henry Ward Beecher



Photo: Richard Snyder

Beyond Sundays

by Wayne Schwab

John, a senior warden and computer programmer, finds a colleague, Tim, stealing his innovations. Since he understands his innovations better than Tim, he simply presents them to his supervisor in their fullness. He says to Tim, "Let's work together. There's enough in this life for all of us." Tim begins to collaborate and when he overhears John talk about his church, Tim asks, "Where do you go? Can I go along some time?"

Mary, the parish treasurer, nurses four nights a week. She finds an unhappy climate of argument among the staff. She decides to

The church does not have a mission; God's mission has a church.

help people to settle their differences and to be a friendly presence herself. Weeks pass; argument declines; friendliness grows. When asked her secret, she says, "My prayer partner prays for me each day." A nurse says, "Tell me more."

John and Mary's stories say how much they value the church's growing emphasis on Monday-Friday work as one of their daily mission fields. They are living the mission of Jesus Christ. They joined it in their baptism. They trust Jesus to help them to care and to be fair — to love and to be just. How they live at work is how they begin to "tell" about Jesus. In that context, they can begin to use words about Jesus and his people. And the doors open for others to seek out the church,

to be baptized, and to join Jesus' mission to make the world more loving and just.

As Mary puts it, "Try to care and to be fair. When you do that, what you say about church sounds real." Live it; then talk it. And be clear about your motive. It is tempting to tell people about Jesus to grow the church.



Rather, tell people about Jesus in order to grow the mission. The church does not have a mission; God's mission has a church. For Christians, Jesus and Jesus' people are the visible center of God's mission. Grow the mission and the church can't help but grow.

A. Wayne Schwab, the national church's first evangelism staff person, helps congregations to put evangelism inside of mission and to make supporting their members in their daily living as Christians their primary purpose. For more, go to www.membermission.org.

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free. And then make sure that every visitor who returns finds a home in a group where he or she will be welcomed, nurtured and accompanied on the faith journey.

So what can a vestry member do to help all of your congregation's members, new and

One of the most powerful motivators on Sunday morning are the relationships you have with the people at church.

old, grow in faith? Yes, invite people. Yes, visit newcomers. But also make sure your church budget and program has at least

one adult education program for every twenty-five adults. In other words, invest in growth: personally, programmatically, and financially. You can't expect results if you don't invest something.

Formerly the adult education staff person for the Episcopal Church, the Rev. Linda Grenz is publisher and CEO of LeaderResources which publishes education programs developed by Episcopal churches and dioceses. Their newest adult education program Journey in Faith and other programs can be previewed at www.LeaderResources.org or call 800-941-2218.



"The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Fred Buechner

"Anybody can observe the Sabbath, but making it holy surely takes the rest of the week."

Alice Walker

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Subscriptions

\$40 annually. Mailed in packages of 15 copies per issue. \$30 annually for electronic version. Published in January, March, May, July, September and November.

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New York, NY 10017

Call (800) 697-2858
or subscribe online at
www.EpiscopalFoundation.org

Formation Lessons from the Bible

A lifelong process, Christian formation involves many things: baptism, church school, prayer, Bible study, life experiences, taking what is learned in church into the world, and being in community with other Christians. What can be learned from those who went before us?

Eve

Blame me. That Tree of Knowledge is very enticing.

Methuselah

You're never too old to learn new things.

Sarah

Go ahead. Laugh. And then be open to God's plan.

David

Others might make you crazy, but take off that heavy armor and write some new music.

Isaiah

If you say it right, people will be quoting you thousands of years from now.

Job

It ain't pretty, but suffering will teach you many things.

Daniel

Prayer might lead you into the lion's den but it will also keep you safe once you're there.

John the Baptist

Formation involves water. And baptism. And then you step aside.

Mary of Bethany

Take the time to sit at Jesus' feet. You may not always have the chance.

