

# BEYOND BUSINESS AS USUAL

*revised edition*

Vestry Leadership Development

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## Discerning Your Vestry's Pinch Points

"The Country Parson doth often both publicly and privately instruct his Church Wardens what a great Charge lies upon them."

—George Herbert

My underlying belief is that growth is natural to churches. The gospel is about transforming lives through the resurrected life of Jesus Christ. Where lives are being transformed, growth will follow. Growth is the norm for individual spiritual lives, ministry groups, and churches.

Churches grow when they are healthy. When I work with churches—particularly smaller churches—I tell them not to be concerned about whether they are growing but whether they are healthy. If growth of some sort is not occurring, it is likely because an unhealthy component in the system that is the local church is limiting the growth (that is otherwise natural).

Of course, not all growth is evidenced by higher attendance or higher membership. Churches can be shown to be growing and healthy by looking more deeply into the life of the congregation.

There are other signs of health and growth to look for besides attendance and membership. What is the reach of the church into the community? How many people are touched by the caring ministries of the church?

I once served a church in which the average Sunday attendance had been in continuous decline for the previous five years. In addition, two singular outreach ministries that the church had prided itself on ceased just before I arrived as rector. Then, to compound things, the church had committed ten percent of its income to outreach, but for the previous four years they had used the outreach line item to cover the budget shortfall. The church was dispirited and discouraged.

As I got to know the congregation, I learned that many of our parishioners were active in a number of caring organizations in the community, and two couples were actively involved in international evangelism ministries. For several months we interviewed people from each of these ministries during the announcements time on Sunday morning. We went from discouragement to encouragement when we as a church corporately realized the vast reach of our parishioners. Although we weren't able to contribute a lot of money to these ministries, we did contribute our most valuable assets: our people.

Look at the various parts of your church's life, and find something in which the parish can truly take pride. That will encourage the leaders to deal resolutely with those areas of the parish life that are not so healthy.

When churches are not healthy, it is likely there is a "pinch point" that keeps growth from occurring. Similarly, when vestries are not effective, it is likely there is a pinch in the system somewhere that keeps the system from flowing smoothly. This may be difficult to recognize because these pinches are intangible in nature. The intuitive leader will discern where the vestry is stuck and work on that area to make it healthier. When one area of the

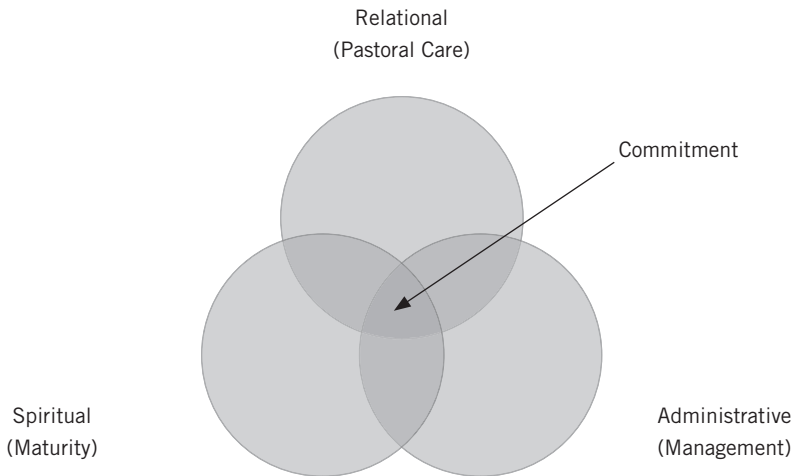
vestry’s life becomes healthier, the whole improves. (Caveat: be careful, sometimes newly developed health in one area will cause unhealthy pushback from other quarters.)

When reflecting on the effectiveness of the vestry, if there is a problem, you’ll likely find the pinch point in one of these four areas: spiritual, relational, administrative, or commitment. Before delving into the four areas, let’s draw a diagram and see the larger picture as to how these areas of vestry life fit together.

### **Spiritual Pinch Points**

Christians in general, and Episcopalians specifically, are very uncomfortable quantifying spirituality. Nevertheless, we know it when we see it. Mother Teresa, each of the recent popes, and Billy Graham are widely respected as spiritual leaders. So, it’s clear people in general have a sense of what spirituality looks like in an individual; we just don’t like to localize it.

Let’s try. What is the spiritual level of your vestry? Is your vestry made up of immature Christians? Particularly if your group has a high visional motivation, vision among spiritually





immature people can seem like a waste of time and cause the group to set its sights too low. Similarly, if your church is highly visional, it may be lacking in administrative organization and follow-through.

