

A SHORT MANUAL FOR VESTRIES PARISH COUNCILS

Origins

In the English Church a Vestry is a room in which the priest vests. In America we term this room a sacristy. Before the Reformation some parishes were served by secular priests appointed by the local lord of the manor or the bishop. Such priests were called Rectors. In other parishes the church was served by a member of a Religious Order either because the church building was shared between the local Order and the villagers or because an Order had founded and built the parish church. In such cases the parish priest was called a Vicar. In “secular” parishes the parish priest was assisted by his flock whereas in a “Religious” parish the members of the Order helped the parish priest. The system of having a body of lay people help the priest originated in “secular” parishes. The lay leadership held its meetings in the sacristy or vestry and thus became known as the “Vestry”.

In those days there was no separation of Church and State. The parish church was the church of all the people and the Vestry served as a sort of village council, which looked after the roads, village politics, the care of the poor and lunatics. Some things never change.

After the suppression of the monastic orders at the Reformation secular priests served all parishes. The local parishes had to take over much of the charitable work previously administered by monks and nuns. To provide funds for this work, the Vestries were required to provide alms boxes in each church and to set aside the collections at Divine Service for poor relief. The priest’s salary came from tithes of crops grown on all village lands, which he supplemented by farming his “glebe lands”.

In England the titles “Rector” and “Vicar” merely denote whether, before the Reformation, a parish priest was a secular priest or a “Religious” priest. In America, in recent times, the term “Rector” has been reserved for parish priests and “Vicar” to priests appointed by the Bishop to be the pastor of a mission congregation.

Annually during the week after Easter, the parish priest called a meeting of all the parishioners. He appointed his Warden, the Rector’s or Vicar’s Warden, the people elected their People’s Warden and others were elected to serve on the Vestry. The parson owned for life, or his period of office, the parsonage and the chancel. The people cared for the rest of the church building.

The first settlers brought this system to America. Because clergy were scarce, they had to be imported from England or sent to England for ordination, the parish vestries assumed more church duties than was normal in England. Often the leading families refused to appoint settled rectors, hiring men year by year on annual contracts in order to control the clergy. The Bishop of London was bishop for all the colonial churches in America. He appointed clergy to act for him.

After the American Revolution the Anglican Church was disestablished. Vestries lost their civil authority but retained the right to elect or call their parish priest in consultation with the Bishop. The Wardens were named “Senior and Junior Wardens”, terms, which may have been copied from Masonic Lodges, which were influential in those days. However the basic duties of the Vestry remained. They were to be a representative committee of church people who saw to it that the parish had a rector, that he was paid, that he was given all the things he needed to function, that the church building was cared for and that parish funds were properly administered. These duties remain the primary tasks of a Vestry.

Election

The word election has a political and secular meaning. In the world, people stand for election to public office. They tend to be “party” representatives who are voted into office on the basis of their talents and program. However, to a Christian, election has a different meaning. God calls or “elects” us to His service. One is called to be a Christian, called into the Church and within the Church there are callings, both ministerial and lay. When a person is called, we believe he or she is called by God. The task of the church is to recognize a call. Sometimes this happens when someone with obvious talents is asked to do a particular job. Someone with musical talents may be asked to be a member of the choir or an organist. Someone with teaching ability may be asked to teach Sunday School.

On other occasions people are asked to volunteer their services. Even then, if there is wisdom, a volunteer’s suitability will be examined before the job is given! Each year at the Annual Meeting, all the members of a parish or mission are called together. If they are a Parish, one of their tasks is to elect people to the Vestry. If they are a mission, the members of the Vestry are appointed by the Bishop. How the selection of these individuals is made is most important. Serving on a Vestry is a ministry, a lay ministry. All ministries are callings from God. So the parish members must seek to identify those whom God is calling. How can this be done? There are some obvious signs of calling:

- a. Is a person devout? Christian callings are to Christian people. Of all signs of calling, the first has to be that a person is obviously someone who says his or her prayers, attends worship regularly and is generous with time, money and charity. By charity one means love for the people of God.
- b. Is a person loyal? When the Vestry is installed each year its members promise to conform to the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Reformed Episcopal Church. Loyalty is a virtue. If people are self-centered enough to put their beliefs and preferences before the teachings and practices of the Church, they are not obvious candidates to serve the Church.
- c. Is the person practical? Obviously the Vestry looks after the financial and structural affairs of the parish. Not all members have to be experts in these areas, but if a person has problems managing his own affairs he perhaps may have many callings in a parish family, but a calling to manage the parishes financial affairs may not be one of them.

