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| A person standing in front of a group of people in a church  Description automatically generated with medium confidence | Improving  vestry  meetings  September 21, 2021  Means of Grace, Hope of Glory |

Raise your hand if you look forward to your next vestry meeting. Many of us, clergy and lay, experience the meetings as “necessary” (as in a necessary evil” that we must endure) or at worse we dread them. In many parishes if you surveyed the vestry, you might find that about 10% felt good about the meetings, 30% were very dissatisfied, and the rest someplace in between. The in-between people often having low expectations and hopes and a sense of fatalism.

We see the place vestry meetings have when the pressure builds to make them shorter or to have them on Sunday after the Eucharist. We rush through the agenda.

Dismal, isn’t it? Many of us find the meetings dull and the climate murky.

But, but, but …. “Not so in my parish friend!! We have excellent meetings. They are productive and they satisfy the soul. Okay if I stop reading this?”

Nope. This is for everyone. If your meetings are less than satisfying, how can you improve them? If they are very satisfying, how can you keep them satisfying?

The best meetings are like the best Eucharist. The community is reconstituted as it recalls its identity and purpose and is fed by sacrificial love to be instruments of love in their families, with friends, in the workplace and civic life. The priest presides at the vestry meeting as she presides at the Eucharist. Her task is to bring all the gifts present into harmony and service for the mission of divine love.

“Wow! That’s awesome! If only …”. Some might say, “Yes, and if pigs could fly.”

*So, where do we begin?*

We are the Body of Christ, and the meeting has a task to advance and relationships to honor and nurture.

The parish is a microcosm of the Body of Christ within a particular setting. It is the one, holy, catholic church in this place. And it seeks to be effective and efficient, safe and risking, engaging and life enhancing. It wants to manifest the fruits of the Spirit and the full stature of Christ.

What happens at the center impacts the whole body. So, if the center is kind and persistent, its more likely the whole parish will show such fruits in its life. And there are two centers. The vestry (priest and laity) are one, the less important one. And those who live an Apostolic faith and practice are the more critical though less visible. My concern in this article is with the first. For the second, get a copy of *Fill All Things: The Spiritual Dynamics of the Parish Church*, and read the chapter on Shape of the Parish.

Let’s start with the idea that the vestry has a task to advance and relationships to honor and nurture. The broad task is the pastoral oversight of the parish. The vestry and rector each have responsibilities for that oversight. The rector carries that responsibility even when a vestry may be unable or unwilling to do so. And we also share in the work of enhancing human life and dignity; dealing with one another as beings in the divine image.

The Shared Leadership model from the world of organization development is useful. It sees all groups as having three elements which exist in some degree of harmony and tension: task, relationships and individual wants and needs.

Take a look at [Shared Leadership: the Maintaining of Task and Relationship Functions.](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1124858/28423101/1629860055707/SHARED+LEADERSHIP.pdf?token=TSTyzyz5CnBeVbPEPzd64c3EZjg%3D) Also at this related [assessment worksheet](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1124858/28461260/1629413384940/Team+Role+Assessment.pdf?token=CpU2Lyd2grqEpeYWwdK%2FxfBOhYE%3D).

“All groups have these three elements. They each require attention if the group is to be productive in its work and satisfying to its members. There is a tension among them. A group that is excessively task oriented may be get the job done but may build up resentments among its members because relationship and individual needs are not adequately addressed. A group that is overly relationship -oriented may enjoy being together but let its task drift. The most effective groups are those that learn how to attend to all three aspects of the group’s life.”

Making progress is mostly dependent on the rector’s skills for creating the needed processes and structures and in part on the behavior of each member. Do the methods used by the rector in the meeting adequacy enable the various task and relationship functions? Is there a critical mass of members exercising the needed group functions?

