

VESTRY PAPERS

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



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Making Room for Newcomers

by Ben Helmer

Church growth can be a revolving door experience. When a congregation masters the art of adding new members it is often confronted with the issue of getting them to stay. Congregations both large and small experience the frustration of recruiting new members only to see them leave for another church home after a few months.

The first thing to remember is that this is reality for most growing churches. Not everyone will stay. Even the most successful growing congregations will admit this. The second thing to know is that the creation of an energetic membership base will take one of two forms: small churches “adopt” and large churches “incorporate” new members.

Adopt or incorporate

In the small church adoption is the process by which new members are incorporated. This is a time of getting to know new members. New members should know they are being adopted when people start telling them about heroes (and villains!) in the congregation’s history. The story is important. One congregation regularly sponsors a newcomers’ night where veteran members are featured telling stories about the congregation and the people who have come before. A videotape of these stories is a wonderful way to preserve them and allow folks to take them home for private viewing.

Other parts of adoption include gradually involving new members in church activities

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In our last issue we examined what it means to be a welcoming church. Here we explore the dynamics of sustaining new members — and helping them be integrated fully into the life of a congregation.

Something to think about: What messages, subliminal and otherwise, does your church convey?

This Issue:
**Sustaining
New Members**

MORE THAN BUSINESS AS USUAL A Multicultural Scenario

by Lindsay Hardin Freeman

Many parishes lock their doors by 12 noon on Sunday, the energy drained from the building. But for St. Nicholas Church in Noel, Missouri, a second surge of the day is just starting.

St. Nicholas is one of two congregations in the Diocese of West Missouri, and one of a growing number nationally, that is reaching out to new constituencies with new traditions — in St. Nicholas’ case, a growing Latino community.

Six years ago, when the Reverend Barbara Beam arrived in Noel (population: 1200), some twelve people, mostly elderly, sat in the pews. Like many small congregations, energy had ebbed and flowed over the years,

and “ebb” seemed the operative word. But there were possibilities for evangelism in a growing local population of Latinos, many of whom worked at new chicken processing plants.

The parish developed some “traffic” during the week offering English classes for the workers, and Spanish classes for those residents who wanted to better communicate with them. At the end of every class, Beam would say a prayer from the service of Compline. And from that start other things developed. Today, some twenty to thirty Latinos, about 40 percent of them children,

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One Midwestern church we know is sponsoring Family Bible Scholar Awards. When a child or family completes an entire book of 365 Bible stories, an engraved trophy is presented in church. Kids and parents love it; the cost of the trophy is about \$7.50. Sounds like a good investment to us.

A Multicultural Scenario

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gather at noon on Sunday. The effort has been a boom to both congregations, as the earlier 10 a.m. service remains stable and active.

Children are essential

Beam laughs as she describes the spontaneity of the service. “We come down from the altar, the crucifer and acolyte and I, and go to the back, and there’s all these kids — with macarinas and tambourines — and we all process around the church, sometimes playing the last hymn two or three times.”

Those children, she believes, are essential to the success of the ministry. “If the kids are involved and something is done on their behalf, the parents will keep coming.”

Such an emphasis is essential if the Episcopal Church is to grow, believes C. Kirk Hadaway, director of research at the Episcopal Church Center. “The bottom line is this,” he says in a recent report¹, “Given the demographic characteristics of our members, sustained growth is unlikely unless we begin to reach out beyond our historic constituency.”

That constituency? Mostly white, older, well educated, and generally more affluent than the average American. Among mainline denominations, the Episcopal Church has the highest proportion of members who are college graduates and in households earning \$75,000 or more.

A lower birth rate for Episcopalians

While this sounds like a plus, there is a downside. More education and a higher income generally mean that women delay having children and have fewer of them. Episcopalians, in fact, have a much lower birth rate than the general population and bear fewer children on average than the members of almost all American denominations. And while more people join the Episcopal Church as adults than other mainline denominations, most are beyond their childbearing years.

Hadaway’s conclusion is clear. “It will require much more than business as usual to expand into other constituencies.”

Necessary anchors

Such growth and openness, says Canon Elizabeth Geitz, author of *Fireweed Evangelism* (see page five), may not always come easily.

“I’ve never met a congregation that didn’t want to grow, but the dynamics of accomplishing that growth are not always easy.”