In some parishes the Vestry sets up a nominating committee to receive nominations and to seek out suitable people. If this is done reverently and prayerfully in consultation with the parish priest for his insights, this can aid the process. Care must be taken to make sure that such committees truly seek God’s will and don’t use their authority to select people of whom they personally approve or think as they do.

Vestry Officers

Depending on how the By-Laws of the Parish dictate, the Rector (or Vicar in a mission) selects one of the members of the Vestry to be his Warden. The Rectors’ or Senior Warden has a special role to play. He is the senior layperson in the parish. If the rector is absent, he chairs the meetings. He acts as liaison between the clergy and laity. He acts for the clergy to the laity. It is most important that the Senior Warden understand his role especially to the Rector. He must set an example. He must be devout, organized, and careful to respect the opinions of all the Vestry members and must work well with the clergy.

The Vestry or the Parish elects another of its body to serve as the Peoples’ or Junior Warden. The Junior Warden has special responsibility to represent the concerns of the parish family to the

Vestry. He also is the principle individual to oversee the care and upkeep of the church property and grounds. He should be a man of prayer who recognizes his solemn responsibility to love and care for God's House, to see that it is clean and tidy, in good repair, an inviting place for people to worship and also that the financial records of the parish are properly maintained on behalf of the parish. He is not required to personally perform all these tasks but rather he should be a man who can inspire others to help in these tasks.

The Vestry elects a clerk or secretary who need not be a member of the Vestry. The clerk records the minutes of all meetings and keeps copies of the National Constitution and Canons, the Diocesan Canons and the By-Laws of the parish for the guidance of the Vestry. In drafting and adopting by-laws it is important that the Vestry makes sure that they conform to the Canons of the Diocese and National Church.

The Vestry also elects a treasurer who is responsible not only for the funds which the Vestry directly administers, but for all funds of the various organizations. Legally the Vestry is responsible for all property and money given to the church, which is the reason why all funds, even if they have their own treasurer, are ultimately the concern and responsibility of the treasurer for the Vestry. A treasurer ought to know something about finances, particularly church finances, needs to think of church funds as a family account rather than a business fund and should always recognize that these funds are God's money. Individual statements must be provided to contributors annually for their tax records. An individual statement of contribution must be distributed by January 30th of each year for the preceding year contributions. The Jr. Warden sees that the Treasurer's financial records are examined each year on behalf of the parish. He also strives to make sure that any functional problems are solved in the paying of bills and administration of the finances.

While the other members of the Vestry have no specific responsibilities, it is always good for the Rector to share oversight of various activities among Vestry members or assign them to committees in order that all have responsibilities. This often helps Vestry Meetings become more productive because a representative of the various parish committees is on the Vestry.

The Law

The Canons of the church indicate that the Vestry is the legal agent and representative of the parish in all matters concerning its corporate property and relations of the parish to the clergy. This means that the Vestry holds legal title to the buildings, the contents of the buildings, except those personally owned by the clergy, and the contents of the bank account. In our church, this means that the parish owns its property and is responsible for caring for it.

This trusteeship of property has three main implications. It is the Vestry, which must comply with the law of the nation, with respect to IRS regulations. The Vestry is responsible to the State with respect to property laws and incorporation statutes. The Vestry is responsible to the Diocese in that once a building is consecrated, which can only occur when it is free of a mortgage, it cannot be mortgaged and it cannot be sold unless it is "secularized" by the Bishop. The Vestry must make sure that the parish is tax-exempt through the IRS, either as part of the tax-exemption granted to the Church or, as a separately tax-exempt, incorporated parish and that proper accounts are kept, records of contributions maintained and statements made available for inspection or audit.

Calling a Priest

The Canons state that the Vestry has certain responsibilities for relations between the parish and the clergy. This has a number of aspects:

The Calling of a Rector.

Jesus called and sent for Apostles, sent men with the responsibility of speaking and acting for their Master. The successors to the Apostles, called Bishops, settled in specific areas where they cared for parishes, assisted by priests and deacons. The Bishop was the “Ordinary” minister, the one normally “ordered” to care for the flock of Christ. A Bishop is still called an Ordinary and his chair in the sanctuary of every church reminds us that he is the Ordinary or normal shepherd of all the people.