**Five matters to concentrate on**

*The rector’s spiritual maturity and emotional intelligence*

There’s no way around this. In organization development it gets referred to as “the use of self.” A rector’s wisdom grounded in training and experience is the most significant factor in having better vestry meetings. We’re not talking about some abstract “perfect.” All priests come with sin and human limitation. There is a spectrum of humility seen in how priests design and lead meetings. An openness to feedback and formal training in group development and methods helps.

[On spiritual maturity](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1124858/28468625/1632250690617/RenewalWhat+Kind+of+Person+is+Being+Formed+From+F.A.T.pdf?token=r7xv0Yrdvq7Ff25pgu6J0cMiN9o%3D) [Emotional Intelligence](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1124858/28468626/1632250778163/The+Emotional+Competence+Framework.pdf?token=3JindBwE%2BLXyb9WhJ0gPy%2FEQsYM%3D)

Related resources are under “Spiritual Maturity and Emotional Intelligence” on the [Shaping the Parish Resources](http://www.orderoftheascension.org/shaping-the-parish-resources/) page.

*Core abilities*

There are several core abilities needed for a vestry do be most effective. My list includes proficiency in Episcopal spiritual practices, ability to work as part of a team, understanding and acceptance of Episcopal Church polity regarding the parish church, and skill in areas of work that are routine for the vestry of this parish. Take a look at the assessment form. You might come up with a slightly different list. You could generate a useful conversation by having the vestry develop a list and prioritize it, have the rector do the same before seeing what the vestry came up with, and running all that up against the list on the worksheet. Talk with one another. Listen.

An assessment worksheet - [What do you bring to the table?](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1124858/28425657/1618118572940/What+do+you+bring+to+the+table.pdf?token=BWNhYBKVmWzMIIZeZsSK8xqSE7c%3D)

*Assessments of our work and life as a group*

Why assess the vestry meetings?

1. It’s a way of building a sense of responsibility in people. We all have responsibility to make our meetings productive and hospitable
2. It can set in motion improvement process by which meetings get better
3. It’s a way of inculcating values

What process might be used?

1. Each year assess the vestry’s meetings at least once. If it is a new practice it may be useful to do it two or three times in a six month period. Best to alternate rather than doing it on back-to-back meetings.
2. Collate on the spot. This has the most impact on people. It’s more likely to produce a change in behavior.
3. Discuss – What do you make of the results? Let’s go around the room with each person making a short initial response.
4. Close the process with a question like this - What might we do better?  Or what did you learn from this? What challenges does it suggest for us/for you? Go around the circle

Here are two assessment worksheets. The first is a [Likes/Concerns/Wishes process](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1124858/28444742/1629413114137/LIKES-concerns-wishes+-+mtg+assess.pdf?token=CT460cRKljmJEXG5ZN8lNxCAf54%3D). It helps us hear people in their own voice. They say what they like, what concerns them. The second is a [Meeting Assessment](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1124858/28461256/1629413132030/Meeting+Assessment--Group+Processes.pdf?token=w0rA4viQlNmKxrj3eHekLCKWUhY%3D) that offers a spectrum. Such assessments can help people consider group issues that they may not be fully aware of. Can help encourage productive values in the group. Other worksheets are available under “Group and Team Assessments” on the [Shaping the Parish Resources](http://www.orderoftheascension.org/shaping-the-parish-resources/) page.

Why are we so hesitant?

I’ve come to believe it’s a mix of fear, shame, and embarrassment. Rectors and wardens are anxious that the information received may suggest they have made a mistake, they are doing something wrong, they aren’t as competent as they want people to believe. Of course, with a slight shift of mental models in our head, we can simply look upon such data as suggesting “there can be improvement.” This returns us to the first consideration regarding spiritual and emotional maturity.

*Group and trust development theory*

Groups have predictable dynamics and stages. It does require some skill to see them. Even more to appropriately act in relationship to them. There are training programs that can increase your skill—[NTL](https://www.ntl.org/human-interaction/human-interaction-laboratory/), [Crosby](https://www.crosbyod.com/events), [EQHR Center](https://www.eqhr.org/workshops). At least a five day workshop to get a sense of what’s happening in you and in the group. Many years ago, it took me until the middle of the third week for my eyes to open.

