

VESTRY PAPERS

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



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Transforming “Business as Usual”

by Stephanie Hull

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Acts 2:1-2

Can we experience the same power felt by the apostles on that Pentecost day? Surely, as the apostles gathered in that room, they discussed the future, worried about how they would go on, and waited and prayed. Can we tap into this great love and power today as we gather in business groups and committees of the church to plan for the future, work out conflict, determine mission, or develop budgets?

The Holy Spirit belongs to us today. It is present among us as we meet to conduct the affairs of the church. It can transform our

meetings from tedious “business as usual” gatherings into opportunities for spiritual formation and profound worship in Christian community.

Over the last ten years, I have worked closely with Listening Hearts Ministries, an organization that assists individuals, congregations, and business groups of the church to practice Christian spiritual discernment. I have worked with a number of vestries and church organizations that want to use spiritual discernment as a way of doing business. I also have had the opportunity to practice spiritual discernment while serving as a member and then senior warden of my parish vestry. This work has transformed my life.

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Making decisions is an essential task of vestries, whether it is about finances or stewardship or evangelism. But how does spiritual discernment differ from secular decision making? What tools might vestries use? Are there any new resources to consider? We asked the experts.

Spirituality and Strategic Planning

by Joel Gibson

In my more than thirty years of serving Episcopal churches, both as a lay person and as a priest, I have worked with numerous vestries which were engaging in some form of strategic planning. For various reasons — from the infectious energy of a new pastorate to the challenge of fiscal crises — almost all vestries undertake this important process. It is almost always a time of heightened energy packed with great excitement.

But there is often a principle disconnect that, if left unattended, can leave the planning process unfulfilling and ultimately less successful. Many vestries or members of vestry leadership teams — in exuberance or

in desperation — often forget a core aspect of church life: discernment of the Spirit. Instead, many vestries adopt a solely “operational” orientation to their planning, foregoing much, if any, spiritual acknowledgement or focus. This segmentation that is so often practiced in secular life is not a friend of the planning process within the church.

Two causal factors in this frequent disjuncture — for lay and clerical leaders alike — are either a lack of a working comfort level with spirituality in general or a far too narrow definition of spirit and the spiritual.

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Spirituality and Strategic Planning

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Through the process of spiritual engagement there will emerge the tools needed to transform the business of God into the ministry of God.

The word "spirituality" comes from the Latin word "spirare", meaning breath; so creating a place for spirituality within strategic planning can be seen as literally "breathing life into the plan" as well as the planners.

As the Executive Director of SOL (pronounced soul), a center that assists individuals and organizations in living more from their spiritual center, I work with church groups to help them bring a greater sense of spirituality to their planning. While setting the planning process within a regular prayer and scriptural context is important, I also ask vestries to practice the following seven principles and practices of spirituality.

Seven Principles of Spirituality in Planning

Spirituality is creativity. Creativity is natural and a normal aspect of every human spirit. Look at things differently. Alter old habits. Consider updating beliefs.

Spirituality is energy. Every person adds either positive or negative energy to a planning process. Positive spiritual energy is generated when you are creative, communicative and collaborative. We all chose which energy we bring to the table.

Spirituality is vision. Spiritual vision works to see beyond the obvious to what might be possible rather than being defined by perceived limits and reacting out of fear.

Spirituality is respect. Begin by having respect for yourself and the gifts that you bring, gifts given by the Creator. Respect for others comes with the recognition that they too have gifts.

Spirituality is communication. Share information in a way that allows others to see, hear, learn and grow. Avoidance, misdirection and self-promotion at the expense of listening are antithetical to this aspect of the Spirit.

Spirituality is partnership. Partnership accepts and values the relationships within the planning process. There is a mutual trust

that all parties are working for the common good.

Spirituality is flexibility. Evaluate the chosen path and be willing to change as change is indicated. Allowing your own beliefs and behaviors to be altered to benefit the whole is to be alive in the Spirit.

Seven Practices for Spiritual Planning

Be thankful for what God has given you. Acknowledging one's strengths, gifts and blessings enables all to proceed more out of hope and less out of fear.

Check the spiritual well being of the group and individual participants. Work to strengthen the thin places. Care for the spiritual health of the members of the group.

Cut the anchor. Try not to limit either the thinking or the actions of the group. Work harder to discern what the call might be than perfecting the process of getting there.

