

# VESTRY PAPERS



November/ December 2008

*To inspire, affirm and inform Episcopal leaders in their work*

## *Discernment: Where's the Spirit moving?*

*by Lynn Gosnell*

The way Martha Steves, former senior warden and current vestry member explains it, the work of St. Mark's vestry in San Antonio, Texas, has undergone a gradual yet fully transformative shift.

"This is by far the most rewarding experience I've ever had," says Steves, a lifelong Episcopalian, who has served on the vestry no less than four times.

Current senior warden Dina Aboul-Saad, director of development for an international nonprofit organization, echoes Steves' sentiments. "In good conscience and with a smile, I can say I've had a really good time, and I've learned a lot. It's been a wonderful experience."

Over the past two years, St. Mark's vestry has adopted a new way of working — one that places the discernment of God's will for the parish at the very heart of vestry service. Attentive listening, biblical study, consensus-building and unhurried conversation take precedence over hearing reports, advocacy, and taking votes. These changes have produced subtle but profound results in the church's leadership.

"I see vestry people who are more energized," says the Rev. Michael Chalk, St. Mark's rector. "They feel that their time is better utilized. They are being challenged and their leadership skills are enhanced."

### **New ways of working**

Key to the transformation has been the integration of specific biblical lessons into vestry business, the radical restructuring of the vestry agenda, and the willingness of church leadership to be open to a new way of working. These changes came about gradually as a result of the vestry forming more intentional links with The Work + Shop, a ministry of St. Mark's and a community of supporters in San Antonio.

The Rev. Dr. John Lewis and the Rev. Jane Patterson, part-time staff clergy at St. Mark's, have co-directed The Work + Shop since 2005. In their retreats, Bible studies, classes and discernment groups, Patterson and Lewis lead individuals and groups in discerning God's call in their everyday lives.

As individual members of St. Mark's encountered The Work + Shop's programs in

*continued on page 5*

*This Issue:  
Spiritual Discernment  
Circulation 24,500*

*This issue comes to you courtesy of The Work+Shop: a San Antonio-based ministry for strengthening Christian communities through daily discernment. The project takes its name from the Benedictine Rule which compares the monastery to a workshop, where members of the community work with the "tools of the spiritual craft" in the daily work of crafting faithful lives. Co-directors John Lewis and Jane Patterson are Episcopal Church Foundation Fellows who, along the way, fell in love with parish ministry.*

*Inside:  
Clothing ourselves  
with Christ*





## Vestry work in real life: New vision

By John McClung and Mary McClung

*How does true spiritual discernment work with nuts-and-bolts issues like vision statements and parish budgets? All of a sudden, such tasks have the potential to express the heart and soul of a congregation. We asked vestry members John and Mary McClung to describe their experiences in writing a vision statement for St. Mark's. John was on the vestry that produced St. Mark's first vision statement in 2004. Mary was on the 2008 vestry that, through more facilitation and guidance of The Work + Shop, revised the earlier 2004 vision statement.*

### **John's Experience:**

I served on St. Mark's vestry from 2003 through 2005, and was senior warden in 2004. In 2004 our congregation embarked on the most ambitious capital campaign in the church's nearly 150-year history. Our 80-year-old parish house, venerable and historic qualities notwithstanding, was in need of extensive restoration and rebuilding.

The vestry of St. Mark's began a gradual process of taking to heart our role as the spiritual leaders of the congregation. Several of us were at a distinct advantage as we sought to find a "new way to meet," having been involved for about two years in a small group, convened by John Lewis of The Work + Shop, that met weekly to examine our everyday life experiences in the context of scripture.

As a consequence of incorporating these practices that we had learned through The Work + Shop, we became a wiser, more gracious body. Rather than follow the time-honored business/board meeting model of vestry service, we ventured into new territory that began to prove more fruitful and life-giving. For example, our meetings began with Eucharist, study and a shared meal. Over the course of time, we quit looking for the majority vote on issues, and focused on consensus and call.

In the context of these new practices and ways of thinking, the vestry spent the better part of 2004 writing a vision statement. The church had crafted a well-conceived mission statement, but had not taken the next step of creating a more comprehensive outline of goals by which we could honestly mark our progress...or failure to progress. To energize this capital campaign and lay out a vision for the future, the vestry spent many hours in meetings with an outside facilitator with extensive business experience to create a vision statement for how we wanted the congregation to look in the year 2020.

