

# Vestry 101 Toolkit

## TOOLKIT QUICK LOOK

[The Mission of the Church, Diocese and Congregation](#)

[The Roles and Responsibilities of a Vestry](#)

[Vestry Toolbox](#)

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Welcome to the ministry of serving on your congregation’s vestry. Although the responsibilities are significant, serving on a vestry is also spiritual and joy-filled work that can deepen your faith and lead to lifelong friendships as you lead the congregation in fulfilling its mission and ministry.

## THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH, DIOCESE, AND CONGREGATION

Every congregation shares the mission of the Church, “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ” ([Book of Common Prayer](#), page 854), and lives that

mission in ways that are unique to its own context. Your congregation’s mission statement will reflect the unique gifts of your community and the particular context in which God has called your congregation.

**Question:** *In the space below, write your congregation’s mission statement. How does it reflect life today and the location that God has called your congregation?*

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Pray over this mission statement and for your congregation regularly. Let this mission inspire the strategies that you, the rector, and other members of the vestry, consider to fulfill your congregation’s mission.

### **The Bishop, the Diocese, and the Congregation**

Your congregation is one of 87 congregations in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington (EDOW) and one of about 6,400 congregations across [The Episcopal Church](#) in the United States. We are a single denomination with 100 domestic and 11 international dioceses, each with congregations clustered in geographic regions. EDOW includes congregations in the District of Columbia and four Maryland counties: Charles, Montgomery, Prince George’s, and St. Mary’s. EDOW groups parishes into eight regions to encourage collaborative partnerships.

**Question:** *Open [this map](#). Notice the geographic borders of the diocese and locate your congregation. [This map shows the eight regions](#) of the Diocese. In the space below, note the region your congregation is in and the other congregations in that region.*

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Each level of the Episcopal Church has an elected leader. Your rector or priest-in-charge serves as the spiritual leader of your parish. [Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde](#) serves as the spiritual leader of the Diocese of Washington and is the first woman elected to hold the position. She is devoted to promoting vital congregations and speaking for justice in her sermons, public appearances and [writings](#). Bishop Chilton Knudsen is our Assisting Bishop.

[Presiding Bishop Michael Curry](#) is the spiritual leader for the entire Episcopal Church, a position to which he was elected in 2015 by General Convention and which he will hold until 2024 when a new presiding bishop will be elected. Together--individuals, congregations, dioceses along with churchwide offices, councils, and governing bodies--are The Episcopal Church.

### **The Mission of the Diocese**

It's helpful to keep in mind that the basic unit of the Episcopal Church is not the parish, but rather the diocese. Just as your congregation has a mission statement, so does the Diocese of Washington. In 2019, the diocese undertook a strategic planning process that engaged more than 500 individuals to create a [five-year strategic plan](#) that is guided by the following mission statement:

*To draw people to Jesus and embody his love for the world by equipping faith communities, promoting spiritual growth, and striving for justice. ([Diocesan Council](#), 2020)*

and three strategic goals:

- 1. Revitalize our churches to grow the Jesus movement.*
- 2. Inspire every person to grow in faith & equip our leaders to lead well*
- 3. Bravely uncover, understand, reckon with, and act to dismantle racism within ourselves, our faith communities, the Diocese, and our localities.*

These goals will guide Diocesan initiatives until 2025.

### **The Diocesan Staff Serve Congregations**



Diocesan ministries support the life and work of its members and congregations so that, together, we will grow in faith, enrich our common life, and fulfill God's mission of reconciliation in the world. The Bishop visits congregations regularly to confirm and receive new members and to provide guidance and inspiration to members and congregational leaders. The [diocesan staff](#) assists the bishop in her ministry with a particular focus on congregational vitality and ministry with youth and families, young adults, college students and Latino congregations.

## Congregations Support the Diocese

Just like a congregation needs funds to pursue its ministries, so does the Diocese. The diocesan budget, adopted each year at the [diocesan convention](#), funds mission and ministry and is supported primarily by congregational giving. The normative standard of congregational giving to the Diocese is 10 percent of the parish's [normal operating income](#). That means, your congregation's budget will have a line item for contributions to the diocese. The diocese relies on your congregation's support. Diocesan ministries receive additional support from the annual Bishop's Appeal campaign and investment income.