As the Church grew, Bishops delegated pastoral responsibility to priests who eventually cared for geographical areas called parishes. For a number of reasons, the right to nominate a local parish priest came to be shared with others. In America this right was given to the Vestry. In the Reformed Episcopal Church the right to appoint a rector is shared by the Bishop and the Vestry of a Parish. Simply put, the Vestry selects, the Bishop approves, the Vestry elects and the Bishop institutes. How does this happen?

When a parish becomes vacant, the Vestry notifies the Bishop. The Senior Warden must then make sure that arrangements are made for worship while the parish is vacant. If he fails to do this, the Bishop may make these arrangements himself.

The Vestry begins the task of searching for a new rector. It can only consider clergy of the Reformed Episcopal Church. If it looks outside the diocese and/or outside the Church, it must make sure that, if it considers such a priest, his Bishop will permit him to leave that diocese and that the local Bishop will accept such a transfer. The Vestry must always make sure that a candidate is in good standing, that is that he is permitted to function as a priest and is not under discipline. It is always wise to work closely with the Bishop and to heed his advice. He often knows his clergy well, know their track record and has insight into their skills. He may also know if a priest has problems, which might not suit him for a particular appointment.

The Vestry may want to visit the parish of a prospective candidate. This should not be done without warning such a priest in advance. He may not seek a new call, or may not want to alarm his people until he has had a chance to consider an invitation. Certainly no attempt should be made to contact individual parishioners for references until or unless such a priest has signified his willingness to be considered for such a post. If a priest is listed by the Diocese, has been in his parish for some time, and is known to be well regarded, there is no reason to undertake investigations until he is on the “short list”. Again, the Bishop can guide the Vestry at this stage.

During a parish vacancy, the Senior Warden must obtain the services of priests to conduct services. This is an opportunity to “view” clergy in whom there is some interest before the formal task of examining candidates is reached.

Even if one particular priest seems “heaven sent” it is always wise to consider a number of candidates informally before setting in place the formal candidating process.

Once a short list is made, these clergy should be categorized in the order of desirability. They then may be asked to come to the parish, meet the Vestry, take services and meet the parish family at a dinner or informal social gathering. In preparing to interview a prospective rector, the Vestry should look at his training, the length of time he has been ordained, the length of time he has served in parishes and what has happened to these parishes under his care. They should discuss his philosophy of ministry and have a mutual exchange of ideals, expectations and ideas. After the meeting a time for reflection and consideration should be given before the Vestry is asked to vote on whether or not to call that man to be

their Rector. If the first candidate is not satisfactory, the vestry moves on to the next until such time as the Vestry is agreed on the next Rector.

When the Vestry makes its decision, by formal vote, it must notify the Bishop. The Bishop will respond within thirty days. This gives the Bishop the opportunity to give advice and counsel and to give reasons why he does not wish to confirm such an appointment, if that is the case. To avoid such an embarrassment, it is wise to keep in touch with the Bishop throughout the whole process.

If the Bishop has no objections, or if the Vestry considers such advice and counsel as the Bishop may give, if such is not a direct objection, and decides to proceed, the Wardens then write to the Bishop certifying the election according the proper form in the Constitution and Canons of the Diocese. Once the Bishop has replied and has sent notification to the Secretary of the Diocesan Synod that such a priest is elected the election is deemed final.

What about search committees and parish questionnaires and profiles? A Vestry may conclude that it does not have the time to do all the work and perhaps travel involved in the process of calling a rector. It can appoint a "search committee" made up of members of the Vestry or Vestrymen and parishioners. As in the case of all committees of the Vestry, such a body acts for the Vestry, is responsible to the Vestry, may not act independently of the Vestry and must submit all its major decisions to the Vestry for approval. A search committee does not call a rector.

A Vestry may decide to compile a questionnaire to send out to the parish. The purpose of such a document is to discover what parishioners believe they need in a parish priest. This very modern procedure needs to be viewed with care and caution. The duties of a clergyman are clearly set forth in Holy Scripture, in the Tradition of the Church, in the Prayer Book and in the Canons. The duties of a clergyman are not subject to referendum! However there are aspects of a ministry, which relate to the needs of a parish. Should a priest be a scholar-parson, a pastoral man, an evangelist, and a teacher? Of course he needs to be all these things, but different parishes need different types of clergy. Similarly a parish profile may help the Vestry take stock. However, the results of a questionnaire, framed in a profile forms a guide to help a prospective priest evaluate a parish in order that he may make professional decisions and not an ultimatum demanding that a priest conform to a set of terms.

