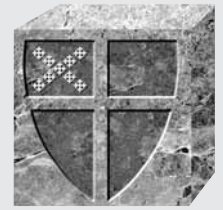


VESTRY PAPERS

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



CORNERSTONE

IS A MINISTRY OF

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

FOUNDATION

Discover Your Need for God

by Tom Ehrich

It is possible, I suppose, to pray and then to lead. I suggest we try it the other way: attempt the hard work of leading, and thereby discover your need for God.

Leadership of a faith community calls for five spiritual attributes. (Notice that decibels and determination aren't on the list.) Exercising those attributes requires hard work and unconcern for self. Our institutions — not just churches — are starved for leadership because not enough people want to do the work that true leadership requires. They want offices, not duties; they want status, not sleepless nights; they want approval, not conflict; they want control, not accountability.

Reading a prayer from the Prayer Book as a prelude to the vestry's work won't be enough.

True leadership requires more prayers than we are accustomed to saying, more collaboration, more letting go, more listening, more losing, more dying to self — more Jesus, in other words.

I suggest that you start by doing the work, and then when you fall short, struggle for civility, snarl in frustration and find compromise and consensus unattainable — then, when you have exhausted your own resources, turn to God for help.

Why is it so hard? Leading a church calls for five spiritual attributes that don't come naturally to us.

First, listen.

Listen to the questions that people are asking. Listen to their life-questions, not

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A PRAYER OF OPENING, OF LETTING GO Silence in the Vestry

by Kenneth Arnold

A scene familiar to anyone who has spent more than a few years in a parish goes something like this. The vestry (or any leadership group) gathers for its regular meeting. The atmosphere is tense because everyone knows that "Joe" is going to bring up a controversial issue.

The rector is also tense; she doesn't have the support to turn back Joe's challenge. She begins the meeting with a prayer. Although heads are bowed, everyone is still thinking about the conflict to come. When it comes, it's unpleasant. Joe stomps out in a rage, shouting, "I want my church back!"

I was one of the objects of Joe's anger.

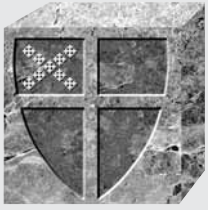
I remember being shocked by his vehemence and by his departure. Not too many months after this event, I left the parish. A year later the rector left. Within another year, the congregation had dwindled to a handful on Sundays.

One of the problems with the life of this parish, and I think with many parishes, is that the people did not know how to pray together — although they knew how to gather on Sunday for worship. So how can I say the people did not know how to pray together?

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As one's profile of leadership rises in a parish, so does the potential for slings and arrows from unexpected quarters. In this issue, our authors suggest ways of staying on track spiritually while living amidst both the challenges and joys of serving on a vestry.

This Issue:
Your Spiritual Life



Silence in the Vestry

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Blessed and cursed

As Episcopalians we are blessed and cursed with a Book of Common Prayer. The book is our refuge and strength; it is also a crutch. Often we feel that having spoken the words in the book, we have prayed. (And often we are right.) What is the difference then between reading the words, or saying the words, and prayer? Does praying together in the spirit — which is different from saying the words of a prayer — make a difference in how we behave with each other in community? How does that work?

In the vestry meeting I described, we were not praying together in the spirit, even though the rector said a prayer and we all bowed our heads. It had already been determined, long before the meeting, that there would be conflict. No one really wanted to pray with the others who were about to oppose what they wanted — no more than they wanted to work out a solution to the problem we all faced. The point of the meeting was to win something over others.

We all face situations like this in our family, work, and church lives. In the secular world, there are all sorts of systems for managing conflict and for helping groups to listen and be respectful of one another. In church, we sometimes use these systems to good effect. But we also have prayer which, if we allow it to use us, can achieve the same results.

Notice I said “allow prayer to use us.” Unlike a management technique, which we use properly to achieve a result, with prayer we are asked to empty ourselves to be used: by God. That is what I mean by prayer in the spirit.

