

Vestry 101

Module 7: Potential Challenges and Commitment to Spiritual Growth

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The text of this section of the video is below. Please refer to it as necessary as you reflect on how your Vestry or Bishop's Committee is doing, and what you can commit to do to grow spiritually, both as individuals and as a leadership body.

1. Can you identify any of the symptoms of dysfunction in your vestry or wider church body? If so, how can you as a leadership body address it and transform it towards health?
2. What underlying issues might be in place—is there an “elephant in the room”?
3. What is the commitment to change and transformation that lies before your leadership and church? How can you say “yes” to moving forward in trust and faith?

Potential Challenges & Commitment to Spiritual Growth

I would suggest that each Vestry member purchase the newest edition of “Vestry Resource Guide.” This Guide speaks of Vestries as doing “holy work” – “seeking to build vital faith communities with the capacity to empower people to live out the gospel as Christian disciples.” It also cites a quote by a retired Bishop, who said: “Vestries should be one of the most exciting ministries in the church – joyful in fact. Healthy effective Vestries make healthy, effective parishes.”

When serving on a Vestry ceases to be joyful; when Vestries become less than effective, we need to ask the question, what's going on?

Symptoms of dysfunction are pretty obvious – it might come in the form of one member dominating a meeting that shuts down discussion; the unwillingness to participate; avoidance of conflict, often seen in the refusal to address the “elephant in the room,” or any subject on which there may be strong differences of opinion for fear of “rocking the boat.” Another sign of dysfunction is “parking lot” conversations, where what was not said during the meeting is aired on the sidelines, sowing distrust and potentially creating factions. Vestry members need to be

very aware of triangulation, which occurs when a third party is brought into a conflictual situation that can only be resolved by the direct and honest interaction between the other parties. Finally, avoidance of accountability on the part of a Vestry member might well be an indication of an underlying problem that should be addressed.

Signs of potential “vestry failure”:

- When a Vestry become issue driven (especially by money issues);
- Poor communication;
- Loss of trust, especially related to financial matters;
- Breaking confidentiality;
- Engaging in gossip and not dealing with rumors.

If you as Vestry members experience any of the above, it's really important and totally in your long-term interests to figure out what's going on. Are there underlying issues? If so, what are they, and how might they be addressed?

Start off by looking at the bigger picture. Has the Vestry articulated where it is going; does it have a sense of purpose; a sense of vision? It's not unusual to discover that as a Vestry, a “we've always done it this way” mentality might be getting in the way of being open to the Holy Spirit and where God is calling a particular congregation. Personal agendas that drive the Vestry's sense of purpose can also get in the way. The question, “are we relying on ourselves rather than on God,” is something, I think, that all Christians need to continue asking. Other important questions include whether our pride in our ability to “maintain tradition” or, alternatively, our “can do,” independent attitudes so prevalent in our individualistic culture, are preventing us from discerning God's guidance. These are not easy questions. However, the more you learn about yourselves through your honest responses to these questions, the healthier and more vibrant you will become as a Vestry. A healthy, vibrant Vestry is critical to the health and vitality of your congregation. Do this work, because through your leadership you will help everyone in your community learn to respond to God's unique calling of your church.

To sum up the above, I would say that as a Vestry, it takes wisdom, courage and humility to examine whether your focus has been on pleasing people rather than God and failing to recognize Jesus as the Head of the Body. It is the job of Vestry members to live faithful lives and to lead by example, to exercise servant leadership, and to share excitement, joy, and optimism with the parish.

As so many Christians in this country see how much Christianity is changing in the 21st century, I think we all need to be very intentional in examining where we have been and where we are going. I am sure we are all becoming increasingly aware of how many Americans are switching religions or claiming no religious affiliation. It is becoming abundantly clear that the Judeo-Christian tradition is no longer the dominant cultural force in the country, and that membership in mainline Protestant churches is declining and aging. For all these reasons, it's incumbent upon Vestries to look at other models, to think outside the box, and above all, to learn to say “yes” to God in new and deeper ways.

Characteristics of Spiritual Leadership

What I think we can do is probably one of the most difficult things to do, which is to overcome our all-too-human resistance to change. It's much easier said than done, but I really believe we

need to start being bold – we need try new things, open ourselves up to what the Spirit is saying through the people and the communities we serve. We need to learn to listen more intentionally; to share our gifts and commit to work faithfully with men and women toward a shared sense of purpose, which is towards a vision of the future that reflects God's dream for our congregation.

Vestries of vibrant and growing churches are keenly aware of the need to be “mission shaped” and “mission focused.” This is an approach that calls for new ways of doing business, and of being church. Vestry members are called into spiritual leadership to engage more deeply with God, our neighbors and with the world. It's an approach that involves risk, the willingness to be open and vulnerable, to change and to be changed.

The characteristics of such leadership are unmistakable - joy, excellence, encouragement, optimism, excitement, support of one another and especially of the priests who are serving you. The gifts of Holy imagination will abound and energize a congregation to move forward with growing capacity for participation in the reign of God.