

## Vestry As a Life-Giving Team

Chris Holmes

You have surely experienced teams that were life-giving and productive, and I'll bet you've also served on teams that were energy-suckers and a waste of your time. What caused those to be such different experiences? Which kind of team is your vestry?

Life-giving teams build community and synergy around a higher purpose while utilizing the gifts of each member of the team. This kind of a team doesn't just sort of happen. It is the consequence of a process of careful selection, intentional development and team leader training.

### **The difference between a group and a team**

The first thing to realize about teamwork is that a team is fundamentally different from a group. Groups come together for sharing or learning and then apply that learning to their individual lives. Teams develop a common vision with established goals, and rise or fall together because their members share responsibility for the results of their work.

The church vestry is innately designed to function as a team with shared responsibility for church governance, structure and selection. It holds a place at the top of the local congregation's organizational structure, with the purpose of helping the congregation fulfill its mission. The best of vestry life happens when the organization functions as a team accomplishing its work productively and collaboratively. The worst of vestry life plays out when it behaves as a group of individuals protecting their silo areas, fighting for turf and refusing to budge for the greater good of the congregation.

### **Six conditions of team effectiveness**

A research study involving thousands of teams identified as effective, found these six common factors:

1. *Effective teams have a compelling direction.* The purpose for meeting is captivating and clear and the team is able to measure what success looks like.
2. *The right people are on the team for the right reasons.* Most often these are stakeholders in the mission of the organization who have the ability to play well with others.
3. *Team membership is well defined.* There is utter clarity about who is on the team and who is not. You would be surprised at how often this is unclear.
4. *The team matters to the organization and its leadership.* The team is given enough authority to carry importance, has an adequate budget and undisputed organizational buy-in.
5. *The structure of the team is solid.* There is administrative support, a reasonable time-line, role definition and clarity about critical details.
6. *The team is adequately led/coached.* The leader of the team is trained and has a good grasp of working with others.

The study on Team Effectiveness found that when the first five of these factors are in place, there is a 60% chance that the team will be effective in doing its work. The other 40% chance of success in effectiveness depends upon the quality of leadership provided to the team.

This research suggests that it is imperative for the vestry to have a clear sense of purpose, membership that is chosen with intention and leadership that is capable. These elements are sometimes challenging in volunteer organizations with limited resources. However, they are essential for vestries in the process of becoming life-giving teams.

#### **Four marks of a life-giving vestry**

1. *Shared leadership with clergy.* Rector and vestry serve as an aligned team viewing their relationship as a partnership of shared responsibility for leading the congregation and bringing about transformation.
2. *Aligned with purpose.* The vestry does the important work of listening to the congregation while visioning what is possible, and then from that input, discerning a compelling purpose for the congregation. That discerned purpose becomes more than a statement on paper when the vestry constantly examines where it is spending its time and money by asking, "How does this embody and fulfill our purpose?"
3. *Mission focused.* The vestry shares with the rector the task of discerning where God is calling the faith community to be active beyond the walls of the church. As much time is spent in meetings discussing ministry and mission as is spent talking about governance, structure and selection. Life-giving vestries have a clear vision for how to live out God's call in the world in service to and with others.
4. *Understanding of holy work.* Vestry members understand that their service on the vestry is more a calling to be in ministry than an election to a position. Life-giving vestries spend time in prayer listening for the direction of the Holy Spirit. Members are faith-centered, biblically grounded and spiritually mature.

#### **Growing life-giving leadership**

Strong leaders are shaped, not born. In vestry life we have the great opportunity to help increase the leadership ability of those placed in positions of leadership in the church by teaching them the skills needed to succeed.

Consider holding a vestry workshop for new church leaders called, "How to Lead a Stellar Church Meeting," covering these essential ingredients:

- Basic group facilitation skills
- Meeting reminders with an attached agenda
- Starting and ending on time
- Grounding the work in the larger purpose of the church
- Including prayer and honoring the work of the Spirit
- Ending each meeting with clear action items and a person's name attached to each commitment

Very often, this kind of workshop can be led by a vestry member who learned team leadership skills in their workplace.

Vestry service does not have to be contentious, frustrating drudgery. Who wouldn't rather serve on a vestry that works joyfully as a team and focuses on God's amazing work in the world as the body of Christ? Life-giving vestries don't just materialize on their own, they happen on purpose when attention is given to careful election of membership, clarity of purpose with a focus on mission and intentional training of leaders.

**Chris Holmes** leads *The Holmes Coaching Group, Inc.* specializing in coaching church vestries, pastors and denominational leaders. He is a United Methodist Pastor, consultant to the Episcopal Church Foundation, and author of *The Art of Coaching Clergy*.