

Vestries: “Fit For Business?”

by The Rev. Canon Renée Miller

“Meetings for the transaction of business are conducted in the same expectant waiting for the guidance of the Spirit as is the meeting for worship...”

The Quaker Book of Discipline

In our tradition, vestry meetings are the places where important issues are discussed and critical decisions made on behalf of a congregation. It is tempting to let our ‘hankering for holiness’ be addressed in worship and adult education opportunities, and limit vestry meetings to the ‘business at hand.’ Yet, **vestry members bring to the vestry meeting and the congregation not only their several practical skills; they bring also their salvaged souls.** Souls salvaged by the power of Jesus’ love. What is done with those souls is at the heart of spiritual practice.

The word ‘practice’ in the Greek actually means ‘fit for business.’ Athletes, for example, are not really ‘fit for business’ unless they engage in a daily routine of training practice. The same is true for the governing body of a community of faith. **A vestry isn’t really ‘fit for business’ unless a ‘practice’ is maintained that strengthens that fitness.**

Let me suggest four basic, though not simple, elements of a spiritual practice for a vestry.

1. Sabbath – Community begins “at the edge of the altar.” The first part of spiri-

tual practice for a vestry could begin where the people of faith gather each Sunday morning to receive the food of heaven. Vestry members committed to being **present at every Sunday celebration of the Eucharist** find their own souls gradually re-shaped in the love of Jesus. Their leadership then grows out of that love and not only they, but also the congregation, are transformed.

2. Scripture – It is tempting to try to soak one’s soul with Scripture on Sunday morning when what a soul needs is small doses of Scripture every day. **A spiritual practice that includes a few short sentences from the Gospel each day will sustain a soul more than a feast of Scripture once a week.** When vestry members take the time to read and reflect on a small portion of the Gospel daily, they begin to live the Gospel and the Gospel begins to live in them.

3. Silence – Silence is the vast ocean in which we dwell, but we often find it difficult to fall into its embrace. We consistently find ourselves “cutting through” the silence by our words and work. A needful part of spiritual practice is to stop swimming and **let the word of God speak in the stillness.** In the space that is beyond mere words, the soul can be profoundly shaped by the images and insights that are given by the ‘still, small voice of God.’

(Continued on page 4)

Episcopal Church canons state that the rector is responsible for leading the worship and spiritual life of the congregation. But the rector can’t do it alone. Many share in this responsibility, including the vestry. By virtue of its visibility within the congregation, and because of the responsibility entrusted to it, it is the vestry who should model a sense of spirituality and worship in their daily lives and in their faith community. This issue of Vestry Papers offers insights into the spiritual dimensions of vestry leadership.

O God, from whom all good proceeds: Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guiding may do them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (Collect for Proper 5, Book of Common Prayer)

The Power of Prayer

by The Rev. Nancy Roth

Vestry members tend to be some of the busiest people in a parish. You are elected, after all, because your skills are needed by the church community – skills that probably keep your lives filled with many activities outside the church as well.

With such a busy life, where does prayer fit in? Is it simply a matter of beginning every vestry meeting with the Collect for Guidance: “Grant us the grace to ask what you would have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices?” Or is spending time in personal prayer outside of church and vestry meetings a vital ingredient in a life of faith, not only for vestry members, but for every Christian? And what is prayer, and how does it have “power?” Is it only powerful when our prayers are “answered?”

We all know only too well that often prayers seem not to be answered. Perhaps a friend is dying of cancer, despite the fact that the heavenly courts are reverberating with the entreaties of friends and family. Does that mean that the prayer is ineffectual?

Generations of Christians have discovered that the effect of prayer transcends the actual outcomes we hope for when we ask God for something. **Prayer is really about transformation, not merely about asking God to make something happen.**

“Asking,” after all, is only one kind of prayer. There are many other ways to pray – meditative prayer in which we let God speak to us through our reading of Scripture; centering prayer in which we just wait quietly in God’s presence; even prayer as action – working, whether in church, home, or business settings,

to help make the world a better place.

When I think of prayer, I often think of the creation story in Genesis in which God breathes life into the first human being.

Prayer is an opportunity to breathe God’s life, again and again.