Congregations support the Diocese with more than their treasure. Clergy and [lay people](#) in the diocese volunteer their time and talent as well, serving on a variety of [committees and councils](#), and contributing to diocesan ministries. Annual business of the diocese occurs each year at [diocesan convention](#) which is held in January at Washington National Cathedral. Each congregation sends their clergy and one or more elected delegates to diocesan convention.

You can find out about the ministries of the diocese on the [diocesan website](#). Remember, we are one Episcopal Church. Your congregation and the diocese share a common mission.

***Question:** Members of congregations often wonder what the diocese does for the parish and why the parish supports the diocese in its budget. How would you answer these questions? Consider sharing and practicing your answers at a vestry gathering.*

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## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE VESTRY

### Vestry as a Spiritual Practice

You might think serving on a vestry is like serving on a board of a nonprofit. They do share similarities: both are entrusted with the well-being of the organization each serves; both have officers; and both must abide by bylaws. A church vestry and a nonprofit board differ in one central way. The vestry is charged with the sacred task of the mission of the Church--“to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ” (BCP, p. 854). The ministry of the vestry is to help the congregation grow into the full stature of Christ and share the gospel with its neighbors. It is a spiritual practice with a commitment to listen to God’s call and grow as a follower of Jesus.

We recommend that a vestry adopt a *rule of life*, an intentional pattern of practices that members of the vestry agree to follow in their daily lives. A rule of life is a commitment to live in a particular way and might include praying every day, reading the Bible on a regular basis, serving others, and practicing generosity. A rule of life, guided by Christian practices such as these, helps a person live in the right proportions, placing God at the center of the work of the vestry. A shared rule of life will expand a vestry’s capacity to listen for where God is calling the community.

**Question:** Watch [this video](#) of Br. Mark Brown, SSJE describing why a person should adopt a rule of life. Why might your vestry adopt a rule of life?



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Does your vestry have a rule of life? If not, consider taking time to write one together. You might draw on the Episcopal Church's [Way of Love](#) and the seven practices of turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, rest. Simple rules are the most effective. The [Additional Resources](#) section offers possibilities for writing a rule of life.

**Pro tip:** Read [the Rev. Greg. Syler's Ten Top Ways to Thrive on Vestry](#) for suggestions about how to make the most of your ministry as a member of the vestry.

### What Are the Vestry's Key Responsibilities?

It bears repeating that members of the vestry, along with the rector, serve as spiritual leaders in their congregation. You are entrusted with the mission of the congregation, called to offer your gifts for ministry to the sacred task of fulfilling God's call. Rather than a representative for a constituency, you are a trustee and a steward.

The [Episcopal Church Foundation](#) identifies four responsibilities of the vestry, shared with the rector:

1. Discerning God's call
2. Identifying new leaders
3. Stewarding and developing resources
4. Special duties in the absence of a rector

**Discerning God's Call.** The most important of the four responsibilities is discerning God's call for your congregation as articulated in its mission and vision. Congregations share the common mission of the Church, but every congregation is uniquely called by virtue of its history, its neighborhood, and its people to live that mission in a particular way. And God has equipped your community to fulfill the mission to which it is called. Discerning God's call requires knowing your congregation's history, its neighborhood, and its people.

Taking the time to both discern God's preferred future and identify the gifts to fulfill that future is a task that takes ongoing attention. Praying about and talking about

mission ought to be part of every vestry meeting. The resource section of this toolkit offers books and articles to help your vestry cultivate a culture of discernment and identify the gifts of the community.

**Question:** *Simon Sinek suggests that leading from “Why” can dramatically change how and what you do. Watch [this video](#) that illustrates the power of why. Why is your congregation placed in its particular neighborhood? What does this suggest about your congregation’s particular mission?*

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**Pro Tip:** Use [MissionInsite](#) to map the members of your congregation and learn about your neighborhood. [This Episcopal Church Foundation article](#) offers ways for a vestry to discern mission.

