

VESTRY PAPERS



EPISCOPAL
CHURCH FOUNDATION
Learn. Lead. Give.

To inform, inspire and affirm Episcopal vestries in their work

Decisions: The Work of Leaders

by Jim Lemler

Decisions, decisions, decisions — sometimes vestry meetings seem overrun and overwrought by them. Decisions must be made regarding mission, program, personnel, planning, facilities, finances and on and on. Some are of a regular and standard nature. Others evoke strong feelings and sentiment on every side. The vestry tries to use good decision-making procedures and listen to the guidance and direction of God. This is a tall order indeed.

Decision-making has been part of the work of leadership in the community of faith virtually from the beginning. Ever since God told Moses to call together a group of leaders in what may be the first vestry meeting ever recorded (Deuteronomy 11 and the preceding chapters) through the life and councils of the early Christian Church, leaders in communities of faith have had to make decisions. Some decisions were readily

embraced by the congregations of God's people, others fiercely resisted.

Leaders make decisions

One important lens for viewing Holy Scripture is leadership. Scripture provides a succession of stories on how people of faith led, made decisions and followed through with action. Leaders had to call on trust, vision and God's guidance.

We most often think of the great leaders whose stories are told in Scripture: Moses, the prophets, Peter, Paul, and Jesus himself. However, we must not lose sight of many other leaders. Women and men prayed, discerned, and decided about very significant matters of faith and life together. Sometimes they surprised themselves about the new directions they pursued, whom they welcomed

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*Arduous? Grace-filled?
The process of making
decisions can leave
vestry members frustrated,
drained, or energized.
Why is it that some people
approach decision-making
so differently from others?
What are the best
methods to use? How
might God be more in the
picture? Here our writers
explore these questions
both theologically
and practically.*

Decision-making led by the Spirit

by Suzanne Farnham

The Church is the body of Christ: the incarnation of God in the world. And every vestry is called to be Christ-alive in its parish and in the conduct of the business of its congregation. This is not an impossible dream. Any vestry that understands and embraces this concept can find the spiritual vitality that transmits God's love and truth throughout the parish and outward into the community and world.

Even simple steps can set things in motion. A vestry, after reading this issue, can reflect on a passage from Ephesians: "In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a

dwelling place for God." The group can then take the further step of sitting silently to visualize and feel itself as embodying Christ. That in turn can lead to an effort to articulate this vision, to express a desire to pursue it, and to pledge itself to live into the vision. Then all will be in place for the actual quest.

Any vestry that commits itself to following these three spiritual discernment practices in its meetings will find its members growing closer to God and to one another, even when wrestling with difficult and painful issues.

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**This Issue:
Tough Choices**



Led by the Spirit

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- ✚ Centering in God.
- ✚ Deep, prayerful listening.
- ✚ Decisions by consensus.

Centering in God

A group seeking to live as the body of Christ must center itself in God's presence. A good way to start is to begin each meeting with a period of silence. People often arrive preoccupied and tense; a period of quiet allows them to slow down and let their thoughts and feelings come to rest. Each person can then become attuned to God at his or her own center and at the center of the gathering. A silence of about ten minutes is usually optimal. But if anyone is uncomfortable with silence, it is better to start with a two-minute silence and gradually increase the length over a series of meetings.

This centering silence is not an end in itself. It is a means to establish a centeredness that is then maintained throughout the meeting. If anyone senses that the group may be losing touch with God at its center, that person is obligated to suggest a few minutes of silence to become centered once more. A vestry immersed in God's presence is prepared to enter into deep, prayerful listening.

Deep, prayerful listening

We do not listen with our ears alone. We can listen with all that we are. People communicate thoughts and feelings through facial expressions and physical demeanor, transmitting peace, joy, anger, and fear verbally and non-verbally. People reveal themselves not only in the words they utter but in what they refrain from saying. And to listen with one's whole self means to loosen the grip on one's own agendas, opinions, and convictions.

