

Roles of the Vestry and the Rector

The catechism in *The Book of Common Prayer* states that the Church exists to restore people to unity with God and each other in Christ. It follows that the primary function of vestries and clergy is to lead congregations in achieving this goal.

Vestries are not a board of directors nor are they the senior management team, though there are some similarities. **Vestries are different because the Church is different, and vestry identity can only be understood when viewed in the context of the Church.** How vestries lead is a process that has a different form in every location, depending on the needs of that congregation, how the responsibilities are divided between the vestry and the clergy, and the personalities of the people involved.

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So Jesus called the disciples and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many."

Mark 10:42-45

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While the national church canons are very specific about the responsibilities and duties of the rector, they are remarkably brief in defining the role of the vestry. In the broadest of terms, the vestry is responsible for the stewardship of money and property and for calling a new rector when there is a vacancy. The rector, as chief clergy in a congregation, has virtually all responsibility and authority for the pastoral and spiritual direction of the congregation. Diocesan canons and state laws may add additional responsibilities to each. Thus, it is advisable that the diocesan canons and the congregation's by-laws, as well as the national

canons, be available for reference.

According to the national canons, **the vestry "shall be agents and legal representatives of the Parish in all matters concerning its corporate property and the relations of the Parish to its clergy."** The rector is responsible for worship and spiritual life; selection and oversight of all assisting clergy; and use and control of all buildings and furnishings. Other responsibilities of the rector include education in scripture and church doctrine; stewardship education; preparation for Baptism and confirmation; and to take a share in the councils of the Church (BCP, page 557).

Even though there are specified responsibilities for the vestry and the rector, there are many areas that can, and often do, overlap and are not prevented from doing so by the canons. In some instances, the rector may assume some or all responsibility for temporal issues if the vestry delegates these matters. Conversely, the canons do not prevent the laity from assuming roles in the pastoral and spiritual life of the congregation.

There are other areas that are often shared by the vestry and the rector. They include:

- development of a clearly defined mission for the congregation that is communicated consistently and reviewed and updated regularly;
- discernment of which activities best enable the congregation to fulfill its mission;
- development of short and long-range plans for the congregation that are also reviewed regularly and communicated clearly;
- management of the congregation's resources, including operating funds, investments, furnishings, and buildings and grounds;
- care of paid and volunteer personnel; and
- communication with the wider community

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Church canons are very brief in defining the role of the vestry. To complicate matters, there seem to be many overlapping areas of responsibility with the rector. Thus, there are gray areas that must be considered. This issue of *Vestry Papers* defines those areas, suggests resources for further study and amplification, and offers two examples of how vestry responsibility can positively impact the leadership of the congregation.

Linked, But Not Yoked

Three Rivers Ministry brings new life to small congregations

Christ Church, Bethel, Vermont began moving toward a new form of ministry 2-3 years ago. It was a budgetary issue as much as anything else. This small congregation in the heart of rural Vermont was in a survival mode and couldn't financially support the full-time priest they had at the time. The church was in danger of closing its doors.

But with the help and encouragement of their vicar, Jean Jersey, who was approaching retirement, and Bishop Mary Adelia McLeod, the vestry began exploring other options that would allow them to continue. They appointed a team to travel to other dioceses, among them Northern Michigan and West Virginia, to observe how others handled similar problems. They met with the vestry of Church of Our Saviour, Killington, another rural church 35 miles away and over the mountain, to explore the option of a joint ministry with them. Church of Our Saviour was a different kind of place, yet also experiencing some of the same financial burdens. Team members also participated in the Leadership Academy for New Directions (LAND), sponsored by the Episcopal Church Center as a vehicle for giving congregations support for doing ministry in different ways.

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever.

I Peter 4:10-11

What has evolved is a regional ministry concept that has breathed new life into two struggling congregations. Christ Church is now sharing ministry with Church of Our Saviour. The two are linked in many ways, yet not yoked. They each maintain their own autonomy with separate vestries and separate congregations, but they share some budgetary items, such as the compensation package for a canon missionary. They hold joint services from time to time, as well as adult Christian education programs, picnics, and quiet retreats.