Certainly, not everyone on the vestry is at the same spiritual level. The spiritual level of the vestry will devolve to the lowest common spiritual denominator. Parishioners take their cues from vestry members. You can be sure that the church overall will rise no higher than the spiritual level of the vestry. The particular method of measurement that one uses is less important than that the priest actually has some means of ascertaining the spiritual level of the vestry.

Reflect on the members of your group. If not everyone in your group can be called upon to pray extemporaneously, you probably have a spiritual problem in your midst. Likewise, if you have members who are reluctant to share their spiritual journey, you likely have a spiritual maturity and intimacy problem. St. Paul told the Corinthians that they were spiritually immature—babes—and that he had given them milk and not solid food, because they were not ready for it (1 Cor. 3:1–2). It's difficult to engage in spiritual concerns when your group has immature Christians in it.

Recall the various spiritual disciplines. Some of them can be exercised as a group. Most vestries will at least occasionally share the Eucharist together. Consider fasting together about a certain issue with which the vestry is struggling. This takes the decision out of the convincing arena and into the spiritual discernment area.

The wise rector or vicar or senior warden will take a serious spiritual assessment of the vestry and know what issues can be brought to the vestry. Time can be spent addressing matters of discipleship in order to raise the spiritual level—and consequently the spiritual vision—of the vestry.

## **Relational Pinch Points**

How are the relationships within your vestry? Is pastoral care needed? Are there broken relationships? Is the time at the vestry meeting spent only in business? If two people are angry at each other and aren't reconciled with one another, they will bring that enmity into the vestry meetings. Even if the anger or resentment doesn't come out in the group, it is a seed of discord that will keep the vestry from discerning effectively together as a group.

In small group ministry we talk about the number of "EGRs" in a group. EGR stands for Extra Grace Required. If you have too many needy people—generally two at any meeting—the group will focus on reacting or responding to the emotional needs of those EGRs. If the relationships are not generally healthy among people, the group will not work cohesively together because these relationship issues are always lurking behind the scenes. This is true for Bible studies as well as vestries.

Time should be set aside periodically for the sharing of personal concerns and good news among individual vestry members as well as the congregation as a whole. Vestry members should be able to "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). Relationships are sustained by sharing and prayer.

## **Administrative Pinch Points**

A church in our diocese had been a tiny mission (financially aided) congregation for over one hundred years. A new vicar came who brought tremendous growth to the congregation—the priest was not a young "whiz kid" but was recently retired. I asked him to what he attributed the growth the church had recently experienced. He quickly responded: "Our newsletter." "Your newsletter?" I responded. "Yeah, our newsletter. I got a woman to be in charge of our newsletter, and she makes our church look like a large church.

Our people don't think of St. Paul's as a small church; they act like what they think they are."

Viewing your church through the lens of congregational size dynamics (Family, Pastoral, Transitional, etc.) is one way to recognize possible administrative pinches in your church. It may be that the way the priest relates to the staff and congregation is inappropriate to the size of the congregation. In a growing (transitional-sized) church the pastor may be a bottleneck by having too many decisions flow through him or her. Alternatively, in a small (transitional-sized) congregation, the pastor may try to function as a large (program-sized church) pastor but instead should be relating to the congregation as a small (pastoral-sized church) pastor.

Attention should be paid to the church background of vestry members. Many times vestry members will have served on a vestry at a previous church. If this church was either smaller or larger than the current church, they may be relating to the current vestry and making judgments and decisions based upon the size of their previous parish. For example, if your church is a large program-sized church and a particular vestry member formerly served on the vestry of a pastoral-sized church, they will often expect the larger church and vestry to function as a smaller pastoral-sized church and vestry, namely, in ways that are inappropriate and counter-productive to the current size.

Similarly, if group members were not given adequate orientation when they joined the group, they may not understand the ground rules for effective group membership or participation. Sometimes vestry members may have a difficult time making a decision because they haven't been given enough information, or enough time to reflect and pray about a decision, or don't have a sense of the group direction. What may come across as reluctance or being obstreperous might simply be a manifestation of an administrative pinch that can be remedied by some hands-on training.

## Commitment Pinch Points

However, unifying these three areas is the important area of commitment. A church can have extremely capable and qualified members who relate well to each other, but if there are members who are lacking in their commitment, the whole vestry and, consequently, the church, will suffer. Chapter 6 will explore the importance of commitment in the life of a vestry and its impact on the congregation.

## For Individual or Group Reflection

- *How would you rate the spiritual level of your vestry? What are its strengths and weaknesses? What is the relationship between the spiritual maturity of the vestry and the work that it does?*
- *How long do your vestry meetings typically last? What does your vestry spend the most time discussing?*
- *How often are people late to vestry meetings? How regular or spotty is attendance? Why do you think that is?*