

Vestry service, according to parish priest and writer Leonard Freeman, begins with a core commitment to Christ. From that follows honesty, confidentiality, a commitment to the whole enterprise, and a positive, generous attitude.

FOLLOWING THE GREAT COMMISSION

What it Takes to be a Leader

by Leonard Freeman

To be on a vestry is, by definition, to participate in leadership. So what does it take to be an effective leader, both within the congregation and on the vestry? For former senior warden and retired CEO Tad Piper of Minneapolis-based Piper Jaffray, it is a combination of both business skills and religious commitment — the latter being the most important.

“The most important piece of advice that was given to me when I began serving as a warden was that the vestry is not the board of a corporation and shouldn’t be treated that way,” says Piper. “Aspects of the church do need to be considered in a business-like fashion, but the real business of a faith community is to help the church community do the most effective job possible in following the Great Commission.”

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Matthew 28:19-20

Tad Piper has it right. In my thirty-five years of ordained ministry, I have been fortunate to work with hundreds of vestry members. The most effective and faithful among them were those who could see beyond the ever-present parochial issues (leaking roofs, staff compensation, diocesan assessments, etc.) to the reason that the church exists in the first place: to bring the world to Jesus Christ.

Being such a leader requires, among other things:

- ✚ A personal faith commitment;
- ✚ Honesty and confidentiality;
- ✚ A commitment to the whole enterprise rather than to just a constituency;
- ✚ A positive, generous, attitude — both within the vestry and in the parish.

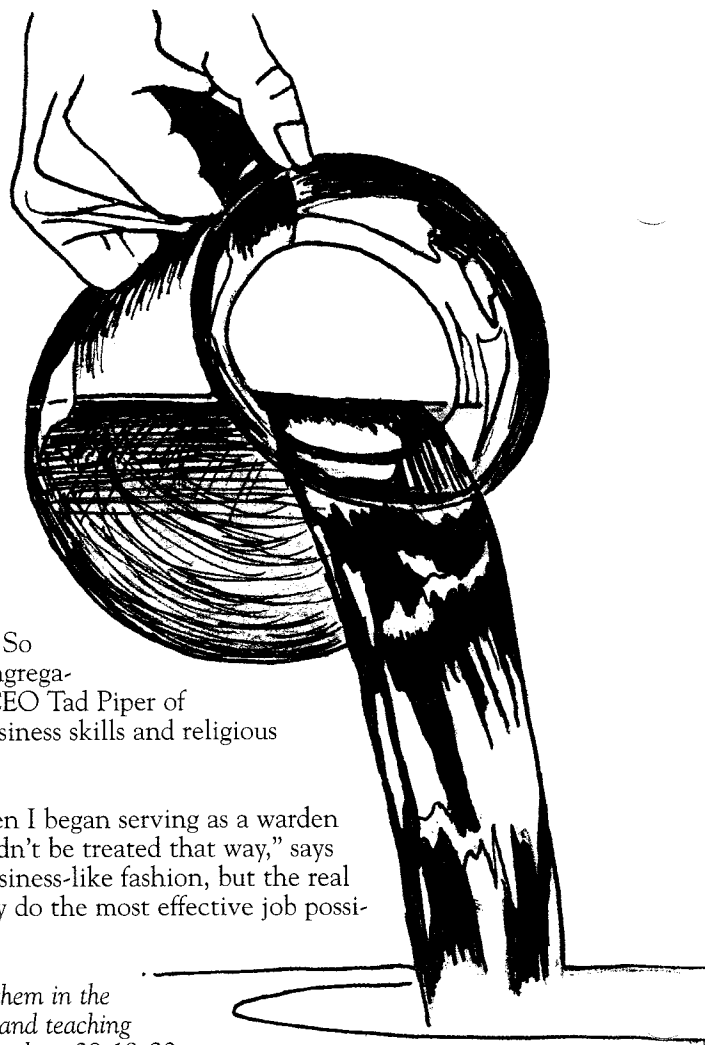
A personal faith commitment

Joining a vestry, like joining a church, is a matter of faith. Since — at its core — Christian service is based on faith, new members need to come to the vestry with their hearts as well as their heads. To put it simply, there must be a commitment to Jesus, and to carry out His work.

Many of us may be at different places on our faith journey. Many of us may not be sure whether we understand or believe every part of the prayer book, or the Nicene Creed for that matter. I cannot, however, forget what a good friend said to me in college when I was first thinking about seminary.

“I believe in God,” I told him, “so I don’t really need to buy all this Jesus as the Son of God stuff, do I?”

“If you are going to be a Christian priest,” my friend replied, “it makes sense that you are going to have to deal with Jesus Christ.”



Being on a Christian vestry means that we need to deal with Jesus Christ on our own personal level as well. It may be as simple as “Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.” The first Christian creed was not all that long: “Jesus is Lord,” it said. But starting there will make all the difference.

