

Vestry 101

Module 1: General Leadership Principles

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The text of this section of the video is below. Please refer to it as necessary as you reflect on and answer the following questions.

1. Does your congregation have a clearly defined identity and purpose that aligns with God's mission? If so, what is it?
2. What kinds of listening processes do you engage in to listen to God and to one another? How do you communicate the work of the vestry/bishop's committee to the congregation?
3. In what ways do you model faithful Christian living and participation in the life of the congregation?
4. Are God's mission and vision for your congregation setting budgetary priorities, shaping congregational life and programs, guiding outreach and faith formation? If so, in what ways? If not, how can you faithfully attend to these matters in new ways?

Missional Approach

The canonical and legal responsibilities of vestries and bishop's committees are very important and must be clearly understood and carried out; however, the Church is more than a non-profit organization. First of all, the Church is not a building: the Church is us, the assembly of the baptized. When we were baptized, our true identities were publicly proclaimed: we are first and foremost children of God with the capacity to learn how to love one another as God loves us. Through baptism, we were united with Christ and filled with God's Holy Spirit to empower us to be agents of God's purposes in the world.

The Church also gains its identity and authority from God—it is Christ's Body in our communities with Jesus himself as its head. As the Apostle Paul writes in his Letter to the

Ephesians, the Church is to show forth the *full glory* of the resurrected Christ, alive and powerful. *The mission of the Church, then, is the very mission of Jesus, making real the healing and restoring, the forgiving and redeeming work of Jesus in our homes, in our workplaces, and in our communities, a mission that is constantly unfolding in our churches and in their surrounding neighborhoods and out into the world.* This is what it means to be a “missional” church. This is why it is very important to discern and talk about “God’s mission and vision” for your congregations, not the congregation’s mission and vision, not the vestry’s or bishop’s committees’ mission and vision, and certainly not the rector’s nor vicar’s mission and vision! In summary, it is true, the Kingdom of God is at hand, within the reach of every one of us, and it is through our congregations that this Good News is proclaimed and lived out.

The Primary Responsibility of Vestries & Bishop’s Committees

With such a spiritual and missional charge, vestries and bishop’s committees must realize that their overarching responsibility is to seek the mind of Christ. After all, the Church is the embodiment of his presence and ministry in our communities. It is Jesus who has a vision and mission for each of our congregations, and it is his intentions and plans for our churches that vestries are charged to discern and put into effect.

In order to do that, vestries and bishop’s committees need to listen. The Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich said that the first duty of love is to listen. Not surprisingly, the words “listen” and “obey” share the same Latin root. It is impossible to obey without first hearing what is expected of us. God speaks to us in many ways: through others, privately, through Holy Scripture, in quiet and in conversation, in prayers and worship. Jesus is constantly communicating his will for our congregations. As spiritual and missional leaders in the congregation, it is the vestry or bishop’s committee members who commit themselves to listening—to prayer, to the reading of Scripture, to hearing God’s voice in the life of the congregation, to personal spiritual practices—so that together they can discern and be obedient to the mind of Christ for their congregation.

Clearly communicating what they hear, being ambassadors of Jesus’ mission and vision, is a key role for vestries and bishop’s committees. To be heard with respect and authority requires vestry persons to model faithful Christian living and participation in the life of the congregation—faithful in relationships, faithful in their commitment to spiritual formation, faithful in prayer and worship, faithful in the sacrificial giving of their time, their gifts and talents, and their treasure for the common good and building up of the church and for the extension of God’s Kingdom. You can’t ask people to go to where you’re not willing to go yourself. Members of vestries and bishop’s committees are called to lead by example, to live out the gospel at all times, through word and action.

The Challenge of Mission and Vision Focus

One of the biggest challenges for a vestry or bishop’s committee is to remain mission and vision oriented as it carries out its duties and responsibilities. Are God’s mission and vision for your congregation setting budgetary priorities, shaping congregational life and programs, guiding outreach? And the list goes on. Are the “God questions” being asked? Church leaders are called to speak the truth in love and to please God first; something that others sometimes find hard to accept. In a sense, if vestry and bishop’s committee members can’t “blame God” for the decisions they make, especially controversial decisions, then not enough prayer and discernment have gone into those decisions.

Many in our congregations are not aware of some important differences between the roles and responsibilities of clergy and of vestries or bishop's committees. Although clergy and vestries and bishop's committees share in much of the organizational and spiritual and missional leadership of congregations, in the polity of the Episcopal Church, rectors and vicars have the final say in some key areas:

- Rectors and vicars have control over the congregation's buildings and grounds, and their use.
- They have the final say when it comes to the worship and programmatic offerings of the congregation.
- They hire and, if need be, let go of staff.
- These responsibilities are vested in the clergy primarily for the sake of order and fidelity to Christian teaching and practice.