Knowing a few group/trust development theories will help. Here are two. The first, [Group Development Theory: Leadership Issues](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1124858/28462240/1629859431703/Group+Development+Theory-+Leadership+Issues.pdf?token=ZWOmF9%2Blgovg97%2FHRpi%2FJidME7M%3D) has been around a long time . It notes three stages that a group needs to go through, and then go through again, to become productive. The second is [Trust Development](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1124858/27880365/1629859635023/trust+development+-+from+IYHS.pdf?token=lx5ofXKwE1%2FPjaL84vQ7zBpPAIQ%3D) which looks at four stages. Other theories are available under “Group Development Theory” on the [Shaping the Parish Resources](http://www.orderoftheascension.org/shaping-the-parish-resources/) page.

*Meeting design*

We need to design meetings not just plan them. Most of us learn to attend to the meeting itself. We think about having an agenda. A series of business items to go through.

If we want meetings to be both productive and interesting, to attend to both the task and the relationships, we need to broaden our thinking. A first step is to understand and use [A Meeting Cycle](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1124858/28468654/1632255426757/A+MEETING+CYCLE.pdf?token=WABWjPoUxBbvAuFpK5SbWbB6%2F1A%3D). The cycle begins the advance work need for a meeting, then designing the meeting, moves to conducting the meeting, and finally engaging the needed follow through.

[Designing a Meeting](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1124858/28468655/1632255450207/DESIGNING+A+MEETING.pdf?token=yLECa39N4q0klgniJm8NNAz3yJI%3D) involves being sure that any necessary advance work has been done, seeing that the “right people” will attend, and having clear objectives for the meeting. That last is critical. We need to learn how to shift from thinking, “I have to get us through this agenda” to “I need to help us focus on the results we seek.”

Have a few methods to help the vestry manage the energy, work both at the task and the relationships, and deal with the extroverted – introverted dynamics. If you use just a few of the methods routinely they’ll become normative and owned by the vestry. Consider methods like these:

1. Go Around the Circle. That’s a way to hear from everyone.

*This is a useful method of allowing everyone to be heard, and is something I’ve used with up to 45 people. Participants speak in turn around the circle. The comment is to be brief and on one point. The method helps equalize the voices in the room so the more hesitant are heard along with the more assertive. It can be especially useful when dealing with controversial issues.*

*Variations include the fishbowl and the Samoan circle. The methods are defined in different ways by various facilitators. In both cases there is a group that sits within the larger circle of participants and engages in a conversation. The inner group is to consist of the various positions on an issue, or might be an “expert panel.”*

*Depending on your objectives and issues, such as the time available, the outer group might remain silent, or there might be an opportunity for comment or questions from the outer circle, or there might be a way for someone from the outer circle to join the inner circle.* From “In Your Holy Spirit: Shaping the Parish through Spiritual Practice.: R. Gallagher, Ascension Press.

1. Use newsprint for recording and managing decision making

*Using newsprint pads to record the group’s thinking can improve participation, reduce repetition, and help people feel heard.*

*The best arrangement is to have pegs in a wall allowing several pads to be hung. It’s better use of space, reduces the number of flip chart easels a parish needs, and eliminates the temptation to “flip” the page over and thus hide the work just completed.* From “In Your Holy Spirit: Shaping the Parish through Spiritual Practice.: R. Gallagher, Ascension Press.

1. Short, small groups

It helps avoid group-think and usually restores the groups’ energy to have people break into groups of 2 or 3. Keep it simple and brief. “We’ve heard the proposal. Let’s break into groups of three with people sitting next to us. How about we spend 5 minutes seeing what questions we each have.”

See, simple. You can significantly improve vestry meetings.

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