

VESTRY PAPERS

To Encourage and Guide Those Called by God to Lead Episcopal Congregations



CORNERSTONE
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Faith Forged in the Fire

by Diana B. Henriques

On September 11th, as my husband Larry and I were finishing breakfast, we heard a plane go over our house – too low and too loud for the usual air traffic approaching Newark Airport, 20 minutes away. We looked at each other in concern, and I glanced at the clock. It was a few minutes before 9 a.m.

By then, most of America knew what we did not yet know: that the plane that had roared over our city, like its hijacked companion, was aimed at the Twin Towers. My peace was shattered moments later, when my sister called in a tearful panic to be sure I was safe. After checking the news, Larry and I raced a few blocks to a low bluff overlooking the city skyline, joining the thousands around New York who watched in stunned horror as the towers fell.

Hoboken has become, in the past decade, one of Wall Street's closest bedroom communities, and I felt certain that many of those whose deaths we were watching were our neighbors. Two memories are seared into my brain from that moment. I noticed a friend who works for a weekly news magazine with

her notebook out, interviewing the distraught onlookers. For a nanosecond, I thought: "I should be doing that," for I, too, am a journalist. But next to me, a terrified young mother was frantically trying to reach her husband by cell phone, as their baby cheerfully tossed his bottle onto the grass. All around us on that shaded overlook, people were in terrible pain – weeping, groaning, and clutching total strangers for support. I did not run home for a notebook and pencil; instead, Larry and I instinctively hurried to our church, All Saints Parish, a few blocks away on Hoboken's main street.

A balancing act

For me, that sprint was the first step in a balancing act that continued for the rest of that surreal week. Our rector, Geoff Curtiss, had left the day before for San Francisco and was stranded there. For the first four days, the parish's response to this ghastly wound would be the responsibility of its lay leadership and its part-time staff. But my employer,

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Who would have foreseen the events of September 11th? Like crises often do, they hit out of the blue and remind us that sorrow, death and loss are a part of parish life. This issue of Vestry Papers explores special responsibilities for parish leaders in such times.

When the Waves are High

by Dick Kurth

I have been privileged to enjoy a number of explicit leadership roles in my life. People who have a real stake in the outcome have deliberately given me authority and trusted me to use that authority well on their behalf.

The leadership role of a vestry is to remember accurately where the church community has been, to shed light on where it is now, and to discern where it needs to go and how it might get there. There must be a shared

notion, regularly tested and never too precise or final, of where the far shore is. Your job as a leader of the vestry is to pilot the boat towards that often dim shore.

But what about crisis leadership? Now the waves are high, the boat is full of water and the shore is not visible at all. The anguished cry is "Who will lead us?"

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When the Waves are High

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We might find the leadership in people from whom we explicitly expect it. Then again, we might not. Where to turn, whom to follow?

We are all familiar with how an unexpected situation can produce leaders we didn't know we had. So, how will we recognize the leaders at such a time? More importantly, how will they recognize themselves?

Leaders are those who can see a situation clearly and act accordingly because they know who they are.

What is it that leaders must know about themselves? That all of us – individually, in small groups and in community – are vulnerable. Accepting our vulnerability and our inability to control people and events is the ground for leadership. We can shape, we can set direction and be intentional, but we can't control. Aligning our behavior to this knowledge is deeply counter cultural, but isn't going against the grain a special gift of the Church?

In a crisis, the first question is not "what happened?" but "who am I?" Second, "who are we?" Only with answers to the question of who you are can you respond to events instead of react to them.

Hearing the call to leadership

Leadership responds, it does not react. We are called to move forward, not to defend. To respond to a call you must first hear the call.

Response has to do with seeing, noticing, paying attention to what is right in front of you. Being there, fully present at all times. It does not have to do with solving problems (reacting). It does not have to do with knowing the answers. In fact, it is crucial not to give answers when there are none, and this too is counter cultural; to act as if you have the answers when you do not prolongs a crisis by increasing anxiety. It is a common abuse of the authority and trust that has been invested in you.

Response means showing your love. You have to see around corners and through walls, and hear even the smallest insistent sound. This cannot be done if you think you know the answers, if you are certain that you know where the shore is before anybody else does. You cannot see clearly through the

cataracts of your own opinions and you cannot hear well through the din of your own problem solving inner voice, either.