Only when we open our minds and hearts to others without blocking the channels of communication can we hear all that is being said. A group must also allow a pause between one speaker and the next to give everyone an opportunity to absorb what has been said and to feel its impact. This focused, respectful listening allows consensus to spring forth.

Spiritual consensus

Consensus means sensing together. In consensus, no votes are taken. Ample opportunity is given for all points of view to be expressed, with each member of the group sensitive to the concerns of every other member. Everyone looks for common

ground, identifying it, solidifying it, building on it. Consensus does not ask for compromise or bargaining ("If you will give on this, I will give on that.") Neither does it require unanimity: not everyone will necessarily be in full agreement with the decision, but no one will be vehemently against it.

When everyone concurs that the stated position reflects where the group as a whole is in relation to the issue at that moment, such consensus indicates a next step. This does not prohibit those who advocate proceeding in either a bolder or more moderate way from revisiting the issue later; it is permissible to test an evolving sense of the group if the moment becomes ripe. A central quality of consensus is that no one wins, no one loses, no one is ignored or left out.

In the name of Christ

Groups meeting in the name of Christ look for an additional dimension, seeking to be guided and drawn together by the Spirit of the living God. Signs of the Spirit — joy, love, persistence, convergence, unity, energy, the peace of God — reveal the movement of God in the meeting. Spiritual consensus is consensus laced with signs of the Spirit. The followers of Jesus experienced that consensus when "the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul." (Acts 4:32)

A vestry can best cultivate these practices by maintaining constant vigilance. It can sharpen its attentiveness by setting aside a few minutes at the conclusion of each meeting to reflect on how well it sustained prayerful listening. At the beginning of the next meeting, a designated person can summarize these observations to reinforce the group's awareness of attentive listening.

The vestry that follows this path will find its meetings becoming more energized, focused, and efficient. It will work in a setting that fosters the development and maturity of faith in its members. It will find itself becoming that holy temple which is a dwelling place for God.

Suzanne Farnham, the founder of Listening Hearts Ministries (www.listeninghearts.org), is co-author of "Grounded in God," a book of particular value to vestries incorporating discernment into their proceedings. She leads vestry retreats that teach the use of spiritual discernment in group deliberations.

Vestry Papers welcomes Donald V. Romanik as the new President of the Episcopal Church Foundation. An attorney and former senior warden of Christ Church Cathedral in Hartford, he served most recently as Vice President for Legal and Government Affairs for the Connecticut Institute for the Blind. We are also thankful for the many contributions made by William G. Andersen, Jr., former ECF President, who retired in September.

Subscribers, join our online discussion group about parish life and service! Click on the Vestry Papers Dialogue link at www.EpiscopalFoundation.org

On the Fear of Failure

by Jan Smith Wood

I have come to believe that fear of failure is at the root of many of our churches' failures: failure to evangelize (we have to come up with the perfect plan first); failure to try new liturgies (we might fail to please everyone); failure to get along (we fight about who is at fault for that really bad whatever); failure to speak the prophetic word (we fear someone will get mad at us).

I have seen vestries and clergy leaders shirk from trying a new thing, not because it doesn't look like it might be a faithful response to God's working or because it might meet a need that we have discerned, but because we are not sure that it will work. Communities are held hostage to a few critics (who may also be serious donors or opinion-shapers) who want everything to succeed. Vestries shy away from trying something new because they don't know if it will work. People turn down invitations to do ministry because they don't know how to respond.

Perhaps it is time to claim the faithfulness of imperfection. Perhaps it is time to know that if we succeed only half the time then we are really living life on the edge and trying to move into uncharted territories. Perhaps we can shift to a new mindset that says a 100% success rate is the real failure because we

have tried nothing new, we have done nothing that depends on anything other than our own current self-awareness, gifts, and known track-record.

Maybe if we let go of the expectation that we will succeed in everything, we will not need to play the blame-game (which comes from trying to find out who is at fault for a failure). Embracing the fact that we are novices at this means we will no longer engage in parking lot conversations (that tend to be critical, secretive, and divisive).