As part of this vision statement, and because St. Mark's has been an important congregation in downtown San Antonio since 1858, the vestry wanted to proclaim

the congregation's continuing role as a civic resource to the city. Clearly audible in the 2004 vision statement (excerpt below) is the community's pride in what the congregation had accomplished over the course of its long history. While it's safe to say all vision statements are imperfect — and ours was — it was written in the context of a very ambitious undertaking that had been conceived but not yet begun.



*Vestry members John and Mary McClung*

When I learned that the vestry on which Mary was serving was revisiting the vision statement, I confess I was initially irritated. Had we done such a poor job? How could this be a good use of time and resources? Looking back now, and comparing the words (below), I see the wisdom of doing so. There was an angst in the first statement that was a consequence of where we were at the time. It is written as if we were trying to convince ourselves, "everything will work out."

*Welcome to new Vestry Papers readers! Every parish and mission in the Church is receiving this special national issue. To subscribe to Vestry Papers, call the Episcopal Church Foundation at (800) 697-2858 or visit [www.episcopalchurch.org](http://www.episcopalchurch.org)*

# Vestry work in real life: New vision

## *Mary's Perspective:*

During my service on the vestry (2007 to the present), we reexamined our three-year-old vision statement in light of new developments in the congregation. While we strove to continue the practices John spoke of above, we sought the increased involvement of our affiliated ministry, The Work + Shop, in our review and reassessment of the vision statement.

In the process, a tension surfaced between the vestry's conscientious desire to be "responsible" stewards of St. Mark's money and buildings, on the one hand, and our commitment to follow Christ boldly, on the other. We were not only tempted to rush to put a new vision statement together before the new building even opened, but also to make plans for new ministries and initiatives so that all of the new space would be utilized from the first day the building opened.

As part of this process, and over the course of several months, The Work + Shop presented a variety of biblical passages to guide and stimulate the vestry's reflection. The first, Matthew 6:25-34, encouraged us to imagine collectively what the kingdom of God manifest through St. Mark's might look like — without being anxious to do what seems most "responsible." The vestry discussed how much of our anxiety was grounded in our understanding of what it means to be "responsible." We began to realize that true responsibility, according

to Jesus, rests with envisioning, then participating in, with God's construction of the Kingdom.

The second passage we used was James 1:12-16: "Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. That person has been proven through testing and will receive the crown of life ... No one ... is tempted by God ... But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin (i.e. "missing the mark"), and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death."

Each vestry member was invited to identify his or her own hopes and desires for how the new, increased space in the building might be used immediately. We reflected on how those desires and hopes might become an impediment to discerning patiently together what the kingdom of God might look like. Similarly, we considered how our desire to be good stewards of the space (by filling it up right away) and to be "responsible" (even to the point of looking for moneymaking uses of the space) might also get in the way of discerning God's will for how St. Mark's might use the space most faithfully in the coming months and years.

Through reflection, we discovered our anxiety and impatience about this period of waiting for our new parish house to be completed. Waiting is hard. But patient, confident expectation is the model of Christ — not worry and impulsive action.



*"Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who seek earnestly for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself."*

*(Matthew 6:25-34)*

## An emerging clarity for St. Mark's

### **Vision Statement 2008**

St. Mark's is a prophetic voice, strengthening the social fabric of our community. We are leaders in downtown life, demonstrating Christ's way for the well-being of the city. We continue our heritage of serving as a spiritual and aesthetic resource. We offer a place for all people to pray, find solace, and experience God's Kingdom.

### **Vision Statement 2004**

St. Mark's serves as an aesthetic resource for the city, reflecting the beauty and quality of

Christ's body in the world. This is reflected in St. Mark's extensive music programs and concerts. St. Mark's is proclaiming its historical position in San Antonio, is a visitors' destination, and has a civic, cultural, arts and music resource center, with gallery, lecture hall and other public spaces. St. Mark's maintains exceptional facilities to accomplish this vision. It is a landmark, which occupies three owned blocks, from Broadway to St. Mary's, and includes abundant parking.