Showing love means caring for the human being first, attending to her, listening to him, banishing anxiety. Such love will help you lead people to the far shore.

We saw this leadership quality abundantly in Rudy Giuliani from the very first hours of the WTC attack. He was everywhere present, tireless, attending to people, telling them what he knew, being honest when he didn't know, not hiding his grief, and throughout it reminding us that as New Yorkers we would get through this (as in our deepest hearts we already knew we would, since as humans we have to get through it). His love and attention to this city laid a strong foundation for the future.

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Telling the truth

When I was six and my brother was five, we moved to England. As we flew from Los Angeles to London across the North Pole (this was 1958), he asked me if the plane would crash. I said it might and it might not. That was of course the truth. I believe in telling the truth. After being bothered by my answer for 43 years, he recently said to me "All I wanted was for you to say 'Everything will be alright.' That's all." That would have been the truth too, even if we had crashed.

Seeing what people need and helping them to get it while telling the truth is what leadership is all about. In crisis or not, that is the heart of my faith journey.

Dick Kurth is senior warden at St. Luke's Parish in Darien, Connecticut and a managing director of Jay Gaines & Company, an executive recruiting firm in New York City. Six residents of Darien, including one St. Luke's parishioner, were killed in the WTC attack, and he also lost a number of other friends and clients.

"The waves have risen and the surging sea is dangerous, but we do not fear drowning for we stand upon the rock. Let the sea surge! It cannot destroy the rock. Let the waves rise! They cannot sink the boat of Jesus."

John Chrysostom
Bishop, Constantinople

– From the homily preached in 409 AD before he was sent into exile by the Romans, where he died from exhaustion and starvation.

TALK BEFORE THE CRISIS HITS

Finding God in the Raging Storms

by Frank Wade

The events of September 11th have attuned our minds to the reality of crises in our lives. This focusing experience, powerful as it may be, is but one of the many forms a crisis might take. Industrial accidents, plant closings, fires and the all too frequent car crash are all manifestations of the same fact. We live in a dangerous world and sometimes that danger becomes real in dramatic ways.

Our word 'crisis' comes from the Latin word for 'sifting', as one sifts flour. While I do not know all of the reasons for that root becoming our modern word, individuals and communities are shaken by moments of crisis. Our assumptions, our hopes, our reliance on a stable foundation are all disturbed and, in some cases, destroyed.

Grabbing for something solid

In a crisis people turn instinctively to the church in the same way a stumbling person will reach for a handrail. We want to be able to grab something solid while everything else seems to be shaking, sifting and falling. That instinct provides the first premise of spiritual leadership in a time of crisis. People are looking for hope that is a match for their fears and faith that is deeply rooted and grounded. Our first task is to see that they do not turn to us in vain.

While the canons are clear that vestry responsibility is temporal, vestries and clergy both share leadership in the faith community. Well balanced leadership will have substantial interplay between clergy and vestry. The question of what members of the community will seek from the church and what they will find there in crisis is essential. The purpose of this article is to set forth some tools for raising and addressing those important issues. The time for talking about these things is well before the crisis strikes.

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One might begin by wondering if people would turn to your congregation in a crisis. Is your congregation known as a place where guidance and support are available in the routine ups and downs of life? Is the church accessible and welcoming physically (vestry) and spiritually (clergy)? Is your church a place where beliefs and hopes are regularly affirmed but questions and fears are allowed?

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*For he shall give his
angels charge over
you, to keep you in
all your ways.*

*They shall bear you in
their hands, lest you
dash your foot
against a stone.*

Psalm 91:11-12

Make Sure the Advance Work is Done

by Tilly-Jo Emerson

When someone asks me about vestries in times of crisis, my frank response is that vestries can be useless in such times – unless they have done their work in advance.

On the other hand, vestries that have done their work are just the opposite. They are better able to withstand stress, respond non-anxiously, make more informed and wiser decisions, and generally handle what life throws at them with faith. And the joy of all of this is that their work is not hard.

Being intentional

Work for vestries involves practicing and being intentional about a number of skills we already have or that are easily acquired. Christian discernment is high on that list. When used as a decision making system in easy times, it becomes natural in times of crisis. Discernment processes require intentional listening: listening for God in oneself and in others, listening to others knowing that together you will be wiser than if you

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Doing the Advance Work

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were alone, listening to support the other person, and understanding disagreement as another example of the diversity in God's creation.