If experimentation is the norm, we will come to know that everything does depend upon God. We will live into the truth that loving neighbor and self is risky business. We will learn that we can thrive in the uncertainty of the untried and new. We will know that we must journey in that wilderness where we come to know God and to see one another more clearly as God's image. Perhaps. With God's grace, perhaps.

Formerly canon educator for the Diocese of El Camino Real, the Rev. Jan Smith Wood is dean of students at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California.

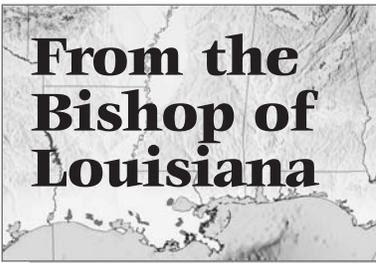


What does it mean to be an Anglican? How do Anglicans make a difference in their own communities? These questions and others are explored in a just-released Episcopal Church Foundation study which includes research from Brazil, India, New Zealand and Tanzania. Order copies of "The Vitality and Promise of Being Anglican" from Maurice Seaton, Global Anglicanism Project (GAP) manager at (800) 697-2858. See an Episcopal Life link at www.EpiscopalFoundation.org



Tips on how NOT to make decisions...

- The bishop is in favor of the project. That means we should automatically: 1) endorse it or 2) dump it.
- It's a contentious issue. So let's not talk about it. Let's just vote.
- Louie's not here. So let's vote now.
- We might offend someone. Let's do nothing.
- We might offend someone. YES!
- The roof's leaking again. Good thing that new vestry is coming on.
- The disciples cast lots. Here's some dice.
- We did it that way last time. Can't remember why, but you're not complaining, are you?
- If people hate us, we must be doing Jesus' work. (*Ed's note: Say again?*)
- We don't have enough money for it? Ask the women's guild. It sure is a good thing we have all these separate accounts. How else would we get anything done?
- Sally said that Joe said that Helen doesn't like it. And she's a pretty big pledger. I guess we better forget it.
- Bob's pretty quiet about this whole thing. Guess he must be fine with it.



From the Bishop of Louisiana

ON PATIENCE & PLANNING

Dear *Vestry Papers* Readers,

I write to you from our temporary offices in Baton Rouge where we are the guests of St. James' Episcopal Church. We are sharing offices, phone lines, and everything else we don't normally consider precious with the good folks of St. James'. The Rev.

Mark Holland and indeed all the people of Baton Rouge have been most gracious. The city has grown by perhaps as many as 350,000 people and the infrastructure here is strained to the point of something collapsing daily.

The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion have been extraordinarily generous to us. I cannot say enough about Episcopal Relief and Development (ERD), the pastoral care of the Presiding Bishop and his staff, and the professional disaster relief folks brought to us by ERD.

I need to ask something more of the church. I ask your patience with us. We are not functioning so well as some want of us. Every member of my staff is a displaced person and some of us are homeless. There is no moderately priced housing to be rented in Baton Rouge. Some of us are driving four hours a day to and from fishing camps with no electricity or potable water but by God's grace, we are showing up. One of my canons with his son and expectant wife are sleeping on the floor of a church nursery. We are the lucky ones; there are tens of thousands just down the street sleeping on cots in a convention center. Our families are separated from us for reasons of education, housing and economics.

So please, be patient. Realize communications systems often do not work. We will, by God's grace and with your help, grow into better functioning. What we have here are dedicated, hard-working staff who are themselves displaced and homeless trying to help those less fortunate. Please understand that we cannot house or care for volunteers at this time. There is not a room to be had between Baton Rouge and Memphis. I know some of you feel God is calling you to come here and in time we will be able to assist you in helping us. Now is not that time.*

Many of our churches are damaged; some are probably lost. We cannot get into Orleans Parish to see the most flooded areas. **Consider this, if you will...what would you do if suddenly your congregation had no income? What if all the ministries you take for granted were suddenly stopped? So plan well.**

Finally, I know that ERD will be with us for years and I hope after the shock of this tragedy has passed, you too will be with us. We are working hard in your name to be the hands and heart of Christ in the midst of this huge displacement of people and the destruction of much of our society.

