

## Principles of Vestry Leadership

The Rev. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr.

**1) The vestry of an Episcopal Church shares with the rector in the spiritual leadership of the parish. The goal and task of this leadership is “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12-16).**

The head of the church is Jesus Christ, and the church is his body (Eph 5:23). The baptized enjoy an organic union with the risen Jesus and through him with each other. As head of the church, the Lord Jesus is both source and goal of the church’s growth in the Spirit. From him the church receives its life, power, and unity; in him the church is formed as a community of sacrificial love that manifests his holy presence in the world. The unity of the church is personal, sacramental, mystical, communal. The church is not an aggregate of individual believers but a society knit together by faith and the enlivening presence of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul emphasizes the mutual interdependence of the baptized within the one body: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable” (1 Cor 12:21-22). From the moment of baptism, believers can no longer understand themselves as autonomous individuals. We are members of one body. We belong to the Lord and to each other.

Within the common life of the body, the Lord Jesus calls individuals to exercise ministry of leadership for the good of the body. This call obviously extends to the ordained but also includes specific individuals within every congregation. In the parishes of the Episcopal Church, the vestry is a community of leaders who have been called by the congregation and Holy Spirit to exercise leadership within the congregation, for the good of the congregation. The canons of the Episcopal Church establish an interdependent ministry of pastoral leadership, under the headship of Jesus Christ. Thus the rector, for example, is given full authority and responsibility for the spiritual life and worship of the congregation, including use and control of the church and parish buildings; yet the disbursement of monies for the ministry of the parish resides with the vestry.

This delicate canonical interdependence means that the rector and vestry together share in the pastoral oversight and headship of the congregation. The rector is ordained by the Lord to envision the mission and ministry of the congregation; but this envisioning

is a collaborative work with the vestry. Once mutually discerned, it is the responsibility of the lay leadership to communicate and support this faith-vision within the parish community. The spiritual growth and vitality of the congregation requires a unity of headship committed to the mission of the Gospel and the common good of the body of Christ.

Leadership in the church differs dramatically from political leadership in modern democratic societies. In our democratic societies duly elected officials understand themselves as serving and representing specific constituencies. Their task is to vote and work for the interests of their constituents. Ecclesial leadership, on the other hand, is ultimately a calling of the Holy Spirit for the good of the church and the mission of the Gospel. Thus the vestry, despite the election of its members by the wider congregation, does not represent specific groups within the congregation; rather, it represents the church to the congregation.

Diversity of opinion is present within every vestry; but the vestry ultimately speaks with one voice. The decision of the vestry on a given matter—even if decided by the barest majority—is a decision of the whole vestry. Because the vestry speaks with one voice, it is able to serve the unity of the church and the building up of the body of Christ.

When the vestry understands itself as a democratic body representing constituencies within the congregation, disunity within the church is the inevitable result. Let us assume, for example, that the vestry has decided, by a majority vote of five to four, to fund a full-time staff position of youth minister. The four dissenters gather in the parking lot after the meeting to reaffirm their strong disapproval of this decision. “Now is *not* the time for the parish to be committing its resources to youth ministry,” they all agree. “Monies are limited and there are other needs and projects that need our attention.” During the following week, they each communicate their disagreement with the vestry-decision to four different members of the congregation, who in turn communicate this disagreement to four other members, who then talk to four other members. Within a week the parish finds itself divided right down the middle. The disunity of the vestry has been recreated within the wider congregation. Instead of faithfully serving its ordained purpose to build up the body of Christ, the vestry has become a vehicle for dividing that body. The leadership of the vestry has been sabotaged by its own members, resulting in parish disharmony and a paralysis of action.

The vestry speaks with one voice and acts with one will. When the vestry speaks, it is the whole vestry that speaks; when the vestry acts, it is the whole vestry that acts.

This understanding of vestry leadership requires a commitment of every vestry member to support fully and enthusiastically the decisions of the vestry. Each vestry member must agree never to undermine those decisions. It is his task to represent to the parish the *one* voice of the united vestry and to lead the parish in the direction decided upon by the rector and vestry, despite his personal disagreement with a specific decision.

**2) Because the vestry speaks with one voice, it is imperative that all decisions be reached through a process of deliberation that is fair, thoughtful, and open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It must be a process where all information has been provided to the vestry and where each vestry member has been given full opportunity to communicate his opinions, views, and judgments, in the expectation that every other vestry member will listen attentively and will seriously consider what he hears. When a vote is finally taken and a decision reached, every vestry member will be able to witness to the integrity of the decision, because all concerns have been heard and taken into account. Consensus has been achieved, not because everyone agrees with the final decision, but because everyone has participated in a process of frank and respectful dialogue and can thus take responsibility for the decision.**

A consensual decision-making process requires a firm commitment by every vestry member to participate in the deliberations and discussions of the vestry. All information, including most especially dissenting viewpoints, must be shared. We might term this the “parking lot” principle. All too often in vestries, significant discussion happens *after* a decision has been reached, usually in the parking lot after the meeting between those who have “lost” the vote. Consensus requires, however, that all meaningful debate occur at the table in the presence of the entire vestry. The vestry needs the contributions of every member. All viewpoints must be communicated and seriously considered. If there is disagreement, that disagreement must be clearly articulated. It is only through acknowledging our disagreement that true agreement can be found, only by confronting our disunity that genuine unity can be established. To withhold information, to hide one’s views and judgments, is to violate the trust that must exist within the vestry for the process to work fairly and justly.

