

# **Vestry 101**

## **Module 4: Vestry Models**

### **Rev. Brooks Keith**

*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. WHICH Vestry Model does our congregation currently inhabit? (in practice, not in narrative)
  - a. Vestry of the Whole
  - b. Council of Advice to the Cleric
  - c. Business Board with a Chaplain
  - d. Operations/Management Board
  - e. Spiritual Board
  - f. Governance/Partnership Board
2. Is our current Vestry Model successful in empowering us to reach our mission?
3. What must be strengthened, transformed or eliminated to provide outstanding Vestry leadership to THIS congregation at THIS time?
4. What is our action plan to accomplish this outstanding leadership?

There are important elements of structure that help congregational leadership manage all the many pieces we have discussed so far.

After the common denominators of Vestry leadership (leadership principles, canons, clarity of roles, concrete responsibilities) comes customizing the Vestry to YOUR congregational shape. Parish mission, church size, geographic location, demographic served, history, personality of lay and ordained leaders...all converge together to produce the successful Vestry governance template for THIS congregation in THIS moment. Several prevailing Vestry templates or profiles, which we call Models, serve as descriptive word pictures.

Not every Vestry habit or culture is healthy or productive. Descriptive does not imply ideal! We have definite opinions regarding which Vestry models are more effective and more faithful than other models, but we want to briefly touch upon a broad continuum to be thorough.

It's important to share a common paradigm of your Vestry for success! Leadership conflict often springs from divergent or contradictory models, especially if they are more implied than actually transparent and agreed upon. Always foremost is the leadership challenge: What's BEST for THIS church at THIS time?!

Let's avoid tired tropes like "we've always done it this way" (cell phone) or "this place needs to be run more like a business" (actually we are non-profits). The best model is not about what's larger, or smaller, or more popular, but rather what's most effective in expressing excellent leadership governance! Let's go exploring Vestry Models together!

*Vestry of the Whole*

This model is usually experienced by small congregations which can function like a Vestry due to their intimate size. Everyone is highly invested, usually sacrificially, in the life and governance of the church in order for this congregation to survive. The Vestry of the Whole displays high partnership, personal investment and inclusivity. Unfortunately, when congregations shift out of this model interpersonal conflict can develop rapidly.

We hope even smaller congregations can grow through and beyond this model safely and sensitively with time and intention. Of course, even very small numerical Vestries can faithfully exercise empathetic pastoral leadership! As congregations grow, what model do we see next?

#### *Council of Advice to the Cleric*

This is a very traditional template vesting extraordinary trust and authority in your rector, vicar or priest-in-charge as primary decision-maker for your parish or mission. In this model the Vestry acts with a reactive, more rubber-stamp governance. This is a version of the clerical-deference “Mother Knows Best” or “Father Knows Best” model so many of us grew up with.

In this model Vestry meetings are characterized by the priest doing a lot of talking, and lay Vestry members a lot of listening (and boy don't clergy love to talk!) This model is more prevalent than many of us care to admit. Now we know this model is easy to lapse into because we want to respect and trust our ordained leaders. But it also functionally isolates that leader and does not model shared accountability to our parishes and mission. This model is most appropriate for brief periods.

We believe this model is best reserved for rare situations in which the priest is the pro-active agent of positive change or dynamic congregational healing. But we do not recommend staying in this model for long even so, and if you find yourself in this model over time without any serious critique from any Vestry member, it's time to change!

#### *Business Board with Chaplain*

This is the direct obverse of our previous model, with the lay Vestry members (usually bringing professional backgrounds in finance, or business, or government, or organizational management) exercising primary operational authority in the parish while the priest serves a chaplaincy or pastoral role for liturgical or “spiritual” matters. In this model lay Vestry members frequently reference their own business experience to bring better governance to their congregations. Rules, manuals, canons and legalities are often highly visible in this model.

However, the Body of Christ is not a for-profit enterprise, government or public entity. We fundamentally miscast the church as a business with no integrated vision of governance, management and stewardship being connected to Christian ministry if we stay here! We should function better than a business, but honestly, I think some Vestry members often forget we are going to strategically lose money every month to effectively fulfill our mission! I also suspect that some congregational stakeholders may have their status threatened when this model shifts, but Ann, no one leader, lay or ordained, should hold a congregation or Vestry hostage no matter their tenure or status.