# Clothing ourselves with Christ

by The Rev. Jane Patterson and the Rev. Dr. John Lewis

It is early evening, and traffic is heavy in the city as people head home for dinner and a night's rest. Lights are beginning to be visible in the windows of homes and apartments. Twenty-six people, however, won't just be going home for an evening with the family. They are packing up food they've prepared, making sure the children are dressed and

Finally one woman speaks up. "You all know how welcome I feel here. I look forward to coming here, and being with you every week for — how long have we been doing this? Four years? But sometimes it feels really lonely, because most of you come with your families, and, as you know, my husband thinks this is all silly. He's a good man, and

*Steven Fowl and Greg Jones observe that biblical scholars are the long-term memory of the church. Jane Patterson and John Lewis aim to convey to their parishioners what it was like to live in the first century as a follower of Jesus, at the time that the New Testament was being written. For Jane and John, those earliest Christians are their spiritual mothers and fathers.*



*The offices of the Work + Shop, located on the banks of Salado Creek in San Antonio, Texas.*

ready, and heading back out again for a meeting of their house church.

When they arrive at last, they are weary from the day, but glad to be together. Their hostess welcomes them in, and takes their containers of food to add to what others have brought. For a while, the rooms of the house are full of laughter and talk, until the meal formally begins with the breaking of bread and the words of Jesus, "This is my body that is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

They continue talking, catching up with one another, until the leader of the house church lifts a glass of wine, and again pronounces the words of Jesus, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

These words, and the passing of the cup, are the signal for the community to grow quiet as they prepare for a time of reflection on their daily practice of following Christ. Silence reigns.

I guess you could say that his religion is 'civic religion.' He's fair in his business; he participates in lots of the things that make our city livable and even prosperous. But he thinks all of this Jesus business is ridiculous, or even dangerous. Sometimes I wonder whether we should even stay together, because our values are so different."

A hush falls over the room as the group feels her anguish and searches for words that contain, somehow, the wisdom of Christ himself. They comb through what they remember of Jesus' words and actions, working to discern the most life-giving course of action for their friend and her family. Finally one of them speaks up. He says, tentatively, "Is there nothing good coming of your being together?" "Oh, no," she says. "On the contrary. I'm often aware that there is a goodness or blessing or — I hate to say holiness, but it's something like that — that includes both of us. When I've been with all of you and I go home, it's

# Discernment: Where's the Spirit moving?

continued from page 1

adult education classes, church committees, and other small-group settings, the idea of bringing a discernment process into the monthly work of the vestry began to grow.

In these experiences, participants would bring a concern or issue to the group and explore a passage in the Bible that might enlighten or provide guidance for the situation. These small group meetings had little in common with traditional vestry meetings, where checking off a to-do list of decisions and reports too often meant not enough time for reflection and discernment about the church's life.

Lewis and Patterson are present at every vestry meeting to help members focus on the biblical passage and what lessons it may hold. Explaining their process of choosing the appropriate biblical passage, they consult first with the rector and senior warden on what is coming up in the meeting. Then they work on finding the appropriate passages, which they introduce at the beginning but continue to teach throughout the meeting.

"In some ways the whole vestry meeting is the Bible study," Patterson says.

## Decisions owned by all

The vestry now gathers monthly to focus on the core issues affecting the church, ones that require a thorough airing. Decisions are owned by the entire vestry in a manner that grows leadership and shares accountability. What is more, say members, consensus is valued over winning the day with one's viewpoint.

It hasn't always been easy to change, leaders say. During a months-long debate about opening a preschool, a massive and identity-changing decision in the life of this downtown church, vestry members found

themselves slipping into "camps" once more, before finally stepping back to discern what was best for the parish community as a whole. Still, lessons were learned.

"For me it made me realize that you've really got to listen to what everybody says, and if someone has an opinion that's different from yours, it's even more important to listen," Steves says.

Revising the agenda was another key to making room for the vestry's practice of discernment. No longer are minutes and reports read and ratified during the meeting. Instead, all material that doesn't require a discussion is sent to vestry members in advance, with the clear expectation that they will read, comment upon or correct items before meeting. In other words, the vestry has more homework now.