Opening and letting go

Ordinarily we think of prayer as a form of asking or seeking. We speak to God, but we also speak to each other. Our prayers are often statements for the benefit of others: Here is my agenda, stay tuned.

The prayer I am suggesting we bring to vestry meetings and other community gatherings is a prayer of opening, of letting go. It is a prayer of silence in which no one speaks; everyone listens. The prayer is simply one of inviting God into the silence, into the hearts of all who are gathered. In this prayer, we ask nothing but to recognize that everyone in the room is one

being. Everything we do is the work of one organism.

This is the essence of love or compassion: that I see everyone as myself. That is a self-emptying love, not a love designed to achieve an end. To pray in the spirit is to release one’s self and let God in the form of everyone in the room come into an open heart.

Could that vestry meeting have ended in some other way had we all begun with this kind of prayer? Probably not, unless we had worked as a community to develop that discipline together. We have to educate ourselves to pray in this way. We have to adopt this prayer as a practice that we incorporate into our daily prayer and into our corporate worship if we are to bring it into the meetings where conflict and dissension and hurt feelings await.

Can we do it?

One way to approach this prayer is for the vestry or any given committee or group to gather on a given occasion and conduct no business at all. I think it is best if the group gathers in the normal meeting room, sits together in silent prayer, inviting God and one another into communion. Everyone leaves at the end of the session, having “done” nothing. It is a test of a community’s prayer life: Can we do it?

In a sense this is just a form of meditation in which we try to still the mind. But it is necessary to begin with the intention, perhaps spoken at first to oneself (or even aloud as one simple sentence), to become open to God and to others. It is also useful to be particularly open to the person we most dislike or disagree with. What would have happened that night if Joe and I had opened ourselves to each other in this way, each offering himself to the other?

We might be worshiping together in a vibrant, growing church community.

Deacon Kenneth Arnold is the publisher of Church Publishing Incorporated and has served most recently at Trinity Church, Morrisania, South Bronx. He is also the author of “On the Way: Vocation, Awareness and Fly Fishing” and “Night Fishing in Galilee: The Journey Toward Spiritual Wisdom.”

August is a surprisingly popular month for “church shopping.” Plan to have greeters and materials ready to go, rather than waiting for September. That way, newcomers are on board for the start of fall activities.

Listening from the Heart

by Robert Nesmith

As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the road. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"...Jesus said, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man answered, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go, your faith has made you well." Mark 10:46-52

After twenty-five years involvement in parish and diocesan leadership positions I had one of those "Aha!" moments that come infrequently, but when they do, you know that something has changed. This time it was an engulfing understanding: "Yes! That is why we are here."

"Here" was our diocesan conference center. Most of our vestry and staff had gathered for the vestry retreat that is an annual event in our parish. Almost always the purpose is to get to know each other better, to review our work of the past year and to set new goals and objectives for the coming year. The previous fall we felt a distinct need to do something different.

Not what God expected

Vestry meetings had been consumed with discussions and decisions on money, how much we had (or lacked) and how to use it

for the endless needs of an aging facility, repairs, programs and outreach. Surely this wasn't all God expected of us as elected leaders of a faith community. At one midsummer meeting I kept track of how we spent our time: 85% of the meeting concerned money and the business affairs of the church.

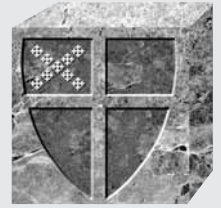
Not only were our time and energies spent on business issues, we had become a contentious group. It did not matter what was proposed: if one group was for it, another opposed it. Clearly this wasn't how Jesus intended a community of faith to live together. That evening one vestry member said, "Our responsibility is to take care of the secular, the business affairs of the church. The rector is responsible for the spiritual."

That raised these questions: Are we charged only with conducting the business affairs of the parish? Are there other parts of our life together that need attention? How do we know? We decided to use our weekend retreat to focus on the role of the vestry.

What are people asking?