The skill of paraphrasing can be particularly helpful in times of disagreement. When we can paraphrase what another person has said to their satisfaction, the dynamic changes, moving the spirit of the conversation from highly charged to collaborative. But a crisis is not the time to learn this skill. People feel too self-conscious and when feelings are running high, as they inevitably will in crisis, they will not tend to have the energy to hang in there with a new process.

And the joy of all of this is that their work is not hard.

Similarly, the work of the vestry entails being aware of group processes and group dynamics. When the group is conscious of the spirit in which it deliberates, when it is accustomed to observing and naming the climate in which its business is conducted, it will be more prepared to deal with issues when there is fear or anger or despair in the room. The ability to name the feeling reduces the tendency under conflicted situations to exaggerate. But unless this becomes habit, people are self-conscious about doing it and under stress will resist.

Responding from a different center

Vestries that have prayed together are like the proverbial "families that pray together.." They will deliberate and respond to crisis from a different center. When they have, as a matter of deep caring, been willing to share soul conversations rather than the surface communication of "who do you work for and where do you live," it will change the nature of the conversation. When people can share with each other their awareness of God in

their lives, just as a matter of course, the conversation takes on another dimension. Trust and authenticity are the results.

Parker Palmer talks about the necessity for leaders to have done deep spiritual work for themselves in order to be authentic and effective in their leadership roles. After participating in several training sessions with a vestry several years ago, the group started having authentic soul conversations at vestry meetings. One of the wardens frequently asked the "God question": "Where is God in your life or this situation?" Very soon, their stewardship meetings followed suit and before they knew it, they were continuing the practice into the coffee hour.

The entire dynamic of the social hour changed. They talked quite easily of God's presence. Newcomers were delighted and came into the conversation at a much deeper level with less self-consciousness. The congregation was able to deal effectively and prayerfully with a very difficult situation when a daycare worker in the daycare center housed in the church was accused of sexual abuse.

Finding God's grace

In the end, vestries that know how to be collaborative, how to handle conflict creatively, and who are not afraid of disagreements, will have fewer serious conflicts because they will handle the situations sooner.

Vestries who have developed a prayerful, open, fun loving climate in their meetings will respond more effectively when a crisis occurs. And they will be more open to finding God's grace in that very process.

A partner in the consulting firm of Marshall, Towell and Emerson of South Orange, New Jersey, Tilly-Jo Emerson has worked with over 100 church governing bodies in areas ranging from conflict management to long-range planning.



"We are beginning to see as we never saw before that we are truly in the world and yet ultimately not of it. For we are groping to the realization that above all else, we are called to be saints."

1965, Selma, Alabama
– Written by seminary student Jonathan Daniels shortly before he was killed while protecting a young African American girl.

Finding God

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If the energy of the congregation's leadership is devoted to issues of control, survival or any of the other lower rungs of Jacob's Ladder, it is unlikely that the community within it will see that church as a resource in times of trouble.

One way to assess that quality of congregational life is to consider whether the church is such a resource now. When the oncologist's report is not as good as one hoped; when a fairy tale marriage becomes an illusion; when the burdens of life exceed our natural strength; when a small child meets the reality of death through the mortality of a hamster, is your church a resource? Would you turn to your church at such a time? Please note that the question is "turn to the church" not just "turn to the clergy." We all have a role in responding to one another in such times. The principle here is the same as in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30). When we are faithful with little things, people will trust us with great things.

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Staying lit when all else is dark

Another perhaps more difficult question: Is the knowledge and love of God obvious at

the center of congregational life? Buildings have exit signs lit so that they will not go out in a time of crisis and panic bars on the doors so that they are easily opened when the need arises. Is the love of God like that in your congregation? Will it stay lit when all else goes dark and can you access it with even the clumsiest of efforts?

Spiritual leadership in a time of crisis grows directly from the spiritual development of the congregation between crises. The good news is that we have wonderful spiritual resources that have stood the test of countless siftings over the centuries. Our liturgies, psalms and collects are able to shine words of clarity and hope on the raging storms of our lives. Education programs can help people to tap these rich resources. The generosity of God in sharing the strengthening power of the Spirit is abundant. When the leadership team of a congregation consciously develops these resources, the church can be the beacon of hope and ultimate triumph it was created to be in crisis and in between.