Expect twins. Do not settle for a numbers game that focuses on body count and dollars collected. Seek out that which addresses the soul and spiritual wealth as well.

Acknowledge accountability. Keep in mind the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). Before and after the planning process, all participants should be using their gifts.

Allow the tension to become creative spiritual energy. The tension between the current reality and the emerging vision is the realm of the Holy Spirit. Embrace it; do not avoid it.

Sustain the Momentum. Visioning takes time to come into being. In the setbacks and delays questions will arise: Have we made the right decision? Will the support still be there? This is the time to seek the sustaining power of the Spirit. Remember to acknowledge the small successes. And remember the life cycles of the Creator.

The former dean of St. Mark's Cathedral in Minneapolis, Joel Gibson is the Executive Director of SOL (Spiritual Opportunities for Life), Minneapolis, Minnesota and can be contacted via its website: www.solfait.org.

"To hear and be moved by Jesus Christ is to be faced with a crisis, a crisis that calls into question the whole basis of the values on which the world invites us to lead our lives."

Senior Warden
Dick Kurth
St. Luke's, Darien,
Connecticut

What in God's Name is Going on Here?

by Rob Voyle

Have you ever walked into a church and thought, what in God's name is going on here? As an interim minister and as a church consultant I find myself asking this question everywhere I go. Sadly, I rarely get any intelligible responses.

The first time I asked it was during a sermon in a parish where the rector had been removed for sexual misconduct. The parishioners responded with embarrassment, nervousness, and knowing (but not knowing) smiles. Several appeared to be itching for the service to end so they could tell me in graphic detail what had been going on. Unfortunately, what the question had raised was the unintelligible gossip, or all the activity that was not occurring in God's name.

What I am most interested in, however, is the real answer to the questions: Where is

God at work in your midst? Where do you find God? Where do you see God acting in your life and in the lives of your fellow parishioners? In other words: What in God's name is going on here?

The person beside you

How well do you as a vestry person know what God is doing in your congregation? At a leadership training program for clergy and vestries I asked two questions of the participants: "Where do you find God and see God most active in your church?" and "Where does the person who sits alongside you in church on Sundays find God in your church?" Most could readily describe where they experienced God at work in their congregations, but became rather bewildered by the second question.

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The Vestry as an Instrument of Call

by Katherine Tyler Scott

The growing interest in the culture and character of congregational life reflects a recognition of larger societal shifts. Like many other institutions, the church is witnessing a move from top-down, hierarchical structures to inclusive circular models of leadership and ministry. The flow of information, technological complexity, and rapidity of change are so great that the capacity to discern truth, meaning, call, and direction are more important than ever.

Many feel a loss of familiar ways of being and doing, whether at work or worship. It is a time of being in-between, or in Hannah Arendt's words, "a time of no longer and a time of not yet." It is a time in which questions of identity and purpose reemerge for another round of clarification.

It is during such times that the leadership of the vestry is essential. Helping congregations successfully navigate through this period requires a healthy partnership with clergy and the ability to manage the tension of being in-between. The long-term health and vitality of the faith community will be

determined by how well the vestry can support the clergy and the congregation in the work of discernment, of answering such questions as these: Who are we? Why do we exist? Whom do we serve? What are we being called to be and to do?

Integrated Leadership Development

Facilitating this work requires a framework of integrated development, depth discussion, and self-discovery. At Trustee Leadership Development, Inc., we use the Integrated Model of Leadership' (see graphic) to help vestries understand both the technical and adaptive challenges they face and the inner and outer work required to meet them. Technical challenges are situations in which the problem is clear, the solution is clear, and the answers can be documented for future use. Adaptive challenges have unclear problems and unclear solutions, and those with the problems must be involved in order to solve them. Most of the training provided to leaders is technical, while most of the problems they encounter are adaptive.

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Christ Church in Short Hills, New Jersey, recently set out a bowl of small wooden crosses in the back of the church. Parishioners were to take one and carry it until they met someone who needed it. Some 400 crosses found a new home.

The Vestry as an Instrument of Call

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Vestry members engage in outer work—visible, measurable functions such as keeping good records, developing budgets, assuring compliance with canon law, strategic planning, and preparing annual reports. They also engage in inner work, the less visible processes of self-evaluation, historical analysis and reflection, and prayerful silence and contemplation, all of which provide the basis for the insight and foresight so necessary for wise discernment and decision making.

