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VESTRY RESPONSIBILITIES

My Top Ten: Vestry Responsibilities

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Just as the Great Commission—“Go therefore into the world to make disciples of all nations”—does not go into great detail on how exactly to accomplish that mission, so the canons of the Episcopal Church are not particularly specific about the responsibilities of vestries.

The vestry “shall be agents and legal representatives of the Parish in all matters concerning its corporate property and the relations of the parish to its clergy” (Canon 14). That’s the whole thing. Being from David Letterman’s Indiana hometown (I used to shop at the store where he carried out groceries) and to provide a little more meat on the bones of how ought a vestry to act—here is my Top Ten list of how I understand the responsibilities of vestries:

1. **Those of us on vestries should explicitly seek God’s guidance in our work.** While a vestry has legal and fiscal responsibilities (and must take them seriously), a vestry is not a board of directors for a business or a not-for-profit. The work of the vestry can be done only as it is grounded in the Spirit. Too often we are not intentional and reflective about our work. How then do we remind ourselves that the work of the vestry is God’s work? We might light a candle to remind us of the presence of Christ. We might end the meetings with Compline. We might share spiritual reflections as a regular part of the agenda. We do begin and end the meetings with prayer.
2. **The vestry must seek means to form community.** A vestry is a group of individuals, called to work in the church, together. Most

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likely, vestry members will come from different services with different backgrounds and have various agendas. Finding common ground, centered on the spiritual life of individuals and of the vestry as a group, then, is fundamental to successful work as a vestry.

3. **A vestry should act in concert with the rector.** The rector is a member of the vestry. The rector chairs the vestry. The rector has canonical authority (e.g., use of space) for certain matters in the church. The rector is NOT a CEO hired by a board of directors to direct a staff carrying out the mandates of the board. Rather the rector is a *partner* with the vestry in the mutual discernment of mission. In concert with the bishop, the vestry determines the means for calling the rector and negotiating a memorandum of agreement. But after that, it's a partnership.
4. **The vestry is not a representative body.** Thinking of vestry membership as one from Christian education, one from the choir, one from the Scouts, etc., where we vote *our* interests, will only get us into trouble. The vestry is a group of individuals seeking to discern, with the rector, what the parish is called to do and to have oversight of that work.
5. **A vestry must define its OWN mission, vision, values, and goals.** There are many organizing principles for outlining the work of the vestry. Personally I like the SWEEPS model (stewardship, worship, education, evangelism, pastoral care, and service), partly because the acronym is memorable. But what is more important is that the vestry moves away from automatic pilot to define its own direction. Vestries are well served by being intentional about their agenda and work.
6. **Vestries must set strict time limits on buildings and grounds discussions.** Vestries, in my experience, often move their attention to the concrete. It is a lot easier to spend a year's worth of meetings hashing out the problems with the old carpet (which people may trip on as they enter meetings) than it is to decide to FIX the carpet and move on to what the parish is called to do. Set strict time limits on buildings and grounds discussions, form a committee—and get on with attending to the rest of the life of the church.
7. **Hold yourself, and one another, accountable.** Have vestry members committed to the tithe as the standard for giving? Does anyone talk about pledging in concrete terms? The last vestry on which I served would probably have exceeded the giving of the entire parish if the vestry members had approached a “modern” tithe of 5%, let alone the biblical tithe. My own parish reinforces that a person's pledge is known only to the bookkeeper, not to the rector or anyone else. That sure keeps stewardship in the closet.

8. **Vestries should celebrate.** Annual picnics, receptions, outings, dinners, and other celebratory events should be part of vestry life.
9. **Have formal rituals.** We're a liturgical church. We like this stuff. It's meaningful to us. Begin (and maybe end) service on the vestry with a formal ritual in a worship service. It's what we do well. And it matters.
10. **Seek continuity and embrace change.** In many parishes, the "old guard" controls the vestry. In others, there is so much turnover that the continuity that allows for living out a mission is lost, with the parish reinventing itself every year. It is a delicate balance—to provide continuity and to bring in "new blood" and new ideas. But it's a balance we need to constantly work on. And being about balance...it's even Anglican!

A three-time senior warden at St. Paul's in Indianapolis, Scott Evenbeck is the dean of University College at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) and was the first lay President of the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes. A longstanding deputy to General Convention, he chaired the House of Deputies' Committee on Education in 2000 and 2003.

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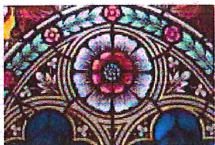
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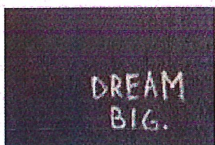
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