

The Vestry is:

Members of the Vestry are legal agents in the congregation who, with the clergy, provide leadership. It is important to understand this is a vestry/clergy partnership.

Being on a Vestry means:

You have been elected to serve on the Vestry by your congregation – called to leadership in your faith community. You are charged with property management as well as fiduciary administration and human resource responsibilities.

You are asked to apply your baptismal vows to your acquired business experience in carrying out the mission and ministry of your congregation. A well-planned meeting and guidelines about achieving stated goals are as important in the vestry room as they are in the boardroom. The vestry takes those skills and enhances them by adding prayer, discernment, and reflection. When addressing fiduciary responsibilities, the basics of standard accounting practices are raised to a higher level by adding questions regarding the discernment of God's will. Entering your call as a Vestry member entails bringing all the wisdom and insights God has given into your congregation. Infusing those gifts with prayer, discernment, and reflection, you are expected to take them back into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.

Your election is **a call to a sacred ministry by the Body of Christ**. If you think of your membership and the membership of your peers as a sacred ministry, you will treat it and each other with more respect and affection. **Think of being a Vestry member as one of the manifestations of your relationship with God**. The value system that drives Vestry decisions is not dollars or production of a product but the Baptismal Covenant to which we recommit each time we witness a baptism.

The work of the vestry is crucial to the life of the congregation. However, being a Vestry member is about what you do and how you do it. Vestry membership is about offering our unique God-given gifts and allowing your strength to shine. Vestry membership is about being yourself, your true self, and staying engaged in the work. It means staying engaged even when you want to walk away. This is not easy. It is hard work and when it feels the hardest, it is then that you are most closely responding to God's call.

I was pushed hard so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me. (Psalm 118:13)

The Roles of the Rector and the Vestry

The Rector's Role

The work of the Vestry is done in partnership with the Rector and therefore it is important for the Vestry members to understand the Rector's role and responsibilities. Title III, Canon 9, Section 5 of the *Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church*, states that the Rector is responsible for:

- Worship and spiritual life
- Selection and oversight of all assisting clergy
- Use and control of all buildings and furnishings
- Education of all ages in the Scriptures; the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Church; and in the exercise of their ministry as baptized persons
- Stewardship education of all ages
- Preparation for Baptism, Confirmation, Reception, and Reaffirmation
- Announcing the Bishop's visit with the Warden and the Vestry, and provide the Bishop with information about the congregation's spiritual and temporal state
- Applying "open plate" offerings from one Eucharist a month to charitable uses
- Reading communications from the House of Bishops at worship
- Recording all Baptisms, Marriages, Confirmations, and Burials in the congregation register

In summary, the canons assign virtually all responsibility and authority for the pastoral and spiritual direction of the congregation to the Rector. According to the canons, assisting clergy have no canonical or legal authority unless it is delegated to them by the rector.

The Vestry's Role

The role of the Vestry is defined by the *Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church* and the local diocese as well as the constitution and by-laws of the parish. State statutes may prescribe certain responsibilities of a Vestry in its role as the governing board of a parish. While the canons of the Episcopal Church have very little to say about the roles and responsibilities of Vestries, they are an important place to start. **Each Vestry member should have, at the very least, a copy of the Episcopal Church canons, diocesan canons, and the congregation's by-laws.**

The Canons of the Episcopal Church Stipulate that the Vestry shall:

- Be agents and legal representatives of the parish in all matters concerning its corporate properties; and the relations of the parish to its clergy. [Title I. Canon 14, Section 2]
- Ensure the standard business methods, as outlined, will be observed. [Title I. Canon 7, Section 1 (paraphrased)]
- When a parish is without a Rector, the officers of the Vestry are responsible for the continuation of worship, including the calling of a new Rector. [Title III. Canon 9, Section 3 (paraphrased)]
- The Vestry has responsibility for nominating persons for holy orders. [Title III. Canon 5, Section 2]

In their capacity as legal representatives and agents of a parish, Vestries must be aware of their ongoing responsibilities and potential liabilities. Vestries and parishes can be legally liable for any of the following:

- Accidents and other incidents occurring on parish property or during parish-sponsored activities
- Violation of fiduciary responsibilities especially those relating to finances
- Violations of contracts, leases, or other legal agreements
- Wrongful termination and other employment practices
- Discrimination and sexual harassment and misconduct

Because of potential liability, Vestries should ensure that the parish has adequate liability as well as directors' and officers' insurance coverage, including coverage for employment-related actions. These insurance policies can provide coverage for actual claims as well as legal defense.

Support of the Rector by the Vestry

Support of the Rector is another important role for the Vestry. This role includes activities such as:

- Setting meetings to engage in open and honest conversation about what is and is not going well in the congregation
- Paying attention to clergy wellness issues
- Paying attention to clergy family wellness issues
- Encouraging clear and direct communication between the congregation, the Vestry, and the Rector

The Joint Responsibilities of Vestries and Clergy

- Articulate the congregation's mission
- Ensure effective congregational planning
- Ensure adequate resources and effective stewardship
- After discerning mission, establish and monitor programs and services
- Communicate with the congregation
- Communicate about the Church at large
- Communicate with the wider community]
- Assessing the Vestry's ministry

(Source of information: *The Vestry Resource Guide*, published by *Cornerstone*, a ministry of The Episcopal Church Foundation)