At the core of the arrangement is the leadership that is still maintained within each congregation. Three Rivers Interparish Council

(IPC) supplements the work of the congregations. Composed of vestry members and other lay leaders from both congregations, and with the assistance and dedication of Canon Missioner, The Rev. Diane Root, this Council built a vision of what their shared ministry might look like. The implementation of that vision is bearing fruit, as can be seen in the renewed vitality of both congregations.

"The Council functions as the legal conduit for the administrative issues affecting the regional ministry," states Robert Borden, former Senior Warden of Christ Church and current Treasurer for the Council. "It owns nothing, however it does maintain a budget and handle the expenses allocated to the ministry. Both congregations contribute to the Council based on a formula established by the diocese, and the vestries of both congregations, as well as members of the Council, approve the budget."

The Council has several active committees. The Worship Committee plans the liturgy for all joint services. Assisting with these services as well as in their respective congregations is a group of lay preachers and several licensed lay readers and chalice bearers. There is also an adult Christian education committee that plans joint programs and retreats. A pastoral care committee that has some training in counseling and in detecting the need for the professional help of clergy and/or physicians. According to Lorie Borden, Senior Warden of Christ Church, "We are a loving community, able to respond to the needs of our communicants. It is a ministry the laity can provide."

The Rev. Root alternates Sundays between each congregation in addition to dividing her time between the two on a weekly basis. A supply priest from the diocese celebrates Eucharist in each location, and lay leaders conduct Morning Prayer on other Sundays. Two members of the Christ Church congregation are in the process of becoming Canon 9 priests through a program that is still being developed by the diocese. Once ordained, they will function primarily in a sacramental capacity and will be able to fulfill some of the responsibilities Root now handles. These postulants are committed to this process, in large part as a result of a decision made early on by the

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I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1-6

Most Episcopalians are feeling a sense of togetherness in their local congregations. For Episcopalians today, "pulling together" . . . at its deepest level entails seeking and finding a deep sense of common purpose and mutual support.

The Zacchaeus Report

Beyond a ‘Patch and Pray’ Policy

Learnings from a major capital campaign

St. Stephen’s began in 1938 as a small neighborhood parish in Edina, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis. For many years now, it has averaged over 400 pledging units – a number that indicates its growth to a substantial size congregation. Its commitment to program has far outweighed its commitment to building maintenance. Two years ago, the congregation’s “patch and pray” policy of 20 years’ duration finally caught up with it, and it found its English, rural, Norman church with a malfunctioning boiler, ice an inch thick on the windows, and a physical plant in an extreme state of disrepair.

At the same time, Diocesan Bishop James L. Jelinek had initiated a plan to establish new missions within the diocese, and had secured the services of a consultant to assist in this process. This consultant was also made available to all local congregations that were in the process of either considering or planning a capital campaign. In return, those congregations were asked for a contribution to the Campaign for Mission. Those funds are managed by the Minnesota Episcopal Foundation, an organization devoted to new mission development.

Mission development is a priority for St. Stephen’s, partly because of its close proximity to two suburban areas outside of Minneapolis that currently have no Episcopal churches. The vestry and rector viewed this venture with the diocese as a win-win proposition for both, and St. Stephen’s agreed to commit 10% of its capital funds, not to exceed \$500,000, to the Foundation.

The vestry appointed a capital campaign advisory committee, headed by Kris Newcomer, a vestry member with fundraising experience, and co-chaired by Hugh Woolridge, a former senior warden. In addition, rector Ernie Ashcroft, current senior warden Tom Brandt, members of several key standing committees of the vestry, former wardens, and other lay leaders from within the congregation also serve on the committee. This committee has been meeting twice a month for eighteen months and functions not only as a capital campaign committee, but as a design and building committee as well. With the help of the consultant, they embarked on their fund drive with an ambitious goal of \$7 million. Work began with a feasibility study, discus-

sions with architects and contractors, and lead gift solicitations.