Selection

Integrated leadership development begins with the selection of the vestry. Are leaders selected who can perceive and interpret the larger reality truthfully? Can they see issues in context? Do they have clarity of personal and organizational mission? Are they comfortable with the authority invested in them, and will they use it for the common good? Have they demonstrated the ability to transcend self-interest?

Organization

Once the vestry is elected, does it organize and frame its work in prayer and contemplation? Does the agenda mirror the primary needs and concerns of the congregation? Does it open up conversations so that the needs and interests of the larger community are considered and addressed? Is there adequate time at vestry meetings to nurture the spiritual health of the vestry, clergy, and congregation? Does the vestry monitor the congregation's congruence between its beliefs and values and its actions? Does it have group norms to which it commits to engage in to do the work of ministry? Is the vestry a solid sounding board for clergy so that ethical decision making and continuous growth and improvement can occur?

Listening

The vestry is not just attuned to the voices of its members, but is able to hear what the congregation is saying through its actions, conversation, and participation. It serves as a

communicator and translator of data received from the congregation. The purpose of bringing information to meetings is to inform decision making and to bring about positive change. The most able vestries help to create an environment in which congregants feel heard and respected.

Depth Knowledge

The most effective vestries know their congregation's history and mission over time. They celebrate its gifts and accomplishments

and use them to liberate the congregation to think and act into a new way of being. Criticism is productively channeled into constructive dialogue, consensus, and commitment to change. The deeper and broader perspective that the vestry can bring helps the congregation see its unique vocation and place in the community and beyond.

The hallmark of an effective vestry is its willingness to embrace the technical, adaptive,

inner, and outer work of leadership. This means the members live out their faith with integrity and congruence, creating a governance community in which honesty is practiced and trust is developed. The vestry's capacity for disciplined reflection will enable wiser discernment and decision making — and the cultivation of a faith community in which not only the vestry, but the congregation, can be instruments of call.

Katherine Tyler Scott is the president of Trustee Leadership Development, Inc., a national leadership education and resource center located in Indianapolis, Indiana. She serves as a consultant/trainer, workshop leader, and speaker for human service organizations, businesses, and churches, and has written extensively on the topics of leadership and leadership education. Founded in 1989, TLD's mission is the education and development of transformational leaders with the capacity to hold individuals, organizations and communities in trust!



"Speak your mind and make your views known. But once the team (rector, staff and vestry) makes a decision, carry it out as if it were your own — even if you disagree with it. You would expect nothing less from the other members of the team."

The Rev. Scott A. Benhase
St. Philip's, Durham,
North Carolina

What is Going on Here?

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A few made tentative guesses, until one person said that he thought it was presumptuous to say where another person found God. At that point the remaining participants were relieved, agreeing that it would be far too presumptuous to say where any person, let alone the person who has sat alongside them, possibly for many years, found God in the church.

I disagreed with them. I believe that it is the fundamental responsibility of every vestry person to know where parishioners find God working in their congregation. How could a vestry faithfully budget, or seek financial support for the work of God's kingdom if they don't know what God is doing?

Discover what is working

Questions that seek to discover what God is doing and parishioners' best experience of their congregation are based in an appreciative inquiry approach that was developed in the late 1980s by David Cooperrider and his associates at Case Western Reserve University. They found that the most effective and creative way of developing organizations was to discover what was working and giving life to the organization and build on these factors.

This was in strong contrast to problem oriented development processes that explore the nature of the problems organizations have and then seek to solve them. At the Clergy Leadership Institute we have found the appreciative approach rather than a problem focused approach to be an effective way for vestries to discern God's will and prepare for the future.

At the heart of the appreciative process is inquiry: having people share stories of their best experiences of belonging to the church. The way questions are asked is critical. If we ask "What's wrong?" we will gather stories about problems, and who is to blame. These stories only lead to defensiveness and judgmentalism.

Build on positive experiences

By asking questions about best experiences that are life giving, we inquire into the very things that make the church valuable to its members. It is on these positive experiences that we can build the future — for it is in these things that we see what God is doing.