The Rev. Frank Wade is Rector of St. Alban's Parish in Washington, D.C. and was chaplain to the House of Deputies at the 2000 General Convention. He is the author of Companions Along the Way: Sermons about Relationships by Posterity Press, available through St. Alban's Parish.



O Lord, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last.

The Book of Common Prayer

Editor's Note

By the time this issue of *Vestry Papers* reaches you, several months will have passed since September 11th. Our readers throughout the country are in varying places with their grief and recovery from these cataclysmic events. Some still reel from the trauma, some are more removed, others want to move on. Geography contributes to this; denial can be a factor. The fact remains that people react to crisis and recovery in different ways.

The same observation can be made within a parish community when loss and grief occur. During such a time, these varying reactions need to be considered by vestry members. We wondered what clergy and laity want from each other in times of stress and took an informal survey around the country to find out:

What do laity look to clergy for in times of crisis? Our most frequent and impassioned answer: Spiritual guidance in understanding the forces of evil and why bad things happen – and how to best respond. **Other answers:** (1) Be there - in the pulpit, by the hospital bed, in the home. (2) Be pastoral - pray, bless, forgive. (3) Be steady - like a sturdy tree, flexible but strong. (4) Be creative, especially with parish conflicts. (5) Give reassurance - show the light of Christ. (6) Share hope.

What do clergy look to laity for in times of crisis? (1) Prayer - for the situation and for the clergy. (2) Support - for those grieving and for the clergy. (3) Presence - show up. No gesture is too small. (4) Do not gossip. (5) Maintain confidences - yours is a key role and discretion must be used. (6) Be clear and ready to focus - come prepared to gently lead.





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Faith Forged in the Fire

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The New York Times, also faced a staggering challenge, bearing witness to a tragedy that had brought city life almost to a standstill. I needed, and wanted, to be part of that work.

The parish, fortunately, has a tiny but very creative staff. Laurie Wurm, our talented community development director, provided extraordinary leadership. At her initiative, the church's doors were kept open around the clock on that awful Tuesday, as we provided simple food and shelter to countless commuters stranded in Hoboken by the mass transit shutdown. She organized nightly prayer services and, with parish volunteers, kept the church open for walk-in visitors.

The staff of our small parish day school, led by Betsy Deyo, was magnificent. The students were soothed and their parents were assured that the children would be cared for until they could be retrieved, however long that took. Organist Barry Oliver provided the comfort of music and our part-time business administrator fielded the phones in the office.

Indeed, when my husband and I first reached the church right after the attacks, Barry already had the doors open. After checking with Betsy and being reassured that the day school was responding appropriately, I found materials for makeshift signs announcing that the church was "Open for Prayer." People had already begun to come in, the first of hundreds who would visit the sanctuary that week.

...I found materials for makeshift signs announcing that the church was "Open for Prayer."

Then, I raced home to see if I could reach the newsroom. Soon, two *Times* colleagues arrived on my doorstep, unable to cross the river but ready to work. We quickly set up a tiny bureau in my husband's office, receiving our assignments and setting out to do our work. When we had done all we could, my co-workers left for their suburban homes. And I went back to church.

Balm for the Spirit

What I found, that evening and throughout the week, was a balm for my spirit. Vestry

members and other volunteers had pulled together, in our rector's absence, to create a place of welcome and warmth. The fledgling committee system we had set up at a vestry planning retreat, held just the weekend before the disasters, was working. Our communications committee chairman kept vestry members informed, by e-mail, of the prayer service schedule. Our finance committee chairman took charge of the spontaneous donations we received, and made sure that bills were paid. Many vestry members found their work had been canceled that week, and their generous help allowed me to devote time to the newsroom.

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And I know that we helped – for I was one of those who turned to All Saints for solace after long hours of sad, demanding work. I spent my days interviewing bereaved families and weaving their weeping anecdotes into stories on deadline. But whenever I walked into the doors of my church, I was embraced and comforted.

The sad but profoundly satisfying work of September 11th continues, for me, on both fronts. Under Laurie's direction, the parish has formed a support group for eight Hoboken women widowed by the attacks. Our capital campaign, planned with such hopefulness during our vestry retreat, is confronting the same uphill slope that all non-profits are now facing. But our vestry continues to enjoy the unity and mutual respect that was forged in those first demanding days. And I continue to cover the fallout from the attacks, sustained every day by the love and encouragement I find within the parish.

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