Two determinations were made early on in the process as a result of the feasibility study:

- The \$7 million goal was a stretch.
- Analysis of findings from their ongoing strategic planning process showed that despite lack of current space and only one small buildable area remaining for this large congregation, they would stay in the present location.

Underlying these two points was the knowledge that the congregation did not place a high priority on growth in numbers, but that it did support development of a mission church in the future. It was also acknowledged that approximately \$4 million would be sufficient to do the bulk of the needed renovations, and additional funds could be used as a challenge grant for developing the buildable space.

Phase One of a four-phase process is underway and will be completed this fall. The campaign itself will officially end on Celebration Sunday, October 3rd.

As it enters the home stretch, the campaign appears to be achieving its stated goal for repair and renovation. As a part of its fiduciary role, the vestry has received regular reports from the advisory committee and has served as a form of checks and balances by approving or disapproving the recommendations of that group. The advisory committee and the vestry have worked well together because they have trust in one another and trust that the Holy Spirit will keep them together. Working well together has not always meant beer and Skittles every day, but it has meant giving each other space to operate and listen to one another, especially when they didn’t always see things the same way.

“It’s been a good learning process for all of us,” says Brandt. “Volunteer organizations are tricky because there isn’t a tsar who can cut through debate and direct the outcome. Outcomes must be determined by consensus, which can be time-consuming and sometimes frustrating. You must remember that the Holy Spirit is the one in charge.”

Kris Newcomer and Tom Brandt, members of the vestry at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Edina, Minnesota, contributed to this article.

*Unto whomsoever much is given,
of him shall much be required.*
Luke 12:48

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about the activities of the congregation.

As important as these responsibilities are, the vestry and the rector should also invest time together in reflecting on their work and assessing how well they are meeting these duties. There is the tendency within congregations to assume that everything that goes wrong is the fault of the clergy and staff. Yet the difficulties encountered may be the result of the action or inaction of the vestry. Regular self-assessment, possibly led by a trained facilitator, can help the rector and vestry address and correct such problems, and can provide

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Council to encourage some of its members to enter a process of discerning a call to become Canon 9 priests.

Signs of a successful ministry are evident, but according to Robert Borden, not all of the problems are solved. The success will ultimately depend on getting another church to join them in this regional ministry and share in the financial responsibilities of the IPC. He is cautiously optimistic about those prospects. “We offer enrichment to one another,” state the Bordens in speaking of the relationship between the two congregations. “We have gone from a hand ringing, woe-is-me attitude to one of dynamism and excitement about what the future holds. Our faith has grown in the pro-

affirmation for what they are doing well and understanding of how to improve performance.

Regardless of the shared and overlapping responsibilities, the rector is the principal and most visible leader of the congregation. The canons do clarify this in assigning the major responsibility for congregational life and use of the buildings to the rector.

Note: For additional information or amplification on vestry and clergy responsibility, please refer to the Vestry Resource Guide, which may be purchased by calling Forward Movement at 800-543-1813.

cess, and there is great energy for what we are about. We think we can make it work.”

The Three Rivers regional ministry is an excellent example of how mutual ministry can work. It is a joint ministry of laity and clergy in a situation where a shortage of financial resources does not allow for a full-time priest in either congregation. It requires the commitment of the laity, the strong and sound leadership of forward-thinking vestries, and the support and encouragement of the bishop.

Robert and Lorie Borden, Priscilla Larson, and The Rev. Diane Root, all active participants in the Three Rivers Interparish Council in the Diocese of Vermont, contributed to this article.

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Resources . . .

- *Vestry Resource Guide*, a publication of Cornerstone, available through Forward Movement Publications, 800-543-1813
- *The Vestry Handbook*, by Christopher L. Webber, Morehouse Publishing, ISBN 0-8192-1453-1
- *Constitution & Canons of The Episcopal Church*, available in most Episcopal bookstores and through Episcopal Parish Services at 800-903-5544.
- *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders*, by Gilbert R. Rendle, ISBN 1-56699-187-0, available through Alban Institute, 800-486-1318, Ext. 244
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