It is always good for the Vestry to read carefully the Letter of Institution found on page 569 of the Prayer Book. This letter sets forth clearly that the Bishop is delegating his ministry to the rector, the terms of such delegation and the rights a rector enjoys in a parish.

Working with a Rector.

A Rector's duties are clearly set forth in the Canons. A parish priest is given the Cure of Souls. At ordinations he is solemnly warned that the spiritual lives of the people are his care and responsibility. In this respect he answers not to the Vestry, but to the Bishop and to God.

1. The Canons state that the rector is responsible for worship. In many modern churches, worship committees decide on the form of worship, what service to have when, but in our Church, the parish priest is responsible for all worship. Certainly all parishioners are free to bring to the Rector their wishes and desires and a wise priest will listen and accommodate when possible. The Vestry should always remember it has no rights in this area. A priest must make sure that worship is properly conducted. It is He alone who must evaluate the spiritual climate of a parish, preach the Word and administer the sacraments.

2. The Canons state that the Rector is responsible for the music, organ, organist and choir. Obviously this is necessary to ensure that music fits worship. If an organist is paid, the Vestry must set the salary. It can advise the Rector as he selects an organist, but ultimately it must be decision of the Rector as what sort of person is suitable as Organist and or Choir Director. Since these persons must be able to work compatibly with the Rector, the decision must rest with him.
3. The canons state that the Rector is responsible for Christian Education. He is called to be the principal teacher in the parish. Consequently, he must ensure that the right people are selected as teachers and the right material is chosen in order that his commission to make sure that all his people are well instructed can be honored.
4. The Canons state that the rector must keep the list of members. He it is who determines that a person is qualified, through baptism and confirmation, through regular attendance at worship, by following Christ, worshipping God each Sunday in his Church and by working, praying and giving for the spread of the Kingdom (BCP page 291). In the light of the Canons he determines who shall be baptized, confirmed, married and buried.
5. The Canons require that the Rector be given full use of the parish church and property and its contents.
6. The Canons require that the priest exercises spiritual discipline, including, as a last resort, the painful duty of refusing the sacraments to people whose lives become a public scandal, who engage in unloving quarrels or who upset the life and witness of the parish. If he takes such steps, he must report such action, not to the Vestry, but to the Bishop who may review such action.
7. It is the Rector who appoints assisting clergy, although the Vestry, if such clergy are to be paid, sets the salary and compensation. Similarly it is the Rector who nominates to the Bishop those who are to serve as lay readers.
8. The Rector's activities are reviewed annually by the Bishop in the context of his Episcopal Visit. Review of parish records and meetings with the Vestry by the Bishop along with the regular exchanges that take place between a priest and his Bishop constitute the basis for this evaluation.

If the Rector is responsible for all these things, what does a Vestry do? We looked at the legal responsibilities of a Vestry above and we defined some of the duties of church officers. We must return to the idea that members of the Vestry are called Christians. In the light of this idea let us look again at the Rector's duties to determine how a Vestry can share with the parish priest, represent the people and enable him to do his duty.

1. Members of the Vestry ought to be very regular churchgoers, not only on Sundays, but also on other Holy Days. Attendance is an active duty, an active ministry and not a passive activity for the benefit of the priest. Worship is our service to God. The Vestry sets a corporate example by being in church, by praying for all parishioners, by helping people get to church by encouragement or even by bringing people who can't get to church by themselves. As long as such criticism is positive and helpful, the Vestry can keep the Rector informed about how faithful he is and how effective he is in preaching, teaching and offering Divine Service to God.