Thinking of prayer in this way is like making the transition from the Newtonian physics of cause and effect (you let go of an apple, and it falls to the ground – you pray, and what you desire ought to occur) to quantum physics, which proposes an intricate web of interconnection and possibility. Scientists speak of the “butterfly effect,” in which the flutter of a butterfly’s wings is said to make a difference in the weather half-way around the world. When we pray, we also begin to notice the interconnections in the world, as the energy of our prayer goes out into the cosmos, helping God’s will be done on earth in ways we might not even imagine.

Most of all, we will notice that prayer begins to change us. We become more centered, able to respond more thoughtfully to issues and events. We become better at listening, not only to God, but even to one another at vestry meetings.

We will have discovered the source of prayer’s real power: God’s transforming spirit, to which we open ourselves through prayer, so that we can become instruments of God’s love.

Nancy Roth is a writer, retreat conductor, and faculty member for CREDO. Her many books include The Breath of God, Or-ganic Prayer (Cowley), and three books of meditations on hymn texts published by Church Publishing, Inc.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:2

Resources . . .

• *Spirituality Consultation: Reflecting on the Presence of God in Small Groups.* A publication of Cornerstone available by calling 901-527-1450.

An invitation for small groups in a retreat setting to share in the process of discerning, through spiritual reflection, God’s love and presence in their lives.

• *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders.* Charles Olsen, Alban Institute.

Inspiring and practical ways vestry meetings can become opportunities for deepening faith and developing leadership.

• *Spirit Windows: A Handbook for Spiritual Growth Resources for Leaders.* Ann Z. Kulp, Bridge Resources, 1998.

A collection of models for group spiritual enrichment activities offering detailed suggestions for retreats, community building exercises, and different types of prayer experiences.

Is the Holy Spirit in Our Midst?

Spiritual Dimensions of the Vestry

by Stephanie Cheney

In a community along the southeast coast of the United States, four couples decided about a decade ago that they wanted an Episcopal Church in their own neighborhood. There was another parish about 15 minutes away, but it was on another island and not easy to reach. Sitting in one of the couple's living room, they set a goal of starting a new congregation, and today, that goal has been transformed into a congregation of over 500 communicants.

According to a former vestry member and an active member in the congregation throughout its history, the spirit of our Lord has definitely been at work and in their midst.

He recounted to me in a recent conversation a vestry meeting several years ago that began a long-range planning process. The sanctuary had been completed, and there was sufficient office space to accommodate the rector, a secretary and limited areas for Christian education. There was no parish hall, and in fact, the vestry had no place to meet. They were already bursting at the seams.

Not long after that, as the vestry sat in one of the member's offices, they grappled with the question of what to do first: build program, or build the space to accommodate program? A question that brings to mind the adage "if we build it, they will come." But would that be a sound route to follow for this young congregation?

.....

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Psalm 19:14

.....

The meeting began with each member sharing personal thoughts on what the congregation meant to him/her. Then they discussed the problem at hand. They did it in an environment of love and respect for one another's opinions, and they listened to one another. The discussion continued for two hours. Throughout the conversation, the young rector sat quietly, never speaking. At the end of the two hours, the vestry emerged with a plan. They would

begin the process with an open forum where all members of the congregation would have the opportunity to voice their needs and wishes for a new structure. That forum would begin with a service of prayer for guidance that the Holy Spirit would lead them in the process and help them stay focused on God's mission for them. They would then set a goal for construction of a new building with a time certain in the future.

At the end of the vestry meeting, the rector was asked why he did not speak during the entire session. He replied that he had been praying throughout the meeting that the vestry would be guided by the Holy Spirit in its deliberations.

The end result of their process is that many diverse needs and desires for new space have been combined into one unified plan, and the building has been completed. The congregation has come to a happy resolution, and there is a strong sense that it has been a grace-filled event in the lives of this spiritual community.

According to my friend, the vestry works at maintaining a spiritual dimension to its deliberations. Each of its meetings begins and ends with prayer. The rector also makes sure that all discussions are entered into prayerfully. When potentially controversial decisions must be made, and the members allow each other to articulate their thoughts in an environment of love and cooperation, the Holy Spirit is most evident. Almost without exception, he states, the conversation will come full circle, and the vote on the issue will be a consensus vote.