Pray for us. Be generous unto us and be patient with us.

In Christ,
The Rt. Rev. Charles E. Jenkins

*Refers to when *Vestry Papers* went to print. Bishop Jenkins believes that the diocese might well be ready for volunteers in late fall. Please check first with the diocese (225) 387-5141 or Episcopal Relief and Development at (800) 334-7626.



Advent is fast approaching. As always, there will be more guests in church during December. Use November to update brochures and websites. Check to see that friendly people will be on hand to greet visitors. And don't forget a special welcome to those returning college students.

Different Styles, Different Gifts

by Perry Fuller

What about that roof? When should we fix it? How can we best reach newcomers? What's the best insurance policy? We can't put off that capital campaign much longer, you know!

The process of making such decisions have enormous capacity to bring together or tear apart vestries. One tool used widely to help people understand ways in which they interact while making decisions is the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator (MBTI). This landmark work by Isabel Briggs Myers, is based on the theory of psychological types developed by C.G. Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and founder of Analytical Psychology.

Determining preferences

The tool is not used to measure people's problems, but rather, to determine people's positive attributes and preferences for dealing with the world. Over one million people a year are typed by MBTI. Groups and organizations including many vestries, have used it successfully for team building, problem-solving, and conflict resolution.

One of the most significant contributions of MBTI is the way it clarifies our

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*Next Issue:
Clergy Wellness*

Decisions: The Work of Leaders

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in the community, and ways that God seemed to be directing and guiding them.

Leaders today, including vestry members, continue this long-standing tradition of decision-making, and they do it in a time of immense change. Life just isn't like it used to be. American culture, religious life, and institutions are changing dramatically.

Congregational dynamics — giving, membership, expectations, worship, program demands — are changing all around us.

Just think of your own congregation and the changes that have occurred in your parish, your community and in the Episcopal Church during the recent past. All of these bring challenges, opportunities, and pressures to bear on your congregation and its leadership.

During these times of amazing shifts, vestries are the leaders of change for their own congregations. They help congregations negotiate the tides that surround them, and introduce changes to develop and further the life and mission of local communities of faith. These two realities place great responsibility on vestries and their decision-making.

Some suggestions

So what are vestry leaders to do? How best to pursue decision-making? How do they lead the mission of their congregations in a time of massive change? How do they make decisions that positively develop the mission and ministry of their congregation? Some suggestions:

- ✦ Keep focused on your mission. Mission clarity is the bedrock of decision-making for vestries.
- ✦ Utilize skills in decision-making that vestry members bring with them. The old joke (please pardon the gender specificity) was, "When is a businessman not a businessman? When he's on the vestry..." Something in many vestry systems and cultures kept competent people from using their best skills. It's still a challenge. Effective vestries acknowledge and use abilities people bring from their settings of daily life, profession, and leadership.
- ✦ "Pray without ceasing..." The time for a vestry to begin praying together is NOT when they are confronted with a major decision. Rather, the ongoing experience of prayer in vestry life provides a continuous foundation.

- ✦ Gather information and sift through it. Information is important to decision-making. Some of that data comes from research; some of it comes from disciplined listening to a congregation. Gather it, but don't become paralyzed by data overload.
- ✦ Distinguish between issues that require a vestry decision and those that do not. Don't be one of those vestries that is tempted to make every decision and thereby spends too much time on (let alone re-deciding) decisions which belong to others. Deal with the big, serious (what one leadership author calls the "adaptive") issues.
- ✦ Build and utilize trust. Leadership is relational. Therefore, the relationships of trust that are built in a congregation help in the making of decisions. No vestry is going to please everyone all the time, but the fabric of trust sustains the community of faith itself.

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- ✦ Use a clear process of decision-making. Knowing what to expect and how things are done help the whole congregation as well as the vestry. Have a clearly understood and agreed upon process for deliberations and decisions.
- ✦ Communicate regularly and with intention. How often have you heard parishioners say, "Hey, we didn't know anything about this? Why don't you tell us what's going on?" Vestries need to have an intentional plan for communicating issues, processes, and decisions.
- ✦ Utilize outside assistance when necessary. There are times when external consultation is really helpful in making decisions. Use it.

