

# VESTRY PAPERS



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CHURCH FOUNDATION  
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To inform, inspire and affirm Episcopal vestries in their work

## It's All About Communicating

*"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."*

*John 1:1*

God speaks and creation begins. What happens when we speak or act — or fail to? There is not an aspect of parish life that does not involve communicating — whether it is with God, with fellow vestry members, with parishioners, or with ourselves.

Communication, after all, is about community, communion, commonality — it is about what we have in COMMON. And in the end, that's Jesus and the love of God happening in people's lives. So doing it, caring about it, working on it will BUILD your church community.

Perhaps you are a new vestry member and do not know how to read budget statements and are afraid to ask? Or you see visitors awkwardly walk the edges of the coffee hour, and realize that no one is talking to them? Or you've been nursing a grudge about a

decision to go ahead with a capital campaign, believing that your views weren't heard?

Or...

Your church friends jumped in to help you recover from cancer, with meals and prayers and visits. You love the music on Sunday mornings. You serve on the education committee of the vestry and saw a child get a trophy for reading all the way through his Bible. You just have this feeling that something is going right!!!

So DO something about it. Tell somebody. It's the Christian way. Because we are not isolated individuals, but a COMMUNITY. We are a communal people. And your good news might help someone else. Or your concern might be someone else's. Or you misunderstood the situation, and you might learn something! (Hey, it's possible.)

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*This issue offers insights, suggestions and creative thinking about communications, our most basic activity in the church. Good OR bad, communications will be at the heart of how you solve your problems, share your story, encourage others and get things done.*

## Leave No One in the Dark

*by Richard Schmidt*

Communications is a two-way street. And about a twelve-way street if it's done right.

Twenty years ago, attendance at the parish where I was rector was increasing, approaching 75 percent of seating capacity at the main service. I had read that when a church is 75 percent full, worshipers feel crowded and attendance stops growing — old-timers stay away or visitors do not return a second time.

I saw four possibilities: (1) do nothing; (2) expand the church or build a larger one; (3) start a mission congregation; and (4) add a third Sunday worship service. I refused on principle to consider (1). The existing

structure was an architectural gem, which eliminated (2). There were already several other Episcopal congregations nearby, eliminating (3). That left (4), an additional worship service.

Adding a worship service would address other needs as well. Children had been excluded from worship at the parish (Sunday School was held during the main worship service), and with a new service, we could design a liturgy to include them. We could also introduce some new kinds of music. I thought an additional service was a great idea. I still think so.

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*This Issue:  
Parish  
Communications*



# It's All About Communicating

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This issue of *Vestry Papers* offers insights, suggestions, and creative thinking about this, our most basic activity. Either way, good OR bad, communications will be at the heart of how you solve your problems, share your story, encourage others, get things done.

And remember that communications will always be a two-way street. Like Jesus, it always takes the other seriously.

"The most important thing is to be willing to listen, not only speak," says Barbara Duffield, a recently retired three-term vestry member from St. Matthew's, Universal City, Texas. "People want and need more than anything else to be able to speak their concerns out loud. It's tempting to listen only to those with whom we agree — and dangerous to do so."

*Vestry Papers won four national awards this spring, one from the Associated Church Press and three from the Episcopal Communicators, bringing our award total to nineteen in the last four years. Thanks, readers, for your support!*

*Vestries — what's the most important quality in a rector? Clergy — what's the most important quality in a vestry member? Write us at VestryPapers@aol.com and we'll print the best responses in a future issue.*

## Communication Lessons from the Bible

Moses — Couldn't talk well on his own; needed his brother.  
*Sometimes deep thinkers need help to say things right.*

Elijah — Heard God in the still, small voice.  
*Sometimes you just have to hole up and listen.*

Isaac — Gave his younger son a blessing in error.  
*Once the word is let loose, it can't be taken back.*

Samson — Destroyed 3000 Philistines while blind and condemned.  
*Include the disabled.*

Sarah — Laughed upon learning she would give birth at age ninety.  
*Keep your sense of humor.*

Gideon — Was the smallest of all, and doubted that God was calling him.  
*Help youth to know how important they are to getting the word out.*

Hannah — Prayed so hard for a son that the priest thought she was drunk.  
*She got what she wanted. Keep praying.*

Amos — His plumb line image has lasted for 3000 years.  
*Give people a vision that lasts.*

Salome — Managed to get the head of John the Baptist on a platter.  
*Be careful what you ask for.*

Jesus — The Word made flesh.  
*Share in that creative energy.*



## ENSURE ALL VOICES ARE HEARD

# *This Parish Is Their Home, Too*

by Neva Rae Fox

As a vestry member, you know how important it is to have consistently good communications with your parish.