Consensual decision-making requires the commitment of the rector and vestry to frank, honest, and respectful dialogue within the bonds of Christian love. All opinions are welcome. All opinions will be heard and genuinely considered. No opinion will be dismissed or ignored. The unity of the vestry thus requires an environment that is truly safe, where each individual knows that his personal integrity will be protected, even in the midst of passionate disagreement. The practice of civility and mutual respect establishes the conditions necessary for the free and honest expression by every vestry member.

Before a vote is taken on any given resolution, the rector should ascertain that each vestry member can attest to a fourfold statement:

- 1) I believe I understand your position.
- 2) I believe you understand my position.

3) I will support the decision, whether I agree with it or not, because it was arrived at openly and fairly.

4) I will accept responsibility for the outcome of the decision, whether I agree with it or not, because it was arrived at openly and fairly.

When each vestry member can make such a statement, consensus is achieved and the previous question may be ordered.

Precisely because vestry decisions are reached by a consensual process that is prayerful, deliberate, and fair, vestry members may in good conscience support and enthusiastically represent these decisions to the parish, *even though they may personally disagree with a given decision*. The good of the community requires the leaders of that community to embrace a discipline of self-denial. Such self-denial and burden-bearing is the heart of Christian discipleship. “If anyone would come after me,” Jesus tells his followers, “he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt 16:24). This discipline is well known in marriages and families. The good of a marriage often requires a spouse to join with and support the other, despite personal disagreement. This is the way of the cross—the embrace of the other in sacrificial love and solidarity. In the words of the Apostle: “As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3).

When the vestry finally acts and makes a decision, those who dissent must prayerfully seek the grace of the Lord to join the majority and move forward with them in the advancement of the church’s mission. Only thus is the unity of headship effectively maintained. If a vestry member finds that he is ultimately unable to support the direction of the vestry, that he is unable to go forward with his fellow leaders in Christ and to faithfully represent the vestry to the congregation, then he is duty bound to tender his resignation, as Bishop Edward Salmon has strongly counseled.

**3) By virtue of their position of leadership, officers and vestry members will often be approached by members of the parish and invited to entertain proposals, concerns, and grievances. It is important that each leader handle these moments in a healthy and responsible way. Specifically, the leader must make it clear at the outset that their conversation will be shared with the appropriate individuals or leadership body, with names attached. Anonymity is disallowed. This insistence compels all members of the community to assume responsibility for their speech.**

One of the most destructive dynamics in a congregation is the communication of complaints, grievances, and rumors behind a veil of anonymity. When no one is held responsible for a conversation, anything and everything can and will be said, without regard for truth or social consequence. Communication that has been divorced from named speakers quickly degenerates into gossip, with great injury to the common life of

the body of Christ. “Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark,” the Apostle James writes. “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:5-6). We each need to be held accountable for our speech and to our speech.

If a vestry member is approached with a specific request or proposal—for example, “I would like the vestry to fund a mission trip next fall”—an appropriate response might be something along the following lines: “I would be happy to bring your proposal to the vestry and will get back to you after our meeting to inform you of our decision.”

The most difficult situation that a leader will face is when a parishioner approaches him with a specific complaint or grievance against the rector, staff member, or fellow parishioner. It is crucial for the leader not to allow himself to be triangled into the conflict, nor should he assume the responsibility and burden of resolving the conflict. What the leader can do is to help bring the involved parties together to discuss the grievance. If the parishioner firmly resists this suggestion, then the leader can at least inform the person that he will pass on the complaint to the appropriate individuals, who will in turn contact the parishioner directly.

In all of these situations, the leader must consistently refuse to listen to concerns and grievances under the cover of anonymity. To do otherwise is to collude in the conspiracy of unaccountable speech. “I will receive data,” Bishop Salmon comments, “but not gossip.” Consider, for example, this common trap: You are approached by someone who tells you that they want to talk to you about a matter of delicacy, but would like to do so in confidence. Before promising your confidence, be sure to inquire whether this matter involves someone else in the parish. If it does, then you must reply that you cannot guarantee your silence. You are willing to keep in total confidence anything that the person wants to tell you about himself, but you cannot promise confidence when that information involves other parties within the congregation. In other words, the leader must retain the freedom to communicate with individuals who need to know what is happening in the life of the community.

When we are upset with another person, it is normal to seek out a third party and share with them our grievance. This is called “triangulation.” As we share our anxiety and emotional distress with someone else, we experience temporary relief from the burden. But this triangulation can be destructive both to ourselves and to the communities to which we belong. We often use it as a means to avoid resolution of conflict. Instead of going directly to the person with whom we are upset, as Jesus counsels in Matt 18:15, we involve others in our conflict, enlisting them to our “side.” We do so in the, perhaps unconscious, hope that someone else will resolve the matter for us.

