

## LEADERS FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL

by The Rt. Rev. Thomas A. Corston

I recently overheard a Church Warden respond to a parishioner who was expressing a concern “What can I do about it?” The woman replied in exasperated surprise, “You are the Warden!”. The Warden walked away obviously misunderstanding her role. Also, recently I was called by an Incumbent who was unsure of his role in face of his Warden’s anger over a pastoral matter. In that case the Church Warden took the position that he was ‘the boss’ and began to run roughshod over the Rector’s actions, which, it turned out, was in a matter of which the poor rector was not even aware. It resulted in frustration and stress quite unnecessary.

Over my years of ministry I have often wondered just what it is that people think when they take on the role of administrative leadership in the life of the local church. In my 40 years of ministry I have found Select Vestry/Parish Council leadership to be woefully inadequate in the proper knowledge of their roles and, sadly, in many cases, the result has caused undue stress in parish life and ministry. Once in a parish my own Warden publically argued with me and angrily resigned his position because I had purchased a (rather cheap) garbage can for the rectory without his approval. The parish was poor, but certainly I didn’t think it was so poor that it could not assure that the rectory had a garbage can so I didn’t think I needed approval for a purchase of under \$10.00 (It was some time ago!). Like the episode noted above, my Warden saw himself as the Rector’s “boss” and made that a point in many discussions.

One of the difficulties in many Anglican communities is that persons who agree to serve in leadership often do not research what that role involves. Many Church Wardens have never read the Canons of the Diocese that clearly places boundaries on their responsibilities. Sadly many of our local church leaders never see themselves as part of a team whose primary responsibility is the furtherance of the Gospel message and the growth of the Church. It has become an increasing concern that many lay people in leadership assume the role of the policeman, most times against any programs, usually suggested by the Rector, that could foster new interest and possible growth. Select Vestry/Parish Council meetings become highly stressful episodes of one-upmanship where the lack of vision on the part of strong personalities often creates highly charged tugs-of-war.

How do you see your role as a Warden...of Parish Treasurer...or Layreader in your congregation? Do you see yourself as a support to the appointed ministry with an open willingness to affect growth with positive energy? Or do you participate with the attitude that you are going to make sure that the Rector does not do anything that you think with shake up things “as they have always been”? Of course, there are some situations where the lay leadership in the parish might need to place boundaries on a program if there is honest concern for that program’s benefit to the congregation. When those situations arise, however, the question always needs to be asked, “Am I upset over the idea because it challenges my own comfort zone, or am I honestly concerned for the cost of the new program to the congregation in terms of the financial realities or their openness to be fully accepting?”

Peter Coutts of The Alban Institute, in a recent publication, writes that local congregations need to choose leaders who are “motivated and motivating”. He writes, “In fact, the absence of the two criteria in a team member will undermine any strengths...in guiding a project” He goes on to suggest that congregations need to ask themselves a series of questions when choosing potential candidates (which pertain as well to any one who serves presently as a leader in your congregation). The questions to consider are...

Does the person already (or, do you) act like a steward of the present and future life of the congregation?

Does the person (or, do you) share the concern for current reality that is a motivation for change?

Does the person (or, do you) have a goal-oriented nature? (Not everyone has and those who don't may not be focused and driven enough for the position).

Does the person (or, do you) believe that congregational change is necessary for the future?

Does the person (or, do you) have the strong personal capability beliefs needed? (Such persons are not easily discouraged and tend to respond to challenges by increasing their efforts).

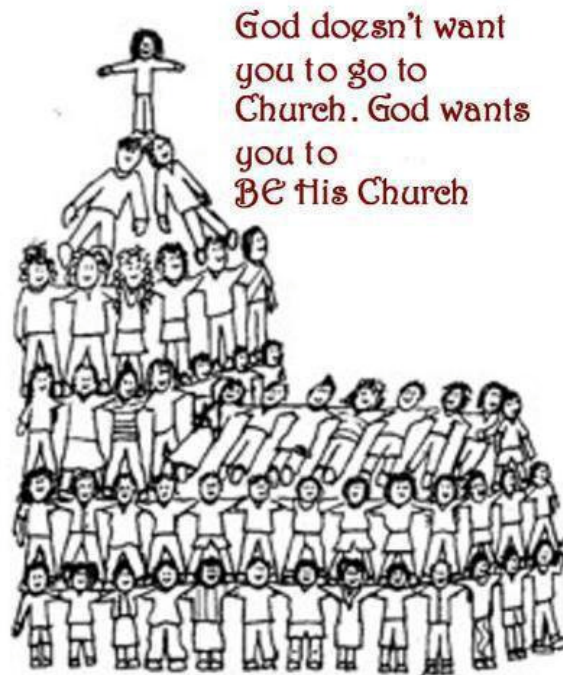


Our congregations need leadership team members who will affect the congregation's confidence in its ability to achieve necessary changes and achieve her goals. Congregations need to believe that the people in leadership have in his or her heart the best interests of the congregation, the needed knowledge, gifts and experience for the work ahead, and that they are reliable. I admit to often being disgruntled by the Warden who decides to head out to a hockey game or a social

event on the very day when the congregation is celebrating a big event or hosting a special guest (like the Bishop!).

Select Vestries/Parish Councils tumble into pitfalls when leaders squabble over such issues as new programming that might foster new growth. When participants see only their own views and not the potential of a suggestion being made for the life of the congregation, then that person needs to take some time out to re-evaluate the matter and their own views. At such moments leaders need to ask themselves if their own view is being too narrow and blocking any possibility to advance the Gospel or the growth of the parish. It is not an easy place to be but we always need to remember that when the vestry members are motivated then the congregation is motivated. When the Vestry acts as an effective and positive team, the congregation is positive and unafraid.

If congregational leaders...Wardens, Layreaders, Finance Officers, and clergy know the responsibilities of their roles are as outlined by the Diocese's canons and policies and see themselves a team who maintain a perspective that planning for the congregation's motivation is important then the congregation will not only accept change where necessary but will thrive through it.



Blessings...

Notes:

Parts of this article are taken from "*Choosing Change: How to Motivate Congregations to Face the Future*" by Peter D. Coutts, copyright 2013 by The Alban Institute.