

COMMUNITY RULES

AN EPISCOPAL MANUAL

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*To Matthew and Lesley
Our soulmates who journey with us.*

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Introduction

The Church is a divinely intended community: it is the body of Christ on earth; it is the place where heaven and earth intersect. Yet the reality in our experience can appear otherwise. Church is often hard work. The “politics” of church can be ugly. Sometimes churches are the worst of employers, and sometimes it is difficult to see the connection between Gospel values and the reality of life in a local congregation.

When a congregation fails to live into the values of the Gospel, the damage can be considerable. Life is hard enough during the week. The last thing we need is for Sunday to be hard work, too. When congregations become dysfunctional, it is not surprising that plenty of people decide that the “church of the holy comforter” (i.e., staying in bed) is preferable to church-in-reality.

We need healthy Christian congregations. Our goal with this little book is to distill the theology and practice of church and Christian community into forty-eight simple and clear rules. This book is written for the new member or the seeker and for the confirmation class. It is written for both congregations and Christian organizations. It seeks to weave together Christian beliefs that shape all Christian living with certain applied rules for employment, leadership, and ethos. We have made the congregation the primary organization; for example, there are sections on rules for vestries and rules for parishioners.

But many of the rules would also work for a faith-based organization, or an Episcopal school or seminary.

These are rules for Episcopal community. We are assuming the structure and ethos of the Episcopal Church. However, much of the book would also work for our sister denominations. We hope others in the Christian family will find the book helpful.

Using the Book

The primary venue for this book is a church membership class; the nine sections work nicely for nine sessions where, over a meal, new members can start to understand the nature of Christian community. There are, however, other venues where this book will work well. The vestry can use the book to start discussion around the responsibilities of leadership and Christian community. Alternatively, a rector might want to send one rule a day to a congregation during Lent; after all, it is in Lent that we should be most aware of our obligations to create healthy Christian community that transcends our propensities to sin.

Starting the Journey

We recognize that every community is imperfect. Becoming a Christian community is a process, but it is a process that begins with being intentional. Our prayer is that the result of engaging these rules will be Christian communities that are truly Christian, places where the values of the Gospel are present and evident in our relationships.

Section VII

BASIC CHRISTIAN RULES FOR VESTRIES

The vestry is the leadership of a congregation. They have a special responsibility for healthy Christian community. They are the bridge between the congregation and the clergy. This section develops all six rules. We are treating people as made in the image of God, and we are striving for a community of welcome, where all are respected.



Make a Commitment and Then Follow Through

Honoring our commitments is always important, but in a volunteer environment it's even more crucial. There may not be someone standing in the wings to pick up where we leave off, so we must think twice before saying yes and make sure we fully understand the commitment we are being asked to make. We then must do all we can to fulfill our promise. We can't be afraid to ask for help if we realize we have taken on more than we can do. Instead of just dumping things in other people's laps, we must offer up what we can do and suggest ideas for how the rest of the commitment might be met. Can someone else be asked to contribute to the task? Would someone in our circle of friends be willing to help, even if they aren't part of our faith community? It might be a means for getting them involved.



Listen with an Open Heart and Open Mind

A healthy community listens with care. We must remember the basics of good listening. When a conversation is confidential, it is confidential. We do not gossip. We are discreet when someone shares sensitive and personal information. We also must include all voices.

Lots of organizations are dominated by people who think they know exactly what the next step should be. They are determined to have their vision realized. And they are not interested in anyone else's perspective.

In *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki¹ points out that groups often get things more right than individuals. So simply walking in and deciding something as an individual is not the best for the organization.

We all bring our knowledge, skills, experiences, and perspectives to what we do. Everyone has value and should be honored. In asking others to honor us, we are also sending a message that we honor those with whom we engage and interact. Before disagreeing with someone or disregarding their ideas, let us step back and look at the big picture.

1. See James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005).



Focus on the Mission and Ministry

Jesus was rarely able to fulfill his ministry without pushback from others. Folks often took offense or found fault with what he was trying to accomplish, where he was trying to accomplish it, and when. But Jesus was so focused on his calling and ministry that he could ignore the heckling and push back against the naysayers.

Most of us do not have to worry about a death sentence for our commitment to mission and ministry, but sometimes our convictions can bump up against resistance and even rejection. As vestry members, our ministry is not only about discerning the will of God but also about telling others about that work and ministry and inviting them to come along. Naturally, we must pray hard to ensure that we are focused on the Gospel mission. Provided that is the case, it is appropriate to trust that God's grace will lead a congregation through the difficult times.