**Identifying New Leaders.** You might not immediately consider identifying new leaders as a vestry responsibility, but as a body charged with leading the congregation in fulfilling God’s call, you will need to attend to raising leaders who will faithfully lead ministries of the Church. The practice of identifying new leaders requires deep listening for the places where people’s passion intersects with God’s call. Coffee hour and other informal gatherings are natural opportunities for vestry members to serve as ambassadors for the mission of the church and widen circles of conversation to draw new people into leadership opportunities. This responsibility of identifying new leaders also includes the responsibility of nominating people for holy orders, that is to serve as deacons and priests in the Church.

**Stewarding and Developing Resources.** Ministries require physical, financial, and human resources. The vestry has the responsibility of stewarding all well--maintaining the buildings and supplies, planning and tracking the budget, and nurturing the

ministry of laity in the congregation. The vestry’s responsibilities in these areas are a matter of good stewardship and legal realities. Vestries have legal responsibility for corporate property, financial, and human resources of the congregation.

***Question:** How did you hear the call to serve as a leader on the vestry? What does this suggest about how you can nurture new leaders? Set aside a time during a vestry meeting to share your stories.*

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***Canonical Responsibilities.*** Every congregation and all clergy in the Episcopal Church are bound to abide by the [Canons of the Episcopal Church](#), which set out the following responsibilities:

- *Be agents and legal representatives of the congregation in all matters concerning its corporate properties and the relations of the congregation to its clergy (Title I. Canon 14, Section 2, page 52.)*
- *Ensure that standard business methods, as outlined in *The Episcopal Church’s Manual of Business Methods in Church Affairs*, will be observed (Title I. Canon 7, Section 1, page 39).*
- *When a congregation 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, page 87).*
- *The vestry has responsibility for nominating persons for holy orders (Title III. Canon 5, Section 2, page 70).*

Vestries are bound by these Canons as well as the [Canons of the Diocese of Washington](#) (see especially Sections 4704-4706), their congregation’s bylaws as well as federal, state and local laws. Be sure to keep a copy of your bylaws in your vestry notebook.



## What Are the Key Roles and Duties of a Vestry?

***The Rector.*** As mentioned earlier, the Rector of the parish is the presiding officer of the vestry, an authority that the Rector may pass to the Senior Warden. The [Canons of the Episcopal Church](#) set out the following broad responsibilities of the Rector:

1. Overseeing worship, spiritual life, and building use
2. Teaching the Christian faith, including generous offering of time, talent and treasure and preparation for baptism, confirmation and reaffirmation
3. Announcing a visit by the bishop and reporting to the bishop
4. Applying contributions not otherwise designated one Sunday a month to charitable uses
5. Reading pastoral letters from the House of Bishops to the congregation
6. Maintaining a register of baptisms, marriages, confirmations and burials  
(See Canon III.9.6 for details)

The Rector often delegates some of these responsibilities to lay leaders. Doing so reflects healthy sharing of leadership and recognizes the ministry of laypeople. Every baptized person is a full member of the body of Christ with gifts for ministry.

***Question:*** *How are responsibilities of the Rector delegated and shared in your congregation? Which areas of parish life do you feel most called to serve?*

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***Vestry Members and Officers.*** The composition of the vestry, its size, election, terms of office and officers will be identified in your congregation's bylaws. The [Canons of the Diocese of Washington](#) require that a vestry has a Senior Warden and a Junior Warden, leaving additional officers up to the congregation to decide. The Senior Warden is a source of support to the rector throughout his or her ministry and leads the congregation in the absence of a Rector or Priest in Charge. The Junior Warden is

traditionally, but not in every case, given special oversight for church property and buildings. Other officers typically include the treasurer who attends to the finances of the congregation and a clerk who takes notes during meetings.