"In some ways, it's less comfortable," says Chalk. "It's so much easier to go to a meeting and just hear reports and then go home. But we want the meeting to be about making strategic decisions and discerning our future."

"Anything that can be written, anything that does not need an interactive discussion just gets handled before the meeting," says Aboul-Saad. "We went from having 10 or 15 minutes for each of our issues to having two basically main issues each month."

## What's the Holy Spirit doing here?

The question that Patterson and Lewis want the vestry to keep foremost in their minds is, "What's the Holy Spirit doing here?"

The result? "You don't feel pinched anymore. You feel like you can really talk it through and listen to each other," says Aboul-Saad.



*"I see vestry people who are more energized," says the Rev. Michael Chalk, St. Mark's rector. "They feel their time is better utilized. They are being challenged and their leadership skills are enhanced."*

## Pare down the agenda

As the vestry at St. Mark's has discovered, *paring down the agenda* is one of the most difficult, but most effective, tools for developing a community of discernment. The rector and senior warden work together to come up with a list of issues they think need to be addressed, and then they ask themselves concerning each one:

- Is this issue *worthy of the attention* of the fifteen-member vestry?

- Can this information be conveyed in a *written* report and disseminated before the meeting?
- Is there *any other committee* that can appropriately address this issue?

The goal is to discuss only *one* major aspect of the parish's life at each meeting, and to do so in depth. Paring down the agenda helps a parish work *strategically* toward its *long-term* goals.



# Clothing ourselves with Christ

continued from page 4

as though the holiness of what we do washes over on my husband as well, and our children.”

The scenario above could be an account of one of the regular weekly discernment groups convened by The Work + Shop in San Antonio since 2001, but it is actually an imaginative description of a house church meeting in Corinth in the mid-first century (1 Cor. 11:23-25; 7:12-15).

---

***Those first-century gatherings for reflection and discernment on what it means to “clothe one self with Christ” (Gal 3:27) are the model for the weekly discernment groups convened by The Work + Shop in San Antonio.***

---

The Work + Shop began when St. Mark's, a downtown Episcopal parish, sought to develop a ministry that would provide a place for those who work downtown to reflect upon the role of faith in their daily

life and work. Simultaneously, The Rev. Dr. John G. Lewis was completing his doctoral thesis at Oxford on the practices of discernment carried out by the Apostle Paul in his churches. Lewis joined the staff of St. Mark's in 2001 to develop this new ministry to the working community.

The Work + Shop has grown since then into a ministry that is both within and outside of the parish. The Work + Shop helps people to engage the Bible imaginatively and creatively, as a tool for discerning how they might embody Christ in their own contexts.

The Rev. Jane Patterson, who is completing her Ph.D. in New Testament at Southern Methodist University, joined Lewis in 2005, and the two priests teach New Testament and practices of Christian discernment in a wide variety of seminaries, parishes, dioceses, a university, and a medical school.

*If you are interested in contacting John Lewis or Jane Patterson for a consultation or to lead a retreat, you will find them on the web at [www.theworkshop-sa.org](http://www.theworkshop-sa.org), or you may call them at 210-599-4224. Snail mail is 2015 N.E. Loop 410, San Antonio, Texas 78217.*

*“The Work + Shop helps people to engage the Bible imaginatively and creatively, as a tool for discerning how they might embody Christ in their own contexts.”*

*John Lewis*



*Martha Steves and Dina Aboul-Saad have discovered greater vitality in the vestry meetings because St. Mark's emphasizes more biblical reflection on the issues and less focus on business details.*



# A Bible study to clip and use

The Rev. Jane Patterson and the Rev. Dr. John Lewis

**How can you tell when a ministry is no longer viable?**

**Can a ministry come to an end without being seen as a failure?**

**How can the generations of a parish support one another in their different ways of carrying out the ministry of Christ?**



The Rev. Michael Chalk, St. Mark's rector, with The Work + Shop leaders the Revs. John Lewis and Jane Patterson.

These are difficult questions, and they are often avoided by vestries as they seek to make everyone happy by supporting every old ministry and every new ministry about which someone is enthusiastic.