Two things happen when we tell these stories. We gather information about what God is doing and what people value in their church, which is helpful in the strategic planning process. More importantly, though, is what happens in the hearts and minds of people who tell and hear the stories. One of the assumptions of appreciative inquiry is: "What we focus on becomes our reality." If we focus on problems and their prevention, problems are our reality and they will abound with all their attendant frustrations

The appreciative approach does not mean that problems are ignored. Einstein is reported to have said, "a problem cannot be solved from the mindset that created it." We use appreciative inquiry to change the mindset of people so they can become knowledgeable about solutions to problems rather than causes of problems.

As Christians, God is our reality. We will only live in that reality when we are focused on what God is doing. As an avid gardener I know that the best way to prevent weeds in my garden is to ensure that I have good healthy crops. As vestry members, your first responsibility is to discover the crops that God has planted in your parish so that you may tend them. I wonder: "What in God's name is going on in your Church?"

The Rev. Dr. Robert Voyle is the director of the Clergy Leadership Institute. Additional information about appreciative inquiry and how it can be used in church settings for strategic planning, mutual ministry review or as a positive way of being in the world can be found at the Clergy Leadership Institute web site at www.clergyleadership.com.



From a church
marquee:

Don't give up. Moses

was once a basket case.

Editor's Note

We are hard at work on our issues for 2003. Do you have ideas? Topics that you would like to see covered? Drop us a line at vestrypapers@aol.com or call Cornerstone at 1-877-644-9941.

— Lindsay Freeman



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IS A MINISTRY OF
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
FOUNDATION



Director, Cornerstone

The Rev. L. Ann Hallisey
(877) 644-9941

ahallisey@EpiscopalFoundation.org

Editor

The Rev. Lindsay Hardin Freeman
VestryPapers@aol.com

Editorial Assistant

Karen Greenfeld

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Transforming “Business as Usual”

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Sorting out God’s voice

Spiritual discernment is the quest to discover God’s will for us so that we can live into the words of the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done.” It is a way in which the people of God can both enact their faith and deepen their love and trust while working out community decisions that they face as the body of Christ.¹ The goal of discernment is to sort out God’s voice from other voices in our lives, e.g. the noise of our outer and inner lives, voices from our past, fears of the future, and desires of the moment.

Spiritual discernment at Listening Hearts Ministries “is grounded in a conviction that the Holy Spirit is an active presence and, when in a group, the leading party in the proceedings.”² It is a discipline distilled from Christian traditions of discernment including Ignatian, Benedictine, and Quaker practices. Several principles are central to spiritual discernment.

Prayer — Prayer before meetings, prayer throughout meetings, prayer by others on behalf of the meetings, prayer after we leave a meeting, prayer in silence. Undefended listening for the leading of the Holy Spirit.³

Total Listening — deep listening for God’s voice in other people, in the mood of the group, and in our own heart and imagination. Requires a lifetime of effort and the practice of silence. Letting go of our own agendas and timeliness, living with uncertainty.

Consensus — an authentic coming together with the body gathered. Spiritual consensus allows one person to stand in the way of a decision, thus members of the group must be genuinely open to agendas other than their own. When one or more truly believe God is not calling them to the same answer as

others, they must have the courage to stand in the way.

A New Perspective

What can happen when a vestry commits to spiritual discernment as a way of conducting business? In the nine years that I served on a vestry, I experienced a number of miracles. I saw a divided vestry suddenly come together over a most difficult and conflicted issue when a member shared a Scripture passage that emerged in her mind during a quiet time of reflection.

Together, we began to see a new perspective on how we could serve God through our congregation. I have seen argumentative budget debates change direction and tone when a member of the vestry called us to silence. Never have I seen an insoluble deadline missed or an important decision avoided.

Perhaps the greatest miracle is that I have come to understand the “business” meeting as an integral part of my and my community’s worship life. The application of spiritual discernment in and out of vestry meetings and other meetings dealing with the affairs of the church continues to provide me with a deeper understanding of discipleship and the gifts of the Holy Spirit working in Christian community.

In addition to her work with Listening Hearts Ministries (www.listeninghearts.ang-md.org), Stephanie Hull is co-author of Grounded in God: Listening Hearts for Discernment for Group Deliberations, Morehouse, 1996. A member and former senior warden of Memorial Episcopal Church in Baltimore City, Maryland, she works for the University of Maryland, using her background in social work and law.

¹ Farnham, Hull, McLean, *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts for Discernment for Group Deliberation*, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1st ed. 1996.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.