Geitz finds that before a congregation can be successful, welcoming newcomers into its midst, current parishioners must feel cared for and supported. Once “in-reach” programs such as pastoral care, education, etc. are in place, inclusion of new members is possible.

More specifically, Geitz points to a study of some 14,000 participants² that identifies three sources of cohesion — heritage, vision and moral commitment — which help congregations grow. If those anchors are present along with favorable demographics, then it may be time to reach out, to risk, to expand.

Slow but steady

Barbara Beam describes the small, sometimes awkward steps, in involving others. “When we first had new people in our church for language lessons, we offered them coffee,” she said. But the coffee was on two different shelves, marked “church” and “classes.”

“I took the signs down. We drank the same coffee. It was a small step, but it was a start.”

Sometimes outreach has been of a different sort, like being asked to bless a truck. “What I love about these folks is how they want to involve the church in all they do,” she says. “They will say, “Could you come and bless my truck? I need it for work.”

And she does, working with the new while taking care of the old.

According to Kirk Hadaway, that kind of growth may change the demographics of the Episcopal Church in a startling way.

“Even tiny gains across a denomination of 7300 congregations would produce growth of a kind not seen since 1966,” referring to the high water mark of mainline denominational attendance.

“It will require much more than business as usual to expand into other constituencies...It will take new churches and a new openness among our existing parishes.”

A parish priest in Minnetonka Beach, Minnesota, the Reverend Lindsay Hardin Freeman is the editor of Vestry Papers.

¹Hadaway, C. Kirk, *Is the Episcopal Church Growing or Declining?*, The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, New York, 2004

²*Faith Communities in the United States Today*, The Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, 2001.

INVITATIONAL LIFELINES

Building for the Long-Term

by H. M. (Mac) McFarling

What makes for long-term involvement and membership in Episcopal congregations? Most local Episcopal congregations have been present in their community for many years, and have a substantial practical and historical perspective. And during the last century they witnessed the steady migration of households from urban locations to suburban areas of growth and then, more recently, a movement back again — with the influx of a new generation into revitalized inner city areas.

How can parish leadership make long-term plans in such an ever shifting mission field?

Intentional invitations on the part of the clergy, especially the rector, to members of the congregation are crucial to building involvement and relationships.

One place to start: a primary part of our Episcopal expression of Christian faith is focused around worship. Centered in reflection on Scripture and the experience of Holy

Communion, priest and parishioner alike experience a sacred timeout from our secular timelines, and thereby participate in a long-term alternative vision to the short-term nearsightedness of our age.

So it is essential, then, that the Eucharist is celebrated in a way that allows the local faith community to experience worship that helps to inform, inspire and transform lives.

Shared endeavors

Secondly, long-term relationships and membership often begin, and are nurtured, in shared endeavors. Allowing the congregation to participate in liturgical planning and expression creates opportunities to inform new members and visitors of how the parish works together. And this same ethos of encouraging members to work with the clergy to create educational classes and programs for all ages will inform, engage and involve people in ministries of teaching and learning.

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Hand each vestry member a treasure trove of stories and practical tips on how to be a leader in the congregation. From Cornerstone, the publisher of Vestry Papers, comes Volume III of The Vestry Resource Guide: Now That You're on the Vestry. 42 pages of articles and discussion questions. Call Forward Movement at (800) 543-1813. (Item #1781, \$8.00 each.)

Next Issue: Young Adults

We admit to having a little fun here at Vestry Papers, and came up with the following list of things NOT to say to prospective members. Try making your own list as a warm up to a serious conversation of how best to sustain new members.

Things Best Left Unsaid

Would you help with the rummage sale? It's pretty dusty downstairs, but that's where we start the new people off.

You can't sit in that pew — it belongs to the Schmidlach family. And that one over there? No, that's the wrong pew, too.

We'd like you to wear this red target on your forehead so everyone will know you're new.

Oh, we're so glad you're here. We need your pledge money right away.

Would you like to join the vestry? We could really use a new senior warden.

The bathroom? Just right down that hallway, take a left at the steps, then down two flights. Toilet paper. Maybe.

Jump right in, introverts — stand up and introduce yourselves!

Here's what you'll need for the service: our leaflet, the readings, the prayerbook, hymnal, the supplemental text and the announcements.