Remember — as a vestry you have continual decisions to make. You are making them in a time of radical change. May God bless you in your leadership.

The Rev. Dr. James B. Lemler is the director of mission for the Episcopal Church. He has served in congregational, denominational, school, university and seminary settings and has been a consultant for numerous boards and vestries. He has written in areas of leadership, mission, congregational development and education.



A clarification to September's Safe Church issue and the question of whether vestries can be sued or not — D & O (directors' and officers') coverage does not cover all potential lawsuits, especially aspects of breach-of-contract disputes with outside groups and blatant illegal acts. Bottom line: always consult your insurance agent, diocesan risk manager and parish attorney.



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Subscriptions

\$35 annually. Mailed in packages of 15 copies per issue. \$25 annually for electronic version. Published in January, March, May, July, September and November.

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Different Styles, Different Gifts

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understanding that people see the world through different “lenses,” for we do not arrive at our conclusions and decisions by the same route. In marital counseling, for example, MBTI results immediately transform issues that the couple saw as problems into differences, a more manageable distinction. For example, one spouse might want a lifestyle that is ordered, predictable and settled. The other spouse might want an open-ended, flexible and spontaneous lifestyle. Initially opposites can attract. But unless the couple understands that these are basic differences in personality preferences and not “problems,” the traits may translate into conflict as the relationship proceeds.

Objective vs. subjective approaches

Deliberative bodies, such as vestries, can profit greatly from the use of MBTI. However, some of the lessons of difference may be learned even if the vestry has not had the benefit of the instrument. For instance, MBTI suggests there are two basic ways in which people make decisions. One decision path is through the process of logic and analysis. This is an objective way of making decisions. It leaves the impression that there is a “right” way to do something, and the people involved are required to adjust themselves to this objective solution.

On the other hand, there is a process of making decisions that is based on personal values rather than logic. It “feels” like the right thing to do, making it a subjective mode of decision-making. This method takes into consideration how the consequences will affect the people involved. Indeed the decision is adjusted to the people, contrary to the other mode in which the people must adjust to the logical conclusion.

In a deliberative body such as a vestry, there are bound to be differences of approach and opinion. Realize that differences are simply differences, not flaws in the other person.

Understanding the dynamics

There are additional refinements worth knowing. Some people combine an objective logical way of thinking with the gathering of facts and information. They may also add an organized, settled approach to this combination. Thus there may be some on the vestry who will operate this way: Here

are the facts, this is the logical conclusion, and we need to make the decision right away.

By now, you can imagine there may be other approaches lurking in the same vestry. In contrast to the “let’s decide now since we have the facts and logic,” another group will be interested not so much in facts and

Realize that differences are simply differences, not flaws in the other person.

information as in general principles. They may like scanning possibilities, and taking a big picture approach. They may appear to forsake details, facts and logic in favor of personal opinion and how others are affected.

Unless groups such as vestries understand differences in the personalities of their members, potential conflict and clashes await. The Decide Now folks may perceive the Wait and See people as indecisive and impractical. The Wait and See group may experience the Decide Now types as rigid and controlling, and away we go. The Deciders become anxious if things are left up in the air too long. The Waiters experience anxiety if they are pressed to make a decision too soon for their liking.

God-given gifts

Believe it or not, there is even more complexity in the decision-making process of groups, but this is enough to get the picture. It would be helpful for vestries to have a qualified presenter do the MBTI for them and coach them on how to arrive at decisions using the resources of all the personalities involved. However, that may not be practical in all cases. Understand that different people arrive at decisions in different ways. Differences are not only good but also God-given gifts which people bring to the table. Gifts are something to be freely given and appreciatively received.

The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller is an Episcopal priest with twenty-eight years of parish experience and thirteen years as a family therapist. He presently does interim ministry, spiritual direction, and leads retreats in Spirituality and Personality, Benedictine Spirituality, and Contemplative Prayer.