The requirements for serving on a vestry and the election of vestry members and its officers, again, are set forth in a congregation's bylaws, which themselves must conform to the Canons of the Diocese of Washington. A 2009 General Convention resolution encourages vestries to seek youth representation. The Diocese of Washington allows youth who are at least 15 years old to serve, with some restrictions. Please consult [diocesan canons](#), Section 4704(c)(2).

**Pro Tip:** *Having a job description for the vestry can clarify expectations and focus ministry. [Here's one model.](#)*

## What Are Best Practices for Vestry Meetings?

According to the *Canons of the Episcopal Church*, the Rector presides at vestry meetings. Many choose, however, to delegate that responsibility to the Senior Warden. Doing so increases collaboration among leaders and frees the Rector to listen to the tenor of the meeting more deeply, attend to body language, and respond to issues thoughtfully.

Vestry meetings can be organized in a variety of ways. Rectors often structure vestry meetings with the counsel of Senior and Junior Wardens who will bring their perspective, wisdom, and knowledge of events to the conversation. Something to keep in mind, however, is that the shape of the vestry meeting will shape the vestry. Be intentional about the agenda.

**Begin with a Spiritual Practice.** Because a primary responsibility of the vestry is to discern God's will, consider beginning with a spiritual practice, whether it's worship, Bible study, or sharing faith stories. Recognizing God's presence and opening our hearts to hear God will ground the conversation in a stance of holy listening.

**Question:** *Recall a meal that began with prayer and recall one that did not. How did prayer change the experience of the meal?*

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***Establish a Vestry Covenant.*** Communities operate with a set of norms, whether spoken or unspoken. A vestry covenant is an explicit statement of your vestry’s norms of working together. Establishing covenants will help set expectations, build trust, and provide a helpful tool for navigating challenging situations. Covenants often include such things as the length and frequency of vestry meetings, the process for speaking, understanding about confidentiality, and honesty in conversation.

***Pro tip:*** Read about [vestry covenants](#). If your vestry has a covenant, review it together. If you do not yet have one, consider drafting one together.

***Set the Agenda Strategically.*** In our time-crunched world, few have time for lengthy meetings. Some believe the optimal vestry meeting is 90 minutes. After that, conversation becomes less productive. If you are part of designing the structure of your vestry’s agenda, consider setting the agenda strategically. We’ve already suggested that every meeting begin with a spiritual practice. But what about the rest of the meeting? A variety of models are possible. Each reflects particular values and the purpose of the meeting.

The Episcopal Church Foundation suggests that much of the meeting focus on strategic, big-picture concerns regarding the life of the congregation. They recommend that committee reports be given at the end as [consent agenda](#) items. Routine reports such as a budget report or a report of the buildings and grounds committee can be sent one week before the vestry meeting, allowing the possibility that an item in a report that needs vestry discussion be added as an active discussion item. Consent agendas with clear action items shorten vestry meetings and allow for spacious discernment. New



items are rarely acted upon at first mention and much of the discussion occurs within committees outside the vestry meeting.

Another model for vestry meetings, called the Bishop Payne model, divides the vestry into three committees--Administrative, Property, and Ministry--with oversight in each area. The meeting begins with worship followed by 20 minute committee meetings to decide what to review, what needs vestry action, and what new item committees will explore before the next vestry meeting.

	Administrative	Property	Ministry
Action			
Review			
New			

At the conclusion of the committee meetings, the vestry regathers and hears committee reports for 30 minutes, discussing only action items brought by the committees, followed by 30 minutes spent discussing strategic issues. Again, much of the work is done between vestry meetings as committees explore the best way to attend to issues in their area, taking the time to listen to God and the community and then report to the vestry. [These slides](#) provide an overview of this method.

**Question:** Review recent agendas of a few meetings. What does the agenda suggest about the values that guide your vestry meetings?

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***Working Well Together.*** Vestries are the primary leadership body of a congregation. Working well together as a vestry is essential to a thriving congregation. Consider vestry service as a team effort where everyone is working together toward a shared mission and vision. A collaborative approach grounded in fellowship and a stance of discerning God’s will for the community will contribute to a life-giving vestry.