Tom Ehrich, the popular author of "On A Journey," was asked to be our retreat leader. Tom had previously used the story of blind Bartimaeus to pose a question to his readers.

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Vestry Papers was the winner of eight Polly Bond Awards at the Episcopal Communicators' annual conference in April. Given for high standards in religious journalism, the commendations bring to fifteen the number of national awards won by Vestry Papers in the last three years.

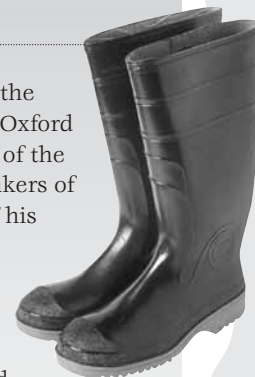
On Going to Church

"If there is anything in the teaching of the New Testament which is in the nature of a command, it is that you are obliged to take the sacrament, and you can't do it without going to church. I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music, but as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off.

"I realized that the hymns were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit."

— by C. S. Lewis, from "God in the Dock." An English professor at Oxford and Cambridge, Lewis was one of the great Christian writers and thinkers of the twentieth century. Some of his other writings include "A Grief Observed," "Mere Christianity," and "Surprised by Joy."

Share the joy of reading this summer with your children and grandchildren by reading Lewis' "The Chronicles of Narnia." Your kids and grandkids will see part of the series — "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" — in theaters later this year. You can help them learn about spirituality and faith by first reading the series with them this summer. — Ed.



Next Issue: Safe Church Guidelines

From the Heart

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If we were at the roadside and had the chance, as Bartimaeus did, to ask one question of Jesus, what would it be? This, then, became the theme of our retreat: What are people asking?

Friday night Tom asked each of us to write our own question on a piece of paper for him. At the Eucharist Saturday morning, those questions were read.

- ✚ Why do people let fear rule their lives instead of faith?
- ✚ How do we remain faithful to Jesus' teaching when we are so torn by anger and dissension?
- ✚ Why can't we learn to listen to others and be more interested in their lives than our own?
- ✚ How can people who disagree learn to love one another and live together in peace?
- ✚ What is life after death like?
- ✚ Why is there so much suffering in the world?
- ✚ If I am supposed to help my fellow man, why has God made it so hard?
- ✚ Does God really hear my prayers?

An "Aha!" moment

Not a single question about budget, money, programs or facilities. No questions about church politics or the Bishop of New Hampshire. *The questions of our hearts reflected our private pains and concerns.* As these prayers were read many of us found tears in our eyes and on our cheeks. A tender nerve had been touched and perhaps our hearts and minds also. An "Aha!" moment had occurred.

Tom's challenge and charge to us was "Listen to your people. Focus your time and energies on responding to their hurts and needs. If

you do this, the business affairs will be taken care of." We resolved to at least act as if we were spiritual leaders, to go beyond the business and "busyness" of the church.

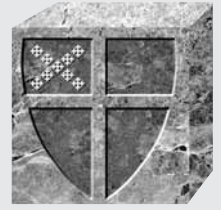
Our meetings always began with prayer, but we resolved now to pray for each other daily between meetings. Each month a different vestry member took a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting to read and reflect on our mission statement and what it meant.

Stopping destructive behavior

We began having a meal together before vestry meetings. We shared our concerns about illnesses, death and other grief and added those concerns to our prayers. Tension and dissension were replaced by optimistic hope. We still disagreed but worked hard to understand, not to win a vote or be in control. Forcing ourselves to stop destructive behavior gave us the freedom to listen to the questions of our hearts. That opened us to the real concerns of others.

We are all called to spiritual leadership of one form or another. Being a vestry member is an opportunity to exercise spiritual leadership. That is evangelism.

