

Five Characteristics of Effective Vestries

(by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey)

1. A self-understanding as leaders of Christian parish ministry

- Though the vestry, rector and officers are charged canonically and legally with particular responsibilities, each member's scope of concern, as well as the life of the vestry as a whole, is the broad scope of parish ministry.
- This calls for a strategic view of the parish rather than an administrative view. The vestry delegates and avoids micro-managing.
- As a Christian community of ministry, effective vestries self-consciously cultivate personal relationships with each other and with God, treating God as active and present and involved.

2. Healthy, transparent interactions

- Opinions and feelings are freely shared without defensiveness, over-emotionalizing issues or attaching a sense of insult or attack (given or received) to differences among members.
- Discussions are frank, direct, solutions-oriented, and focused on the pertinent issue at hand.

3. Mutual Accountability and Clarity of Expectations

- Leaders and the vestry at large are comfortable with accountability to each other.
- Structures are in place for mutual ministry review between rector, staff, vestry and ministries based on clear, mutually established expectations.
- The Vestry (including the rector) interacts based on clear expectations of group norms.

4. A healthy rector who models these traits and nurtures them among the vestry.

5. Processes and structures that nurture unity, positive interactions and "productive" meetings.

- Group norms that outline specific behaviors expected or discouraged.
- Clarity about the process of discussing agenda items. Discussion norms foster issue-oriented discussion, rather than parliamentary jockeying. Issues are clearly differentiated between those presented for information to the vestry, those seeking the vestry's advice, or those requiring action by the vestry.
- Understand deliberations as a group discernment process, grounding the work in the common seeking of God's voice. Avoid votes unless legally or canonically required.
- Focused agenda prepared in advance.
- Reports issued in advance so that meeting time is spent on the implications of reports rather than reporting.

Avoiding trouble in the future: Three "Deadly Sins"

- 1) Unhealthy interpersonal traits
- 2) Structures that hinder working together and sow distraction, dissention and distrust.
- 3) Unhealthy leaders (last because a healthy system can hold leaders accountable)