But building such a system is easier said than done. And when communications between the vestry and the parish are nonexistent or broken, trouble will surface. Hopefully you will never experience this avoidable situation.

Effective communication cuts down on rumors, embraces the parish in important decision-making and ensures all voices are heard. A lack of communication plus an atmosphere of secrecy, real or perceived, can cause serious rifts — and may take years to heal.

### **Hearing the parish**

While it is important for vestries to communicate with the parish, it is equally important to hear what the parish is saying to the vestry. You've probably heard

something like this: I think you should do something about children crying during service...I don't like the new color of the kitchen...Who is this new group meeting in the parish hall?

Believe it or not, that is communicating.

The parish — or at least those doing the talking — is telling you that they want to have a role in the decision-making. That they want to be a part of what happens. They want you to know that this parish is their home, too.

*Listen to them.*

### **Steps for communications**

Here are seven easy steps to ensure effective, two-way communications.

1. **Let the parish know what you're doing.** Simple announcements help

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*Printed material, such as newsletters, is a time-honored tradition in parishes. But with technology emerging as a new driving force, should churches adapt? Here's one distinct viewpoint:*

## **Seize the Day With the Web**

by Tom Ehrich

Thinking about electronic communications for your church? Here's an analogy. I asked my dental hygienist which teeth I should floss. "Whichever ones you want to save," she replied.

Should your church convert its communications to electronic tools such as e-mail and web site? Only if you want to stay in business.

How aggressive should you be? It depends on how much money you want to continue wasting in print media. And how many constituencies you want to reach effectively and economically.

### **Do It or Else**

It's that clear-cut. No ambiguity. It's like a decision to put tires on a car. Do it or else. Or else what?

Or else waste money. It costs virtually nothing to send an e-mail, compared with 39 cents (projected to be 42 cents in 2007) for an individual letter or bulk rate for large mailings, plus printing, paper, and staff time.

Or else waste effort. People read their e-mail, but not much of their postal mail, especially

wordy documents printed on pastel blue paper, folded and stapled.

Or else waste opportunity. People of all ages are hungry for faith. Fewer and fewer see that as requiring church attendance. If you want to serve this growing constituency, you need to be creative and intentional. The usual process — come to church, sign a guest register, get on a mailing list, read printed mailers, come to more events, feel at home — simply doesn't work any longer.

Or else waste credibility. Like it or not, more people spend their days on a computer. They do their work on-line, as well as their communications, travel and event planning, much of their shopping, and, yes, their religion. The fastest growing form of religious expression is on-line faith — from web-delivered Bible study to discussion groups to sermons and classes. If you aren't on-line in an aggressive and appealing way, you aren't meeting people where they are. Or else lose touch with young adults and teenagers. Younger folk expect to do all

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*Vestries, remember to consider the needs of your own congregation when thinking about the best ways to communicate.*

*Cultural norms and economic conditions will make a difference, for no one group is exactly like another.*

*As Vestry Papers went to press, The Wall Street Journal reported that Church of the Advent in Boston is now listed on MySpace.com, a popular web site among teens and young people.*

*"It's a way for us to say, 'Hey, come and see,'" says the Rev. Patrick Gray, rector.*

# Seize the Day

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significant business on the web, from talking to sharing to registering to buying to making decisions. If you don't have a web site, you're invisible. If your web site is dull or self-congratulatory, goodbye. Remember this: Jesus didn't sit in the Temple and wait for people to drop in. *He went where they were.*

Enough of the negatives. Let's talk positives. What do I mean by electronic communications?

## E-mail

- ✦ E-mail everything, from personal communications to parish newsletter to reminders to invitations. E-mail is immediate, well received, virtually cost-free, and can be tailored to reach groups and to incorporate personal names.
- ✦ E-mail looks better. If you send as an HTML page — basically, a web page — you can incorporate photos, graphs, and formatting as well as dynamic links to your web site. Example: an acolyte schedule showing a photo of last week's acolytes, upcoming schedule, and a dynamic link to send an email if a recipient can't serve that Sunday.
- ✦ E-mail and web pages force you to communicate well. No more eight-page newsletters with 1,000-word articles by the clergy. Single-page, short articles, lists, links, photos — this will be read. No more lazy posting of a notice on the off chance that someone might read it.
- ✦ Follow CAN-SPAM requirements. Or else you will get blacklisted by AOL and others.
- ✦ Offer printed and mailed alternative for those who request it. You'll be amazed how few exercise this option.