2. Music is one of God's gifts. The Church has a great treasury of hymns, anthems and other music. The Vestry can help the help the Rector by making sure the parish has the best organ, organist and choir possible. Vestry members can also help by being open to learning new hymns and new tunes in order that the worship of the church may elevate the people rather than catering to the lowest common denominator of comfortable experience.
3. Christians learn both here and hereafter. The greatest antidote to heresy or discord is good, sound teaching. The Vestry should participate in Christian Education and show an example to the rest of the congregation. They make the resources possible for the Rector to provide that education.
4. The Rector records membership. The Vestry helps in this ministry by setting an example in worship, in prayer, in service and in giving. Vestrymen and women should be active in evangelism and in sponsoring and attending outreach programs and social events, which draw new people to the parish.
5. The Vestry makes sure that the church building and property is kept in good repair, is as beautiful as possible, is neat, clean and tidy and that the furnishings, vestments, books and accessories are in good repair. Assuming these responsibilities frees the Rector to devote more time to Pastoral Care, Prayer and Study of the Scriptures.
6. The Vestry, each of its members, take care to observe spiritual discipline, minister to those whose conduct is harmful or divisive and help the priest in his task of maintaining decency and order. As representatives of the people, the Vestry can, without gossip and in a positive manner, help with interpersonal relationships. Representation always is a ministry of reconciliation, not of division. There are occasions when unhappy people harm the unity of a parish. On such occasions, after all else fails, a Vestry must support the rector as he exercises discipline. Because a parish is, by definition, a tolerant place, those, who, at least to outward appearances, are insensitive, sometimes take advantage of the situation. They lack reverence, saying and doing things in God's House, which would not be tolerated in a secular organization, caring only for their needs, demands and programs. They do not honor God and they hurt their neighbor. Such people destroy parishes by driving people away. If compromise and reconciliation were always possible, there would be no hell.
7. The Vestry by example, stewardship and active promotion raises the money to ensure the priest and assisting clergy are well paid and cared for. A Rector cannot do his job well if he is worried about the survival of his family or his financial well being. A Vestry should be generous, show appreciation and help in practical ways particularly in caring for the priest's wife and family.

The Vestry and Growth

A parish by definition exists to grow. It has to be understood that we are called to reach out to all whom God may call to serve Him in our part of the Church. Some will be Episcopalians who wish to continue in our tradition of spirituality, worship and teaching. Others may have "mixed" marriages and seek a home where the whole family can worship. Others may be unchurched but who are open to the Gospel.

People choose a church home for the following reasons:

1. They meet a parishioner who is interested in them, who is enthusiastic about his or her faith, loves the parish and is optimistic about the future. Such a parishioner invites our family to a church function.
2. When the family takes the first step to come to a church function, whether it is a social event, an enquirer's class or worship, it meets kind, welcoming, open people who demonstrate the liveliness of their faith and fellowship.
3. The family discovers that the parish offers firm teaching, a disciplined faith and a concerned fellowship.
4. The family discovers that it is as important, as welcome to contribute and serve as the person who has been in the pew from day one.
5. The family finds that it is noticed, contacted and visited by the Rector or lay members or both.

The Vestry has a vital role in evangelism. Each member must set an example. Some practical steps can be taken.

- a. The Vestry, as individuals, must set an example by making personal contact with those who they know to be unchurched. They should never discuss church problems or conflicts outside the parish family. If at all possible, they should take turns acting as "welcomers" who look out for new people, make them welcome, show them the right pages in the Prayer Book, take them to coffee hour and introduce them to others.
- b. Vestrymen should attend social events, instruction classes and all parish activities to learn more about the faith and fellowship of the Church and to encourage others.
- c. The Vestry should organize social events, work at social events and make a special effort to have fellowship with newcomers who attend such events. It is a truism to say that if a parish prays together, it stays together. It is also true that parish families are families and need to have fun together.
- d. It is not enough to leave visitations and the contact of new people, or even old people, to the Rector. It is a good practice for a Vestry to divide the parish list up between themselves and make frequent contact with those for whom they are given the responsibility to pray and care. Each Vestryman and woman can help the Rector by keeping him in touch with the needs and problems of members.

The Vestry and Business

We have noted the responsibility a Vestry has for the business affairs of the parish. It should always be remembered that a parish is a family and not a business. It is God's family. Tithes, offerings and donations are given to God and God's Church. There is a teaching role here for the Rector.

All too often Vestries divide up the affairs of the parish into sacred and secular. **There are no secular affairs in a parish.** The Rector does not have responsibility for church finances. It is better

that he not know who gives what and how much. It is good that he know if someone stops giving. A family or individual may be in a financial crisis, which goes deeper. They may be alienated and need care.