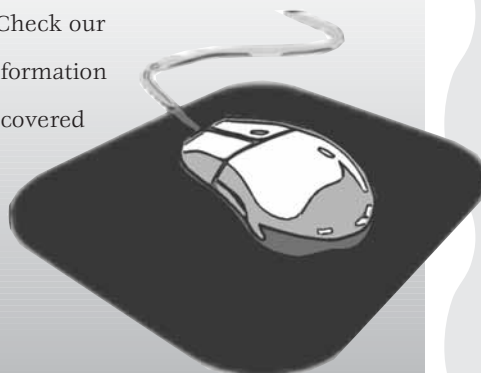
A member of St. Matthew's Church in Louisville, Kentucky, Robert Nesmith is a retired Coast Guard officer and owner of a distribution business. He has served as junior and senior warden of St. Matthew's, and has held several leadership positions in the Diocese of Kentucky. He is currently studying for an advanced degree in Spirituality in a combined program from the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary and Bellarmine University.



And Jesus said, "I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood rose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst...great was the ruin of that house!"

Luke 6:46-49

Join our interactive learning community and share with others your thoughts about different aspects of vestry life. Check our website (www.EpiscopalFoundation.org) for more information on how to join, and to find resources on every topic covered in *Vestry Papers*. And thank you to Karen Greenfeld and Susan Johnson of the Episcopal Church Foundation, who keep things updated.



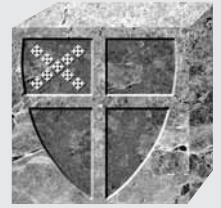


ANCHORED IN THE SPIRIT

Keeping Grounded

Given the often intense nature of vestry service, how does one stay spiritually grounded? We asked the experts – vestry members, past and present.

- ☑ “Church attendance was critical. It made a difference to center our vestry meetings in worship as well. We began by checking in with one another and having prayer, lighting a candle to burn during the meeting, finishing with Compline, and sharing a spiritual story. Corporate worship as a vestry and the corporate worship of the parish are VERY important.”
— Scott Evenbeck, Indiana
- ☑ “You have to be there. It was when I was on the vestry, especially as warden, that my whole spiritual life started to develop, for it's in the doing of things that you get involved. Historically, that's one of the reasons for the Daily Office, when you practice your religion “x” number of times a day. In psychological terms, if you want to develop in a certain way you can enter that life through belief, which will lead to practice and then amendment of life. Or you can start with practice, which leads to amendment of life and then belief. Either way, the more you are involved, the more your spiritual life grows.”
— Juli Towell, New Jersey
- ☑ “The type of love I cultivate the most, my primary prayer is “noticias” – just noticing the people around me and the situation...My attempt to imitate Christ is to start by noticing in the here and now, as he always did: the outcast, the sufferer, the man trying to be out of sight in the tree, the Pharisee, the authority.”
— Dick Kurth, North Carolina
- ☑ “During my vestry service I found that Bible study, either formal or on my own, helped me keep perspective. It's easy to get lost in the minutia of ‘church business.’ A warning sign is when vestry service or other lay ministry begins to feel like the day job continued into the evening or the weekend. The wonderful stories of the Hebrew Scriptures or the Jesus of the Gospels are an antidote, and a reminder that what we're about at church isn't just meeting to decide when to have the next meeting...”
— Dan Austin, New Jersey
- ☑ “Being called to serve on a vestry asks us to bring our hands-on skills with our desire to serve our parish...The fact of doing work in fellowship with others in this service creates in us a balance of spirit. Regular worship, especially enhanced by good preaching, music and liturgy, feeds us. Regular prayer helps us to see the good path we are to follow for our physical, spiritual, emotional health ‘and peace at the last.’”
— Lili Whitmer, Connecticut
- ☑ “Church attendance was more important to me during my vestry service. Since the vestry has a responsibility to the congregation, it is a good place to see the members. While I was on a vestry we had a rector who was found to be using church funds for his personal expenses. I was pretty disillusioned by that episode. But I talked with his replacement and continued to attend church and seemed to retain a spiritual balance.”
— Greg Young, Minnesota
- ☑ “We have a small (50+ pledging units) parish so it is important for vestry members, especially wardens, to be everywhere all the time. Services, church school, clean-up days, fellowship events, etc. It's also important to know what is happening in the diocese – whether we are in sync and taking advantage of opportunities to collaborate with other parishes.”
— Bernard J. Milano, New Jersey



“The Old Man of the Earth stooped over the floor of the cave, raised a huge stone, and left it leaning. It disclosed a great hole that went plumb-down. “That is the way,” he said. “But there are no stairs. You must throw yourself in. There is no other way.”
— by author
George MacDonald, of whom C.S. Lewis said, “He baptized my imagination.”