Oh thank God, fresh blood.

Gee, we haven't had a young family like you in forever.

The Hispanic church is just down the street.

A nursery? Maybe in a couple of months if more people show up.

Of course you can't be on the outreach committee. You haven't been here long enough.

Building for the Long-Term

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Intentional invitations on the part of the clergy, especially the rector, to members of the congregation are crucial to building involvement and relationships. Being challenged to aspire to a life of faithful witness, service, and work on behalf of the Gospel can oft times be the inspiration a person is seeking — and that makes all the difference. Each lesson, Gospel reading, and sermon can serve as an invitation for discernment as to what purpose God may be calling us.

Lifelines and links

The worship experience alone will not create long-term relationships without a link or a lifeline that people can grab hold of to help pull themselves into the life and purpose of the congregation. These linkages can come in many forms, from the hospitality of ushers to thoughtful offerings during the education hour. Through such gifts people can become part of the mission and vision of a congregation. But for these linkages to last, there must be a person on the other end of the rope, as it were, ready to offer a relationship to those who are drawn to the church community through a shared worship experience and invitational lifeline.

This balance of shared experience in worship, and extension of selves in relationship for ministry, provides the foundation for a long-term journey of Episcopal formation and Gospel transformation.

Lifelong journeys

If we would seek a lifelong journey of discovery into the mystery and majesty of the Gospel, we must inspire, equip, and encourage those who encounter the Episcopal Church to discern what ministry to which they are called. Parish leadership must create opportunities throughout the church year that inspire parishioners to seek a deeper level of inquiry into what their faith means to them and how to move from meaning to ministry.

The Gospels bear witness to ministries important to Jesus during his time among the people and communities of Palestine. They included care and healing for those who were ill, visitation to those in prison, concern for the poor in the midst of misfortune, food for the hungry, clothing for the

naked, shelter and hospitality for those without a home, and community and reconciliation in the midst of conflict.

Being challenged to aspire to a life of faithful witness, service, and work on behalf of the Gospel can oft times be the inspiration a person is seeking...

Intentional Gospel ministries

Many Episcopal congregations have found new life and purpose through intentional and inspirational ministries faithful to Gospel examples and relevant to their local communities. These mission fields, and countless others, provide real opportunities for a local church to have a long-term impact on the lives of its members and the lives of those they serve in their community. The true call of transformation begins to occur in those willing to risk a life in ministry and to each life they touch in witness to the Gospel.

H. M. (Mac) McFarling, III, is a physician specializing in obstetrics and gynecology in Atlanta. A member of the Episcopal Church Foundation's Board of Directors, he has served in a variety of leadership roles through his parish, St. Luke's, Atlanta; the Foundation; and the Consortium of Endowed Parishes.



Subscribers, don't forget that Vestry Papers now hosts an interactive dialogue on our website. What works? What doesn't? Join the conversation at www.EpiscopalFoundation.org

Do your kids think getting down the chimney is the miracle of Christmas?

Children should know there's more than one reason to celebrate Christmas. This year, introduce them to the real meaning of the Holiday season, and let Jesus give Santa Claus a little competition.



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Church Ad Project

As a result of General Convention's vote to support parishes and missions as they seek to grow, all congregations will receive their choice of two free ads from the Church Ad Project, paid for by the Office of Communication at the Episcopal Church Center, for use in local papers and other media. Contact the Church Ad Project at (800) 331-9391; www.churchad.com



OUTWARD AND VISIBLE SIGNS

Following up with Prospective Members

by Elizabeth Geitz

To enlarge the site of our tent today requires intentional follow-up on initial visits. If a comprehensive system is not in place we will lose the many angels God sends to worship with us.

Following up on Initial Visits

- Do you treat every newcomer as an angel sent by God?
- If the guest is of a different ethnic origin than the majority of your congregation, do you have in place an intentional way of listening "with the ear of the heart" to his/her particular needs?
- Is your congregation educated about the needs of different ethnic groups within your community?
- Do you obtain the name and address of every guest who worships in your church?
- Do you have a lay calling system?
- Are people visited within thirty-six hours of attending your church?
- Is there a record keeping system in place?
- Do you assign a shepherd to each newcomer for one to two years?

Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. (Isaiah 54:2)

Orienting and Integrating New Members

- Does your church offer a newcomer forum outlining church programs and offerings?
- Do you host several parties a year for new members?
- Are these gatherings offered at different times of the day and week to attract a diverse population?
- Are there clear guidelines to help someone become a member of your parish?
- Do you offer a new member dedication litany during a worship service?
- Does your church assign baptismal sponsors to new families who seek the church for baptism of a child?
- Is Guild of the Christ Child used in your parish?*
- Do you have a structure in place for new members to deepen and share their faith with one another?
- Is there a system to integrate new members into small groups?
- Is there a system designed to help them move into leadership roles?
- Do you follow-up with new members at the one-year mark?
- Is there a way for new members to give feedback to the hospitality committee and clergy about their experience of joining your congregation?

*Guild of the Christ Child is a program that provides two-year follow-up for parents of the newly baptized with letters and cards to send to the new parents at anniversaries, keeping them connected to the church. For more information, call (503) 223-4171.

*The Reverend Canon Elizabeth Geitz is the Canon for Ministry Development and Deployment in the Diocese of New Jersey. She is the author of six books, including **Fireweed Evangelism: Christian Hospitality in a Multi-Faith World**, scheduled for release in November by Church Publishing, Inc.*



We have noted that the large, evangelical church nearby saves about five Sunday parking spots near the front door for guests, and urges its own members to park farther away. Episcopalians, take note! It seems like a welcoming thing to do.



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Room for Newcomers

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and making room for them. The church that reserves active roles in worship and service to long-time members will not have a high adoption rate. However, the church that makes a new member senior warden after a year puts that new member in a precarious role and may be looking for another one at the next annual meeting! Common sense and good follow-up are the norms for adoption. Work at it. It doesn't happen by accident.

Incorporation in larger churches usually comes through involvement in activities. People charged with introducing prospective new members to the programs and small groups offered by the congregation are essential. If new members have to do all the investigating and asking, they will probably assume membership is a "secret process" from which they are excluded. This is when people often decide to look elsewhere.

Pro or con subliminal messages?

What subliminal messages does your church convey? At announcement time are different voices heard inviting new people to attend an event? Are new members invited to a small group or activity and welcomed as potential participants? Are youth and young peoples' programs open for growth?

Successful growing churches, regardless of size, admit they have changed dramatically in their time of growth, and they expect to keep changing as they grow.

Research tells us that members of a church today are not as interested in brand loyalty as they once were. They will find a church that suits their needs and meets their expectations with less regard to whether it's the Episcopal Church or another denomination. So, the implications are that the congregation has to listen, and be ready to shift priorities, responding to needs of new cultures and new times. Successful growing churches, regardless of size, admit they have changed dramatically in their time of growth, and they expect to keep changing as they grow. That always means some people will leave rather than change to accommodate the needs of new members.

A good formation tool is essential to incorporating new members who will stay. An ongoing program that teaches the basics of the faith, is a safe place to ask questions, and insists on "you" being more important than "us" is vital. Large congregations can usually have an ongoing small group for new members. Small churches may need to have them as demand requires. The essentials of this are that long-time members come together with new ones in a climate where both learn together.

A commitment to mission is essential

A common thread among all growing churches is their ability to connect membership with mission. People respond well to opportunities for engaging with others in a common ministry to their community and the world. They also appreciate the church recognizing and affirming their daily life and work as part of its mission. Programs about parenting, the work place, and related daily living are key to retaining members.

If you visit a church that is growing, members will usually share two things about why they grow:

- ✚ Everyone has gifts and those gifts are identified and nurtured;
- ✚ Everyone has ministries from Sunday to Saturday that are important and need to be affirmed.

Being about God's business

The life of a healthy congregation is built on the needs of its members and the vision of its mission. When membership and healthy relationships form the core of the congregation's life, the vision is continually refreshed and renewed. Jesus began his public ministry with a clear and somewhat narrow view of what it encompassed. He ended it with an awareness of the Father's love for all humanity, not just the Jews. If we are truly about God's business — loving souls and mending broken hearts — what we have to offer will only be expanded by what we receive from those whom God sends to us.

The Reverend Ben Helmer is a member of the Congregational Development Unit at the Episcopal Church Center. He works primarily with dioceses focusing on congregational development strategies for small churches.