The Rector has a duty to remind the Vestry that all money belongs to God and His Church and that in the administration of this money, the demands and dictates of the Gospel come first.

In business, it is seldom appropriate to use funds designated for one purpose for another. It may even be illegal. In a family, a fund set aside for Bill's college or Betty's car, in an emergency, may have to be used to pay for an operation. There's nothing illegal about that. It is always good practice for a Vestry to state up-front that designated funds may be borrowed to meet an emergency.

Financial accounts should be made available to the congregation, or at least a regular digest of the financial situation. People can't respond if they don't know. It may be bad business for a firm to demonstrate its needs. In a family everyone needs to know.

No parish lives to itself. Regular donations to missionary activities through the various Mission agencies of The Reformed Episcopal Church, Diocesan Seminaries and local charities should be part of a parish's ministry. Such a ministry does not cut into available funds, but rather, in God's way, increases giving and the spiritual climate of a parish.

The Vestry at Work

Parish by-laws establish how often a Vestry should meet. Meetings should be regular, at a set time and place and be conducted with efficiency. The Rector is to function as the chairman of the Vestry. He and the Senior Warden should meet some days before each meeting to set an agenda. It is always good practice for the secretary to distribute copies of the minutes as soon after each meeting as possible. This enables the Vestry to remember the tasks it has set itself.

A Rector is a professional. He is not a hired employee. Vestries should never require that a Rector give an account of his ministry during the past period. Much he does is confidential (it cannot be shared with those who are not ordained); time slots cannot be set for prayer, study, sermon preparation or even visitation. At the same time a working relationship should be established which enables the Rector to feel comfortable in sharing with the Vestry aspects of his ministry which he is able to discuss. Similarly, Vestry members should be willing to give account of their stewardship and labor.

Vestry meetings should always begin with prayer. It is also good practice for a Vestry to meet from time to time to worship together and study together. Before any important decision is made, time should be set-aside for prayer. Members of a vestry should keep at home a parish list and regularly pray for all the members. In a large parish such a list may be divided into daily sections. It is all too easy for Vestries to ignore the spiritual dimension of their task and to treat the parish as an impersonal unit rather than as the family of Christ.

It is always good to end a Vestry meeting with a time of fellowship. Often this period of sharing can bind wounds, prevent quarrels and strengthen fellowship.

Business should be conducted efficiently. Members of a Vestry are called by God and serve the people of God. They are not called to serve themselves, their pet ideas or vested interests. Long speeches and contentious behavior should never take place in a Vestry meeting. The vestry should prepare itself for business with great seriousness, prayer and preparation. No major decision should ever be made without considerable consensus. Close votes always indicate that conflict may be just around

the corner. The first Christians believed that the Holy Spirit's will is done when, after prayer, in the light of the Church's teaching and discipline, consensus is reached. It is possible for people to agree to disagree about a particular matter, but when a clear majority decision is reached all members of the vestry should agree to support the decision and act as if the vote had been unanimous. In this way the cause of Christ can be advanced in the local parish.

Resignations should always be accepted. It must be assumed that people are adults who will only resign if they cannot serve efficiently. If a person puts himself before the good of the whole, and uses resignation as a threat, such a threat must be taken seriously and the resignation accepted for the good both of the individual and the parish.

The Vestry and Candidates for the Ministry

One of the most solemn responsibilities of a Vestry is to certify to the Bishop and the Diocesan Standing Committee that a person who feels he has a vocation is suitable. A Vestry may be asked to recommend a person who seeks to be a Candidate and will be asked for its opinion before a candidate is received by the Bishop as such, and finally before ordination. Notice that a Vestry is not being asked to rule on the validity of a vocation. That is a task for the Bishop and his advisors. A Vestry is asked to give its input about the character and service of an individual. Has such a person been in the parish for sufficient time for him to be known? Is he frequent in worship and a devout person? Does he get on well with other parishioners? Is he known to be moral, truthful and sane? Is it the opinion of the Vestry that this person is calculated to be useful in Christian Ministry? In short, the Vestry is being asked to give a personal reference.

Consideration of a Candidate by a vestry is given on the nomination by the Rector. It is to be assumed that the Rector thinks that such a man has the makings of a clergyman. It may well be that members of the Vestry know more about a person than the priest. A Vestry should never pass a person about whom there is real doubt for fear of alienating him. A Loyal churchman will not leave a parish simply because a Vestry cannot agree to recommend him. If he does, he ought not to have applied in the first place. A Vestry should be careful not to exercise bias or prejudice or to act on negative gossip.