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Mission

To inform, inspire and affirm Episcopal vestries in their work.

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.

Call Cornerstone at (877) 644-9941

or subscribe online at

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Need for God

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their institution-questions. Listen to their yearnings, frustrations and brokenness. Listen without intending to fix, or to harvest for political gain, or to assign blame. In the stirrings of the human spirit we will hear God's Spirit.

Second, be honest.

It seems quaint and refreshing nowadays when someone says exactly what they mean to say, intend to do, or did wrong. Normative behavior is to deny, shade, minimize, spin or simply lie.

When leaders lie, a community's fabric of trust unravels. People make up "facts," guess at reality, lose trust in each other, and become suspicious of outsiders.

Dishonest leaders defend their lies as necessary to protect the institution. Nonsense. The ones being protected are themselves.

Church leaders should set a Godly standard of honesty in all doings, transparency within the community, respect for each other, and trust in God. If we cannot tell the truth to each other, what can we possibly tell the world?

Third, be patient.

Leaders need to know the difference between patience and avoidance.

Avoidance looks the other way as problems mount, opportunities arise, people evolve, situations change. Avoidance buys calm today at the expense of tension tomorrow. Avoidance pleases one person today at the expense of failing many people tomorrow. Avoidance loads today's unmet needs onto tomorrow's constituents.

Prodigious efforts to catch up, such as capital campaigns or staff restructuring, often leave the system exhausted, wary and conflicted.

To exercise Godly patience, leaders must be merciful with human frailty. If people are punished for failure, they will stop trying. If they are scorned for new ideas, they will stop thinking. If they are mocked for aiming high, they will aim low. If only winners get credit, people won't take risks.

Leaders must stay calm when anger erupts — as it will erupt in any institution — and not rush to douse the flames, to take sides, or to exploit anger for personal gain. Leaders must explore what lies behind the anger, allow anger to proceed within healthy bounds, set norms that discourage

scapegoating, blaming and abuse, and work together to affirm open, compassionate resolution.

Leaders must establish an environment of kindness. When people feel loved, trusted and fairly treated, there is no end to the good they can do. In the absence of kindness, people will be self-protective and grudging in their effort.

Fourth, be tolerant.

Religious bullies have declared tolerance weak and intolerance high moral principle. Leaders in all walks of life are having to choose: Will they stand up to religious bullies? Or will they take the expedient course so that business-as-usual can proceed?

This is "gut-check" time for religious leaders. The most basic Christian values are fairness, justice, love and mercy. When religious leaders can set aside basic values to pursue some church-political issue, the enterprise is lost.

Fifth, see the whole.

After Easter, the apostles faced a dilemma. Was their future to be found in the upper room where they were staying, or as Jesus had told them, "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth?" If they took the whole seriously, what was the place of the upper room?

There is work to be done in the upper room, of course, as well as people to know, learning to do, power to receive, healing to mediate, conflicts to be resolved, and joy to be had. One could have a rich religious experience just by staying inside.

Leadership must resist that easy course of staying within the walls, within the known and settled. If the world is changing and people's needs are changing, life inside must change, too. Or else it will become effete, precious, self-serving and ineffective. People inside must venture beyond the walls. Someone must see larger realities and respond to them.

A prolific writer, priest and retreat leader based in North Carolina, the Rev. Tom Ehrich is the author of "On a Journey," a series of daily meditations now received by Christians around the world. He is also the author of several books and a syndicated newspaper column. For more information, go to www.onajourney.org.