If we bind others to secrecy in the process of triangulation, we create an intolerable situation for those individuals and for the community. Imagine the following scenario: Rosemary Jones's mother becomes severely ill and is hospitalized. The rector never visits her. Rosemary is understandably disappointed and angry. So she approaches the Senior Warden, or other parish leader, and tells him her grievance, but she does so with a request for anonymity ("Please don't tell the rector that I came to you"). The leader grants her request. What is he now to do with this information? By promising his silence, the leader has implicitly accepted the responsibility of resolving the conflict; but the promise of confidentiality has made it impossible for the conflict to ever be resolved. Let us assume that the leader then goes to the rector and tells him, in general terms, that parishioners are critical of his lack of attention to pastoral care. No names of course are mentioned. The rector's perceptions of the congregation are dramatically altered. Suddenly, every member of the congregation has become a potential "critic" or "enemy." The result is irresolvable conflict and profound damage to the pastor-parish relationship. Secrets destroy the bonds of community.

All of this might have been avoided if the leader had retained the freedom to communicate Rosemary's complaint to the rector. The rector could then have approached her directly, perhaps in concert with one or more leaders, to discuss the matter. Perhaps the rector did not visit the mother because he did not know that she had been hospitalized. Perhaps other pressing matters prevented him from doing so. Perhaps he simply bungled the situation. But whatever the reasons for the pastoral failure, the potential at least now exists for a resolution of the conflict. If there has been misunderstanding, then clarification can be offered. If there has been a failure in pastoral duty, then an apology can be tendered. This is not to suggest that all conflicts are so easily resolved—often they cannot be—but as long as there is a free-flow of information, there is at least the potential for such resolution.

**4) Underlying the principle of responsible speech is the moral imperative of active reconciliation within the body of Christ. From time to time, the ordained and lay leaders of the parish will find themselves in conflict with one or more of their brothers and sisters in Christ. The leaders of the parish are called by their baptism to actively seek reconciliation with those whom they have offended or injured and with those who have offended or injured them.**

Conflict is inevitable within the common life of the body of Christ. Despite their regeneration in the Holy Spirit, the baptized remain sinners, fallible, finite, and broken. We sin against each other. We alienate and hurt each other by our behavior and words, both intentionally and unintentionally. However the conflict arises, the community of faith is called by its Lord to actively address each controversy and to seek mutual reconciliation.

The duty of reconciliation falls especially upon the leaders of the parish—and for two reasons. First, the modeling by its leaders of the healthy management of conflict invites the parish to grow and mature in the practice of active reconciliation. Second,

unresolved conflict between leaders and fellow parishioners breeds a spirit of strife, anger, and resentment and disrupts the unity of the congregation. And if the conflict resides within the inner community of leadership, between the leaders themselves, the damage to the parish is magnified by many times. Not only is the united headship of rector and vestry severely crippled, but the unresolved conflict, with all of its evil consequences, inevitably spills over into the larger life of the community.

The intentional practice of reconciliation is difficult for everyone. Most of us would prefer to avoid confrontation. Yet the failure to resolve conflict wreaks havoc in the common life of the church. It permits the nursing of grievance, real or imagined. Anger possesses the heart. The bonds of communal love are broken. Estrangement between individuals and families becomes firmly entrenched. Thus the Apostle Paul counsels the church in Ephesus: “‘In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (Eph 4:26-27).

The teaching of Jesus is even more explicit: “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matt 5:23-24). “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matt 18:15-17). So highly does Jesus accord harmony between his disciples that he gives both parties in a dispute equal responsibility to seek the resolution of conflict. Unity in the Holy Spirit is achieved, not by avoiding our disunity, but by actively addressing our discord in love and forgiveness.

The most difficult conflicts to address are those between parishioners and their rector. Parishioners find it especially difficult to communicate their grievances and hurts to their priest, and the priest is often unapproachable in this regard. Yet the spiritual and communal necessity for the resolution of conflict remains. Parishioners, and especially lay leaders, need to overcome their fear and apprehension and to bring their concerns directly and immediately to their priest. Often it will be discovered that the priest is unaware of the offense he may have given. The priest, for his part, needs to inculcate an approachability that encourages his parishioners to come to him directly, in the knowledge that it is safe for them to do so. Similarly, the priest must be willing to seek out those whom he has offended and those who have offended him. Conflict, misunderstanding, and hurt feelings between the rector and members of the congregation are inevitable, just as they are inevitable within any family. What is required of all is a firm commitment to address discord directly and not allow it to fester and poison the pastoral relationship.

No moral practice is more important for the health and sanctity of the body of Christ than the mutual ministry of reconciliation. A mature congregation will address its conflicts directly and immediately, in a spirit of gentleness, honesty, and charity.

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The four steps of consensus are taken from an unpublished paper by Ross G. Paul, "Do We Have a Consensus?" (n.d.).

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