The Vestry and the Termination of a Ministry

Rectors come and go. Priests accept calls to ministry as coming from the Lord. After prayer and seeking the advice of his Bishop, a Rector may decide that the time has come for him to move on or feel that the Lord is leading him to accept a call to another parish. In some parishes such a moment may breed insecurity, a sense of loss or even betrayal. It is essential that a vestry understand that it is normal and to be expected that after some period of time a priest may very well move to another sphere of ministry. Such a time is a moment for acceptance, for understanding and for generosity. A good priest will also have made the Vestry aware of his feelings and have interacted with them about discerning a new call.

On rarer occasions, a Vestry may feel pressure from the congregation to conclude that it is time a Rector move on. Unfortunately such times may be ones of conflict where the relationship between a Rector and the Vestry or a Rector and a significant portion of a parish has broken down. This is a time for great caution and the Bishop must especially be consulted before the situation has deteriorated beyond the potential for repair.

There are moments in a priest's ministry when he needs to say or do things, which are not popular. People get angry. Moments of anger are never times to act. It is always good to prayerfully consider that the Rector may be right and what he does is needed for the spiritual welfare of the parish.

This is a time when a Vestry can urge people to look at themselves, to offer their anger to God and to ask His will. A Vestry can often talk to a priest, give him counsel and always give consideration that he might be right.

If it becomes obvious that something is really wrong with the Rector's actions, a Vestry should always seek to mediate. A Rector is a human being. He may be ill, succumb to stress, have family difficulties or simply need time off. Vestries should always make sure that a priest gets at least four Sundays off in a year and every three or four years arrange for him to have a small sabbatical. A Vestry is called to care for the priest. It should constantly examine whether he is paid enough, has time with his family, can afford a vacation and get help with his personal needs.

A Rector cannot make special friends of parishioners. By definition he leads a lonely life. He may not be able to afford to join a club, go to the theatre, dine out or spend time with other friends or colleagues. If he can't afford these things, his isolation and loneliness may have a terrible affect on his ministry. In short, a crisis may be the vestry's fault.

No priest can survive if his Vestry and parish are always users. A parish needs to be caring, thoughtful and generous to its parish priest and his family. If a pastoral relationship is breaking down, the Vestry must first make sure that the crisis is real and not merely the attempt of unhappy people to rid themselves of a clergyman. It is at this point that the Wardens must utilize their positions to speak with the priest and attempt to help him work through the problems. No Pastor can work to solve problems he knows nothing about. Nor should he be "put on the spot" in a Vestry meeting. These matters are best handled by the Parish Council working *with* the Priest. It should also be remembered that in such cases the priest must take counsel with his Bishop and the Bishop may want to speak with the Wardens and or other members of the Parish.

If the unfortunate circumstance occurs where a Rector needs to be removed from a Parish, such determination must be made by the Bishop. The Bishop's decision is final. The Bishop will undoubtedly already be talking to the Wardens or the Vestry before he makes such a decision. A Vestry may not seek to influence such a decision by cutting off a priest's salary. There is never a legitimate reason to refuse to pay one's pledge or attend church. We worship, give and work as our bounden duty and service to God and not in support of a particular priest. A Vestry should never seek the removal of a Rector until and unless it is sure that there is consensus in the parish.

Tragically there are occasions when Rectors get themselves into trouble. They succumb to besetting sins that offend the Church and the parish. Again, great care should be exercised in dealing with such situations. A Rector, in his pastoral duties may easily be the subject of gossip and false accusations. If these come to the attention of the Vestry, they should always be treated with the utmost caution. There are people, who from spite, supposed rejection or deeper reasons are prepared to seek the ruin of a priest. When a scandal erupts, the Senior Warden should first talk to the priest in confidence. He should also talk to the person or persons making an accusation. He should use prayerful common sense in evaluating a charge before he talks to the rector and particularly before any formal addressing of such charges. The Priest should hear out the Sr. Warden and discuss candidly the situation with him.