## Web site

- ✦ By now, most churches have web sites. Few churches have good web sites. Too many web sites function as bulletin boards, like the jumbled bulletin board outside the parish hall that people walk past.
- ✦ A good site is one that people come back to every day because it confers value, not because it looks good.
- ✦ The best web sites have these characteristics:
  - Simple and intuitive to use.
  - Pages open quickly.

- No scrolling required.
- Change content regularly — every day for a larger church, never less than once a week for any church. Do complete redesign once a year.
- Clear message of what this church is about.
- Use the web's interactive capability: pay your pledge via secure credit card process, sign up for an event and pay for it, dialog with rector and other parishioners, give feedback on events, update personal information.
- Enable participation: read a paper, listen to a sermon, download study notes, join an on-line discussion.
- Use secure pages to handle confidential information, like a vestry's working documents, a family's pledge and attendance records.
- "Test and measure." Using web statistics, you know exactly what worked and what didn't.

## Instant messaging

- ✦ Youth ministers need to be on-line when youth are on-line, using the tools they use.
- ✦ Clergy can use Instant Messenger (IM), too. More and more professionals use IM as a business tool, not just a chat.

## Telephones

- ✦ Lose the automated answering system. When people call a church during daytime hours, they expect to talk to a person. Even huge enterprises are turning off their "telephone trees."
- ✦ Consider Voice-Over-Internet Protocol (VOIP) for low-cost long-distance and conference calling.

I have looked hard for effective Episcopal parish web sites and found only one thus far: [www.chslf.org](http://www.chslf.org), by Church of the Holy Spirit, Lake Forest, Illinois. If this newsletter were electronic, you could click on that link and see for yourself, you could send the editor and me URLs for effective web sites you have found, we could dialog about my article, you could solicit input on your site. See what I mean?

*The author of several books and a popular speaker and retreat leader, the Rev. Tom Ehrich is the founder of On a Journey, a daily web-based ministry at [www.onajourney.com](http://www.onajourney.com)*



*"The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*

*Hebrews 4:12*

*Next Issue:  
Capital  
Campaigns*

# This Parish Is Their Home, Too

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avoid serious issues. Tell the parish what you're going to do and tell them in plenty of time. If you're going to pave the parking lot, let the congregation know in advance, or you can be sure the altar guild will assemble at church to shine the silver at the same time.

2. **Announce changes.** Perhaps you have opened your parish hall to welcome a new community group or a 12-Step program. Herald it early and often or you might find out that ECW has decided to change its meetings to those exact same days.
3. **If the change impacts the parish in any way, check first.** Ask for feedback in surveys, articles, discussions. Even if no one responds, you made the effort to include others and can't be accused of not caring about what people think.
4. **Don't spring surprises — if something is going to affect the parish, let them know.** And then repeat it. Redundancy in important messages is not a sin. The kitchen is being painted. The kitchen is being painted. The kitchen is being painted.
5. **Be visible.** As a vestry member, you should be attending church-sponsored events. (It goes without saying that you should be in church on Sunday!) Visibility is a strong method of communicating.
6. **Be available.** And let it be known that you are available. Be sure your phone number and e-mail address are in the hands of the parish.
7. **Ask opinions.** Give people the opportunity to voice what they think. If not, you can be sure there will be an uproar over the color chosen for the kitchen.

## Tools for effective communications

No doubt, you use some already established tools which provide effective communications between vestry and the parish. One of the most obvious — and critical — is the monthly newsletter. This is the one tool that reaches everyone — even those who don't quite make it on Sunday mornings. Does your vestry publish a report in each newsletter?

Then there are the other communications tools that you already utilize (don't you?): bulletin boards for flyers and posters; letters and mailings for special notices; items in

the Sunday bulletin; announcements during services (in those churches that permit them).

## But how about...

- ✦ Vestry photos on the bulletin board?
- ✦ A calendar of events located in an obvious spot?
- ✦ Vestry meeting minutes posted on the bulletin board?
- ✦ Letters of welcome from the vestry in new member and stewardship packets?
- ✦ A suggestion box (not often used anymore but still viable).
- ✦ For something new...the church web site, rapidly emerging as the most important tool in communications (is there a notice from the vestry on the web site?) ...weekly e-mail updates to parishioners ...coffee hour (be available) ...faxes (yes faxes, not as in vogue with the advent of e-mail, but still effective).
- ✦ And for something completely different...surveys to ascertain opinions and ideas...name tags indicating you're a vestry member (but you have to remember to wear them)...and word of mouth remaining the most effective way of communicating.
- ✦ No communication tool can be effective unless it is kept up to date. Nobody likes to see the sign-up sheet for last Advent's dinner posted in the middle of summer, or the Lenten program schedule in September. This pertains to the web site, bulletin boards, phone messages — and don't forget to check the suggestion box.