Being on a vestry will, hopefully, strengthen and renew your faith and commitment over the long run. But there may also be moments where you wonder what drove you to take on this ministry, given other obligations and interests. That’s when you will need your faith, and to remember why you are doing it: because of your commitment to Jesus Christ.

Honesty and confidentiality

One of the oddities of church life is that it may sometimes seem overly “warm and fuzzy,” while at other times, nasty. That seeming dichotomy is because of the stereotypes about church lives that are often brought, unconsciously, to the enterprise.

“A minister (or vestry member), should never say a bad word about anyone,” for example. But what if the job is not getting done as it should? Should we sacrifice the enterprise — the Great Commission?

Of course, we shouldn’t engage in gossip or pettiness. And, yes, we should give people the benefit of the doubt, but sometimes the work will call for being honest about what is going on. Not every volunteer or every priest will be the right person to do a particular job, nor will the best intentioned individual always do his or her task well.

On the other hand, it will sometimes be appropriate to put aside some piece of the effort for a pastoral reason — to take care of someone, rather than just push ahead with a task.

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To make these kinds of decisions a vestry, with their clergy, will need to be able to look at, and talk about things, honestly — with love, but honestly. It is part of the hard work of being a leader, to “give up childish ways” — i.e., unhealthy stereotypes — so that God’s work can be advanced.

And that gets us to confidentiality, for unless the clergy and the vestry can trust each other to not gossip or criticize about what is spoken within the context of a vestry meeting, then they cannot be honest together.

Being on a vestry you may hear things you never imagined. “I thought everything was all nice until I got on the inside and heard all the whining and complaining,” one warden told me.

There is an old saying: “Where the angels are, there the demons will be also.” Given that the church is the place where we bring so many of our deep hopes, it is where our worst fears may fly as well. Being on a vestry requires the ability to experience both your own anxieties and those of the parish — and not believe that you have to solve every problem post haste.

Sometimes there is nothing wrong that needs changing. It is just part of the background of being a real leader: to hear all the emotion, and to still stay grounded.

A commitment to the whole enterprise

“There are varieties of gifts,” says St. Paul, “but the same Spirit.” Given that the job of a vestry is to care for the whole congregation and related ministries, vestry members need to be committed to the whole ship, and not just a certain deck.

If you see yourself as being on the vestry only to stand up for a particular grouping or agenda, your vestry experience could well end up being negative and unsatisfactory, both for yourself and in terms of the overall mission of the congregation.

Part of that is because no matter how interesting a particular agenda or cause will be at a particular moment, it will turn out to only be one item on a long list of things to do. And so you will either be bored to tears by having to sit through many things you don't really care about, or you will find yourself able to relate to other issues through only a narrow lens.

It comes back to the Great Commission. A vestry leader needs to be there to help Jesus' work wherever and however that work presents itself. It may mean that the nursery needs painting to attract new families, and it is time to lift a hand with a paintbrush. It may mean that the Friday night soup ministry of the parish needs more hands and it is time to make some soup. More likely, though, it may mean helping to discern where God would have the parish put its resources — whether it is in a capital campaign to build new classrooms or an endowment fund to expand outreach possibilities. As a vestry leader, you will need to see the whole picture.

We all need to pray for one another's concerns, work on behalf of others, and spend time learning and caring about those ministries that may have only interested us marginally before. Remembering that is part of what it takes to be a real vestry leader.

A positive and generous attitude

According to former senior warden Bob Laskey, the most important characteristic of a good vestry member is a generous spirit and a grateful heart:

- ✚ Grateful that God has asked you to be in this leadership role;
- ✚ Grateful for the other members of the vestry and their skills and talents;
- ✚ Grateful for the parishioners and their gifts of time, talent and treasure;
- ✚ Grateful for your family and friends;
- ✚ Grateful for the clergy family that serves this parish;
- ✚ Grateful for your own gifts that you bring to the table.

Coming to your vestry service with a positive and generous attitude will almost always help, for the best leaders believe in, and like, who and what they are leading.

The concrete generosity of your own time, talent and treasure will make a significant difference. There is no end to the generosity that people can have toward God's work, but if we are not practicing it ourselves we will never believe it, and therefore, never ask it from others. Your own generosity will enable others.

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A vestry/clergy partnership

Finally, a word about the clergy. Vestries and clergy are in a partnership, rather than an employee/employer or executive/board kind of relationship. The simple truth is that being a priest or a deacon in a parish is hard work, with lots of emotion and spiritual dynamics flying. The clergy will absolutely need your support. That does not mean that they cannot make mistakes nor be beyond reproach. But clergy are there because of the same reason you have chosen to serve — they have been called to minister in the name of Christ.

Your support of them, both as human beings and as leaders of your congregation, will help the whole enterprise more than you will be able to imagine.

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