

On the occasion of a visit by Bonnie Anderson,
delivered by the Rev. Dr. J. Fred Barber - Sept 9, 2007

Presentation on Vestry

First, I feel that you should know that I am by no means an expert on Canon Law, and my observations about vestries and their prerogatives come more from my experience than my the study of Canons.

On the other hand, I have been a rector for the past 30years in small, medium, and medium large parishes.

First a bit of background in our Church: The Anglican Church first came to these shores in Virginia. The colonial period of our church marked a time when Vestries were very much in the dominance. Clergy were often hired without tenure, and there was no Bishop in the American Colonial Church.

After the Revolution, the American Church began to organize in Philadelphia. The constitution of the American Church was written at about the same time as the federal constitution, and with some of the same men and ideas behind it. Perhaps foremost among these ideas was the concept of "checks and balances". The early Episcopal Churchmen were leery about a bishop (even an American one) having too much power. Likewise, the powers of the incumbent Rector in a parish were to be weighed off by a lay authority. In the diocese this check to the bishop was the Standing Committee, in the local parish the check to the Rector was the vestry. Each of these committees was given specific powers, and the clergy were also given specific powers. It was the hope of the founders of the church that these powers would hold each other in check. The object was not paralysis, but a growth and prosperity that came through co-operation.

There have been times in our church when clergy were in the ascendance, and there have been times of lay dominance. However, in each of these times there was always a way back to balance by remembering the constitutional nature of our church towards checks and balances.

VESTRY AND ELECTIONS

Now let me be more specific, and try to share with you some of my own experiences. There have been situations in my ministry, when things were calm both on the diocesan and parish level. At such times, the vestry election attracts little attention. As a matter of fact, it is often difficult to find five people who will stand for election. I can remember years in my ministry when the vestry nominating committee would report out a slate, and they would be elected in the first few minutes of the annual meeting.

We do not live in such times today. There is an election to the vestry for a reason: It is the way that the congregation chooses their leaders. In times of great controversy, such as we live in today, it is a bad practice for there not to be an election. I know that elections make the annual meeting much more difficult, but each congregation ought to have the

opportunity to make an honest choice among the membership to lead the congregation. Trinity has had contested elections for the past four years. We have had persons that are known to be liberal, and persons known to be conservative. The congregation has chosen. Who can argue with that? Some may say that this will cause strife and difficulty in the congregation. I do not think so. On the contrary, I think you will have more strife and loose more people if you are seen as a church that will not tolerate discussion and opposition. Our church has taken a pro-national church stand over the past several years, but we have not lost several members who are staunchly in the Network corner. Why? Because they value the fact that they are not only welcomed, but asked to take part in the ongoing life of the church in all its parts...spiritual, social, and political.

So, the first thing that I would hold out as important is the parish vestry election. If you feel that your congregation should be going in another direction, then stand for vestry. Write a letter to your Rector, Warden's and vestry and ask to be nominated. If that doesn't happen, have your name put forward from the floor. If you win, be ready to not only state your beliefs, but also be willing to listen to the beliefs of others with an open mind. Remember, you could be wrong. If you are not elected, give thanks that you are part of a church that allows dissent, and work to support that congregation. Churches: be courageous enough to make the election open. In the long run, it will be a binding force for your church, not a divisive one.

THE VESTRY ITSELF

We are not a church where the clergy can ignore the wishes and directives of the vestry. The vestry holds the purse, and "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 law is designed to encourage the rector and the vestry to work together. The only way they can get things done is to combine their powers. Sometimes however, a vestry will completely dominate a clergyman and put pressure on him to do the will of the vestry. At other times the clergy will have their own people on the vestry and run the church as a dictator. Neither of these is the way our church is designed to work. When one side becomes too powerful, the church becomes twisted. In vestry domination the spiritual side may neglect for business sake, on the other hand the dominant clergy often turns the church into his private fiefdom.

Clergy need to stimulate and bring forth gifted, thinking laypeople who will assume roles of leadership. They should not work to simply produce lay version of themselves. Vestries need to encourage their clergy to work in new ministries and give honest and vital leadership. When either of these sides fail to nourish the other, then the neglected side must begin to nourish itself. There have been many times in the past when gifted laypersons rose up out of the congregation much as the judges of old rose up out of the people of Israel. It should be regarded as no less a gift from God. Remember that God can raise up and call lay leaders, just as he calls clergy.

THE VESTRY AS A DISTINCT VOICE

At the Annual meeting of my parish this past January, I told the congregation that it was my intention to remain a priest in the Episcopal Church. I also made it clear that this was a personal decision, and that I had no right...and no intention...of making that same decision for the parish. That must be their choice, as reflected through the vestry.

The vestry, of its own accord, has stood up as a voice for unity with both the Episcopal Church and the diocese of Fort Worth. They have expressed on several occasions their hope to remain under the care of both the presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, and the bishop of our diocese, Jack Leo Iker. When I have written to the bishop about the vestry's action, I have been careful to point out that this is the decision and action of the vestry. There have been times when I have been in disagreement with some actions of the vestry. These are not personal defeats on my part. These are simply times when the vestry part of the church, and the clergy part of the church were not in full agreement. It happens between the branches of our federal government, it happens in marriages. It is human. The clergy and the Vestry do not always have to be in agreement for there to be a beneficial and spirited mutual ministry.

It is not wrong for the vestry to disagree with me, or for me to disagree with the vestry. It is wrong when we stop listening to one another.

HARMONY BETWEEN VESTRY AND CLERGY

When there is strong clergy leadership, and strong leadership from the Vestry, when the vestry is ready to listen to the clergy, and the clergy to the vestry, when neither side is working to completely dominate the other...then there is the possibility of real harmony and a good working relationship.

Dominated people lose their drive and don't share their ideas. Dominated clergy don't offer the best of pastoral care or spiritual insight. Dominating people (vestry or clergy) can easily become egotistical, and listen to no one. This is not the way to harmony and a good working relationship.

One of the great gifts that we have in the American Church is this idea of working together...checks and balances...each side encouraging the growth and development of the other side. It is not so in many other parts of the Anglican Communion. Here lay people and their opinions are valued. Laypersons are often given jobs of responsibility that would be given only to clergy in other cultures. We should remember that is not the Episcopal Way to either dominate, or be dominated. It is the Episcopal way to co-operate...lay and clergy; priest and deacon, bishop with both his clergy and laypeople.