At St. Mark's, we realized that we simply could not continue to ignore these questions, especially as they pertained to a particular long-standing ministry that had practically defined the parish in the eyes of the community. Yet this was also a ministry that required extensive human and other resources, just as fewer and fewer young adults had the time and energy to carry it out.

The move back into our Parish House after its extensive remodeling brought the issue to a head, and the question of the continuance of the ministry was set as the centerpiece of the vestry's agenda for August, with an hour set aside purely for discussion of the results of interviews with "stake holders" in the ministry, both staff and parishioners.

This Bible study was used to initiate reflection on the interviews, and is presented here in the hopes that it may help another congregation do the hard work of discerning whether a ministry continues to be an energetic vehicle for the work of Christ.

## Experiences of God's power: 1 Corinthians 12:1

Now concerning spiritual things (*pneumatika*), brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed...Now there are varieties of experiences of God's power (*charismata*), but the same Spirit...and there are varieties of services (*diakonia*), but the same Lord; and there are varieties of actions, but it is the same God who energizes all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit (*pneumatos*) for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another *charismata* of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of deeds of power (*dynameis*), to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who distributes to each one individually as the Spirit chooses.

## A note on key Greek words:

*Pneumatika*, refers to all sorts of things inspired by the "breath," or spirit of God. *Charismata*, often translated as "gifts," or "spiritual gifts," are perhaps better understood as experiences of the power of God working through us when we make ourselves instruments of God for the well-being of those around us. *Diakonia* referred originally to table service, but gradually came to mean any form of Christian service or ministry. *Dynameis* are sometimes translated as miracles. When you see the Greek word, you can see that what is foremost in the word itself is its "dynamic," or powerful quality. Thus, Jesus did many deeds of power, some of which were what we might call "miraculous."



*The monetary value of the time a vestry spends, given the time and talents of those assembled for a two-hour meeting, has been calculated by Work + Shop staff to be \$4,500. Which issues deserve that outlay of resources?*



### ECF's Mission

To strengthen the leadership and financial capabilities of Episcopal congregations, dioceses and related organizations to pursue their mission and ministry.



### President

Donald V. Romanik

### Program Director

Lynne Grifo

### Editor

The Rev. Lindsay Hardin Freeman  
[VestryPapers@EpiscopalFoundation.org](mailto:VestryPapers@EpiscopalFoundation.org)

### Editorial Associate

Kelly Mistick

### Director of Marketing

Rebecca McDonald

### Design/Production

Monarch Communications

### 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.

Episcopal Church Foundation  
815 Second Avenue  
New York, NY 10017

Call (800) 697-2858  
or subscribe online at  
[www.EpiscopalFoundation.org](http://www.EpiscopalFoundation.org)

## A Bible study to clip and use

### For reflection on the passage:

What do all of the inspired actions of the church have in common, according to Paul? What is the purpose of all of the actions inspired by God?

### Note the wide variety of actions inspired by the Spirit:

- the speaking of wisdom
- the speaking of knowledge
- faith (or "confidence")
- healing power
- powerful deeds (Whose power is known through one's powerful deeds?)
- the courage to speak forth what God gives one to say ("prophecy")
- the discernment of spirits
- tongues ("languages" not native to those present, but perhaps familiar to others), interpretation of tongues

### Assessing the continuation of a ministry:

- What is the purpose of this ministry as a channel of the power of God for the common good?
- Does every aspect of the ministry currently contribute to the achievement of this purpose?
- Does this ministry look like the ministry of Jesus (the "one Lord")?
- Does this ministry maximize the potential of those engaged in this ministry? In other words, do they correspond to the *charismata* that the Spirit is distributing in our community?
- Is there a dynamic balance between the resources required of the parish and the evidence of the Spirit's power known through this ministry? Does it energize or deplete the community?
- Is this ministry the best way for the parish to achieve the core purposes outlined above?
- What is the most powerful way for a ministry to be initiated in the first place?
- What makes a tradition a *living* one, which continues to energize a community?
- What risks are taken when a ministry is passed down from one group to another?



With new learnings about how to work together, leaving room for prayer, study and biblical reflection, vestry members (left to right) Beverly Bryars, Lorrie Uhl, and Kate Crone find meetings more enjoyable, satisfying and productive.