But when they allow their secular interests to dominate the conversation, things can begin to get out of whack. "A lot depends on the individual personalities of the vestry. Trouble comes when vestries approach their work as if it were a corporate board," he states. "You have to keep in mind that we're working toward the glory of the Lord."

He concluded that two of the most valuable lessons he learned while serving on the vestry were that:

- everyone's voice needs to be heard, and
- maintaining a sense of spirituality helps vestry members keep in focus that they are about the Lord's work.

O heavenly Father, in whom we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray thee so to guide and govern us by the Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget thee, but may remember that we are ever walking in thy sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Book of Common Prayer
page 57

(Continued from page 1 – *Fit for Business*)

4. Showing Honor – “...Outdo one another in showing honor.” (Romans 12:10) A spiritual practice for vestry members includes the **willingness of each member of the vestry to see one another and every member of the congregation as ‘transfigured’ by the love and spirit of Christ**. It is always easier to keep each other ‘disfigured’ than it is to see people through the eyes of Jesus. Vestry members who adopt the spiritual practice of seeing people transfigured, will be a part of the transfiguration of the

entire world.

A vestry meeting is more than a group of parishioners meeting to attend to the business affairs of the congregation. The Quaker tradition suggests that the business of the church is an extension of the worship of the church. Our spiritual practice begins at the altar, carries through the business of our life, and returns once again to the altar – where in the hushed silence, we meet the God of love.

Renée Miller is Canon to the Ordinary in the Diocese of El Camino Real and a member of the faculty of CREDO.

Spiritual Practice and the Vestry

Because vestry meetings usually take place in a church and are dedicated to the service of the Church, most open and close with a prayer, often delivered by the clergy or a designated vestry member. But the spiritual life of the vestry is not just about prayer at the beginning and end of meetings. It is also about how the vestry approaches the agenda items in between. There is no doubt that committees need to be accountable for their work, budgets need to be attended to, and committee reports need to be heard. **The question becomes how to make these practical matters spiritually nourishing and not just another agenda item.**

Many vestries work to make their meetings more spiritually enriching by using different practices during meetings. Some examples include:

- **Preparation.** The agenda – sent out ahead of time – is a call for prayer, asking all vestry members to hold the agenda items and concerns in prayer before coming to the meeting.
- **Bible study.** Vestry members reflect on a scriptural passage (perhaps the next week’s gospel reading) and ask what it is calling them to be in the world.
- **A shared meal.** The vestry begins the meeting by breaking bread together, thus

building community and recalling the meal shared by Christ and his disciples. But business should not begin until the meal is finished.

- **Faith sharing.** Vestry members share experiences of God’s presence in their lives since their last meeting.
- **Evening Prayer.** Building on the liturgical strength of the Episcopal Church and its Book of Common Prayer, the vestry can celebrate Evening Prayer, with a lay member as leader.
- **Meeting in the context of the Eucharist.** The “business” is a response to the Gospel.
- **Closure.** Ask each member to share, in turn, where Jesus was in this meeting.

During the vestry meeting, it is helpful to pause for silence and for listening to the voice of the spirit. Some vestries have one person in prayer during the meeting. The praying person changes at an appointed time or by simply passing a designated object to the next person. It is quite a remarkable experience to participate in a meeting this way, by not speaking, but through prayer and listening.

This is an excerpt from The Vestry Resource Guide, Volume II, a Cornerstone publication available through Forward Movement Publications at 800-543-1813.

Now Available!!!

Vestry Resource Guide, Volume II

This companion to the first volume of the Guide offers practical information on financial leadership, congregational conflict management, and transitions in clergy leadership – all with an emphasis on the spiritual aspects of vestry leadership. *To order both volumes at \$5.00 a copy, call Forward Movement, 800-543-1813.*

Cornerstone

a ministry of

The Episcopal
Church Foundation
266 S. Front Street, Suite 204
Memphis, TN 38103
(901) 527-1450
www.episcopalcornerstone.org

Director

William S. Craddock, Jr.

Editor & Associate Director

Stephanie Turnbull Cheney

Subscriptions

(\$25 annually for 5 issues,
sent in packages of 15 copies
per issue)

To subscribe, contact the
Cornerstone offices listed above.

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. . And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

Joel 2:15-16, 28