## Name a committee

Communications is a responsibility of more than one person. Consider naming a communications committee of the vestry — which allows a team to be responsible — for major ongoing efforts, such as articles in the monthly newsletter or postings on the bulletin board. Including non-vestry members on the communications committee is another layer of effectiveness.

And always look to new ways of communicating, such as weekly e-mails with updates — and to remind people that the parking lot will be paved!

*Neva Rae Fox is the director of communications for the Episcopal Diocese of New York. A member of the ECW and the altar guild at St. John's Church in Somerville, New Jersey, she has lived through many of the experiences described above.*



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### Design/Production

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### Subscriptions

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

*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)

# Leave No One in the Dark

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## Great ideas need to be communicated

But great ideas only fly if they are well communicated. I didn't communicate well. In my address at the annual parish meeting, I explained the need for a new service and announced that it would begin three weeks later. Foolish young man! I hadn't even told my senior warden, much less the vestry as a whole. And I certainly had not asked for their suggestions or help. I blind-sided my vestry.

Since no one else had invested in the new service, failure was predictable. After a decent turnout at the first "family service," attendance soon dwindled to a number that could not sustain the service. A few months passed before I canned the whole idea and returned to the old schedule, egg covering my face.

## What do you think?

Fortunately, I do learn from some of my mistakes. Ten years later, I was again rector of a growing parish. The same four possibilities loomed before me. This time I initially chose (1) to do nothing. For nearly a year, I waited, until people were, literally, standing and leaning against the walls during worship. Finally, one Sunday after church a vestry member said to me, "Dick, three new families came to church today, took one look inside and walked away because we didn't have any seats. We've got to do something!"

"Really?" said I (as if this were news to me), "What do you think we should do?"

Then began what seemed like an interminable time of talking. Everyone agreed something had to be done. Some wanted an additional worship service. Some wanted to add onto the existing structure. Others wanted a new and larger church. And everyone wondered where we would get the money. Back and forth went the talking — while newcomers continued to walk up, take a look and walk away for lack of a seat. I recall commenting to my wife at one point, "We'll still be talking about this at the Second Coming, and I'll be asked why we talked and talked and didn't do anything!"

## We did something

But we did do something. Four years later, we had erected a splendid new church, doubling our seating capacity. Not one parishioner left because his or her opinion did not prevail. It was a joyful experience

for everyone. Part of the reason was all the talking we did and the way we talked with one another. Here are some of our communications strategies, things I wish I'd done in my other parish ten years earlier:

✦ **Invite comments.** No major decision was made until all had been given an opportunity to contribute. We regularly held parish meetings at which everyone could speak. Progress reports were made and questions answered, but mainly, we asked people to tell us who Christ was for them, what worship meant to them, what they hoped would be different in their lives because of what would happen in the new church. All this was recorded and given to the architect.

✦ **Listen to the comments.** Few things provoke anger more quickly than being dismissed or taken for granted. Our leaders not only invited comments, but listened and responded to them. We sometimes had to explain why a parishioner's suggestion would not be acted upon, but this was always done with respect and an expression of gratitude for the parishioner's interest.

✦ **Keep no secrets.** Unless national security concerns are a factor in your parish life, why keep secrets? When people don't know what's going on, they may suspect that a few insiders are making all the decisions and that something is being cooked up behind their backs. If that's what they think, they will not support whatever decisions are made.

✦ **Be redundant.** We were unfazed when someone said, "How come you keep saying that again and again?" We knew that if something was announced from the pulpit, published in the newsletter, posted on the bulletin board, and personally told to our ten gabbiest parishioners (there were no e-mails or web sites in those days), someone would still say, "Why didn't you tell me?" In communicating with the parish, we aimed for redundancy. The result was that no one felt left in the dark.

I have been gone from that parish for six years, but it continues to grow and now plans to construct a youth and community center next to the church. They still know how to communicate.

*A former parish priest, the Rev. Richard H. Schmidt is the author of several books and the editor and director of Forward Movement Publications, Cincinnati, Ohio.*