

TRANSFORMATIVE VESTRIES

Five Ways to Become a Transformational Vestry

By Donald Romanik

We talk a lot about transformation in the Episcopal Church and perhaps, at times, that word is overused. But more and more our local congregations need to become transformational faith communities as we strive to preach, teach and live out the good news of the Gospel. Transformation is a dynamic, spirit-filled process through which we grow, revitalize, engage in mission, adapt to change and prepare for the future.

For faith communities, transformation involves moving from the idea of membership to that of discipleship; from just raising money to nurturing stewardship; from recruiting volunteers to developing leaders; and from perpetuating clergy-centric models to promoting health lay-clergy partnerships. But who is going to do this important work?

Clearly, we need to raise up, empower and deploy faithful and committed leaders who will ensure that our congregations are ready, willing and able to engage in this critical work of transformation. And, in our Anglican/Episcopal tradition, the primary group of leaders charged with this task is the vestry.

Ideas to help vestries move from transactional to transformational:

Understand that...

1. *Vestry service is holy and collaborative work.* Contrary to the traditional concept of the role of vestries, it's not just about the budget, the buildings or the boiler. Vestry service is a whole lot more. In essence, the vestry, in partnership with the rector or priest in charge, is responsible for overseeing the spiritual, missional, strategic, administrative and fiduciary aspects of the congregation. While particular individuals, especially the clergy, are charged with specific roles and responsibilities, the work of a vestry is a team effort with mutual accountability. It is holistic and comprehensive.

2. *Vestry members need to represent the entire faith community.* Despite your personal involvement in specific ministries or programs, e.g., choir, altar guild or outreach, as a vestry member you must represent the entire congregation and cannot serve as an advocate or spokesperson for a particular constituency, activity or special interest group. When making tough decisions, you need to consider the total needs of the congregation from a missional and strategic point of view, especially when it comes to issues of budgets or allocation of resources.

3. *Each member of the vestry is valuable and unique.* When you serve on a vestry, you should bring the totality of your prior experiences to the table whether personal, familial, spiritual or vocational. Don't be afraid to share your expertise or insights especially in complex or technical areas. Your feedback is important. At the same time, realize that as part of a team you must listen to other voices, even those who may not have the same background or point of view as you.

4. *Model discipleship.* Vestries are not just boards of directors of church-related, non-profit organizations. While you have important business to conduct, your primary role is to discern and implement what God is calling your congregation to be and do in a particular time and place. And this can only happen if the vestry, as a whole as well as its individual members, engage in regular and ongoing spiritual practices including worship, prayer, bible study, retreats and sharing individual faith stories. Your vestry experience should be a unique opportunity to become more

spiritually grounded. It should advance your lifelong journey toward discipleship and your capacity to model that journey for others.

5. Don't do it alone. Vestry service should not be an isolating or lonely experience, even when dealing with critical issues or serious conflict. First of all, remember that God is an important part of the equation. That is why spiritual practices should be a regular part of vestry meetings and other gatherings. You also have each other – fellow parishioners, who, like you, are contributing their time, talent and treasure for the good of the community. Trust in yourself and each other. You also have outside resources to assist you with your work, including other parishes, diocesan officials and yes, the [Episcopal Church Foundation](#). (ECF) As you live into your mission, remember that ECF is here to walk alongside you on this important journey of faith and commitment.

An opportunity and not a grim task

I also want to suggest transformational vestry service needs to be personally fulfilling, life-giving and fun. It is an awesome responsibility to lead a congregation, especially in times of diminishing numbers and resources. But these are also times of incredible opportunities for innovation and for exploring new ways to be the Body of Christ. It is a time to celebrate and rejoice. All of us have busy lives and lots of demand on our time and energy, but you will best serve yourself, your family, your colleagues and your entire congregation, when you approach your vestry membership with a sense of joy and wonder.