If a priest admits wrongdoing, he should always be urged to talk with the Bishop. It may be well that the situation may be resolved quietly. Sometimes a priest given counsel and professional help can continue his ministry. Sometimes due to the nature of the problem, the priest may have to be removed. If formal charges are made, a priest has the option to talk to the Bishop and accept his verdict or he may elect to be tried in the Diocesan Court. If he takes that course, he may be suspended for a period. It should be remembered that in the church as well as in society, a man is innocent until he is proven guilty.

If a priest is involved in a scandal, admits his sin, or is removed, the Vestry will be faced with hurt and angry people. It is important that the Vestry takes the lead in demonstrating a Christian example. Priests are human. They can fall. They can be forgiven. They should always be loved and a parish should attempt to be as kind, generous and understanding as possible. The parish will survive. A new Rector will be selected. The work of the church goes on.

Mission Parishes

A mission parish is unusually under 30 adult communicate members and is governed by a Bishop's committee that enjoys all the rights of a vestry save that of calling its priest. The Bishop, who will consult with the committee in the process, appoints the Vicar of a mission. Similarly, the Bishop may remove a Vicar. In all other aspects this manual may be used as a guide in diocesan and parochial missions.

The Vestry and the Diocese

A parish is part of the wider family of the Diocese and national church. This relationship is organic. A parish is not "affiliated" to a Diocese, but gains its authenticity and mission from the wider fellowship of the Church Catholic within the Diocese. It owes its loyalty to the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Reformed Episcopal Church and the Diocese and its Bishop.

The Vestry sets an example in this area by making sure that the parish tithes to the Diocese is always paid on time as part of the working budget. It supports the Diocesan Seminary. It is only through support of the wider church that a parish can be sure that, in the future, there will be a supply of clergy, good promotional material and Episcopal care without which no Anglican parish may long survive. The Vestry makes sure that it elects the most talented people to Diocesan Synod. The Vestry encourages its priest and other clergy to attend clergy conferences and retreats and helps with expenses. The Vestry responds to appeals for help and money to enable the whole church to grow.

The Vestry also shows loyalty by abiding the Canons and the teachings and practices of the whole Church.

In our highly mobile society, in which families move from place to place, few wish to be part of a fellowship that has no roots and no extended family. The more a parish is made aware of the greater fellowship of Diocese, province, national church and sister churches overseas, the easier it is to establish lasting loyalties and a sense of corporate responsibility.

The Vestry

These then are some, but not all of the duties, ministry and responsibility of a Vestry. It is hoped that all Vestrymen, considered by all Vestries, will read this very brief guide and its suggestions put into practice. Above all, we shall make great progress together if Vestries contemplate the religious and spiritual nature of their high calling and develop sound methods of working with the clergy to ensure the growth, stability and harmony of the church at its most basic level, the parishes of our Diocese.

The Parish Council

The Sr. Warden and the Junior Warden, along with the Rector constitute the Parish Council. The Parish Council should meet at least once per month to pray through the Parish Directory with the Rector and to discuss the activities of the parish and concerns of the Rector and parish. Preferably, this should occur

prior to the Monthly Vestry Meeting. Since the Sr. Warden represents the interests of the Rector and the Jr. Warden the interests of the people, this counsel of advice for the Rector or Vicar is critical. Needs, concerns, problems should be able to be freely discussed between the members. The Rector or Vicar can use this council to bounce ideas around , and to help formulate plans on how to deal with particularly difficult problems. In some matters of necessary discipline the parish council can be used (within the bounds of propriety) to help formulate the best way for the priest to approach the matter. It must be remembered that the Priest cannot reveal everything to the parish council because of the pastoral nature of his office. Some things must be kept “under the stole” that is the confidences of counseling with parishioners must not be revealed by the priest. However, many things can be discussed by this committee. The job of the wardens is to give their opinions. The job of the Rector is to listen to the advice and to weigh it carefully. The Rector must then make his decisions as to how to act in certain instances. When the Wardens see their function as complementary to one another and to the Rector, this can be a very powerful tool in helping to oversee the affairs of the parish. They can present a united front on many issues and help defuse potentially explosive situations. They are also part of the checks and balances in the oversight of the parish which helps protect the Rector from unfair or undue criticism. The matters discussed in the Parish Council are confidential. They may not be discussed with others including wives. When disagreements arise in the parish council, questions may be directed to the Bishop for his counsel on sensitive matters. Since the Bishop is the Senior Pastor of each parish, this is most appropriate.