There are situations, if the Rector, Vicar, Interim or Priest-in-Charge is unwilling or unable to exercise effective organizational and governance leadership, that this model works briefly. Often, we see this model employed immediately following clergy misconduct or removal. And the cleric will often not want to stay in a church which enjoys this model! But we believe

this model may be useful for very brief periods, and ultimately not to use for too long. Evolution towards a healthier and more respectful clergy-lay leader partnership is possible and desirable!

#### *Operations/Management Board*

Brooks: Often called a “working” Vestry, this model was in vogue in the previous generation of the Episcopal Church and may still hold some value for some congregations at certain stages of their journey. We used to call this the SWEEPS model as each acronym letter denoted a distinctive element of congregational life. Each Vestry member is assigned operational oversight over one such element of congregation life, i.e. stewardship, worship, evangelism, pastoral care and finances. The Operational Board Vestry model is useful for uplifting lay ministry, and also for extending a committed leadership footprint into critical elements of congregational life.

But we can also see some potential drawbacks in this model, including sustaining ministry leadership over time as Vestry members rotate, and also the reality that not all Vestry members may have equal leadership capacity. Over-identified individual leadership can also unintentionally develop under this model, in which the particular ministry becomes seen as the property of the Vestry leader and not belonging to the congregation. We can do better still with the next model.

#### *Spiritual Board*

I love it when Vestry members are identified as spiritual leaders, or elders, providing the congregation with anchoring moral leadership. Imagine clergy and lay Vestry members sharing equitably in leadership, often choosing to use consensus to arrive at important decisions. In this model prayer is a significant agenda item for each Vestry meeting, as is spiritual formation for each Vestry member through study, retreats and spiritual direction.

The benefits of the model accrue first to the Vestry member in their spiritual development, and secondarily to the congregation led by those seeking spiritual maturity. Everyone is encouraged to move deeper into their discipleship! But potential drawbacks of this model may include dis-empowering a Vestry to exercise effective governance leadership—someone has to approve that monthly financial report! Yet it is a model to strive towards for many of our congregations in the Episcopal Church in Colorado.

#### *Governance/partnership board*

This model includes elements of the previous models combined to provide proactive, effective Vestry leadership through governance. Governance leadership is shared missional vision always seeking to clarify the congregation’s unique, particular mission, or purpose for being. Effective governance also tends those canonically appropriate, critically important leadership functions which best empower the congregation’s leaders to fulfill that mission here and now.

Governance partnership Vestries do not normally exercise operational or managerial oversight over salaried or volunteer church leaders, but instead delegate operational authority to the rector, vicar or priest-in-charge while articulating clear and compelling best practices leadership standards which define healthy, successful ministry. While governance partnership boards tend to enjoy the benefit of paid staff members, this need not always be so. They do require a clear Vestry chair, whether the priest or one delegated by the priest to lead the Vestry, and a clear operational executive to realize the church’s mission daily.

The canons allow for the Rector to designate a representative, usually the Senior Warden or Bishop's Warden, to chair Vestry meetings while the cleric still retains all the authority to assume the chair at any time. In fact, our Vestry is chaired by the Senior Warden and runs far more effectively than when I chair the meetings!

This model demands high leadership functionality, trust and authentic partnership, and in return delivers very effective ministerial results.

As a priest in good standing in the Episcopal Church in Colorado, I have inhabited each and every one of these Vestry models over the years. While some are more preferable than others, each one can provide helpful Vestry leadership and certainly elements of all can be mixed together if necessary. Most importantly, ask yourself:

- WHICH Vestry Model does our congregation currently inhabit? (in practice, not in narrative)
- IS our Vestry Model successful in empowering us to reach our mission?
- WHAT must be strengthened, transformed or eliminated to provide outstanding Vestry leadership to THIS congregation at THIS time?
- WHAT is my action plan to accomplish this outstanding leadership?

**Ann:** Brooks, thank you so much--you have brought your usual clarity and sense of humor to bear. Who would have thought learning about vestry models would be so fun and informative?

*[Slide 40--pause and learn]*

**Ann:** You may pause the video here and go deeper in this area. Please review Module 4: Vestry Models to reflect on how your vestry or bishop's committee currently operates, and whether another might be a better way to respond to the call of Christ.