This isn’t to suggest that vestries will not face challenging circumstances or have members who do not agree. Rather, well-functioning vestries share fellowship in Christ, keep God at the center of their ministry, and set spaces for honest and holy discernment. Members of the vestry are not called to represent a particular group within the congregation, but they are called to listen for the will of God and seek ways to fulfill that mission.

Establishing a vestry covenant, a mission-focused agenda, and clear roles and responsibilities will go a long way toward building and maintaining healthy relationships. Another helpful tool is an annual [mutual ministry review](#) in which the vestry and the rector, together, look at their relationship and the health of the congregation. Remember that the work of leading a congregation is a collaborative endeavor.

***Question:*** *In your experience what are three best practices of serving on an effective team? How can you contribute to a healthy vestry?*

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## **VESTRY TOOLBOX**

**Commissioning liturgy.** Some congregations commission new members of the vestry during a public worship service. While baptism is understood as a commissioning for

any lay ministry, the Book of Occasional Services offers a liturgy for the commissioning of ministry. Consider [this liturgy to commission members of the vestry](#).

**Sample vestry retreat.** [These articles](#) by the Episcopal Church Foundation are helpful in designing a retreat right for your congregation. Here is a [sample vestry retreat](#).

**Sample vestry agenda.** Here is a [sample vestry agenda](#) based on the Bishop Payne model.

**Supporting the ministry of the laity.** The ministers of the church are the laity, Bishop, priests and deacons. Healthy vestries both care for and support the laity in ministry. [Here are some suggestions](#).

## **Prayers and Spiritual Practices for Vestries.**

### **A Prayer for the Church**

Gracious and loving God, we pray for your holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where it in any thing is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. Amen. (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 816)

### **A Prayer for a Church Meeting**

Almighty and everliving God, source of all wisdom and understanding, be present with those who take counsel for the renewal and mission of your Church. Teach us in all things to seek first your honor and glory. Guide us to perceive what is right, and grant us both the courage to pursue it and the grace to accomplish it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 818)

For longer prayers and practices consider the following:

- Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families, In the Early Evening found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, (p. 139) would be appropriate for an evening meeting.
- [Dwelling in the Word Bible study](#) offers the opportunity to hear God speaking through Scripture.



- Watch and discuss one [Traveling the Way of Love](#) films at each vestry meeting, using the accompanying small group discussion guides.
- Listen to Bishop Mariann's [Way of Love podcasts](#) or read her [most recent book](#) over a period of time and discuss them as a vestry.
- Share a meal together and listen to one another's faith stories such as how you began attending the church or who has been influential in your life of faith.

**Vestry Handbook.** Consider creating a vestry handbook as a vestry team with the following elements: (1) Parish bylaws, (2) Diocesan canons, (3) Clergy and staff contact information, (4) Vestry member contact information (5) List of parish ministries and chairs, (6) Minutes from the most recent annual meeting, (7) Most recent parochial report, (8) Monthly financial statement, (9) Summary of most recent annual audit.

**Vestry Orientation Slides.** This [set of slides](#) can serve as the basis for a vestry orientation at an annual retreat or gathering of new vestry members.

## NEXT STEPS

We invite you to engage with this toolkit as a vestry and reflect on your life together.

1. What new practice might you as a vestry take on?
2. What practice might you as a vestry let go of?



## **DIOCESAN RESOURCES**

### **Canons of the Diocese of Washington**

The Canons are the rules by which the congregations in the Diocese of Washington agree to live. It governs our common life. You can find diocesan canons [here](#) and the canons of the Episcopal Church [here](#).

### **Diocesan Staff**

The Episcopal Diocese of Washington staff supports the congregational life of our parishes. If you have a question, please reach out. You can find contact information at the [Diocesan Staff Directory](#).

### **MissionInsight in the Diocese of Washington**

This suite of robust demographic tools and in-depth reports assists parishes with getting to know their local communities--a key element of growing and revitalizing our congregations and a vital component of the diocesan 2025 strategic plan's implementation. Click [here](#) to learn how to use MissionInsite to reach newcomers and revitalize your congregation. If you have questions, contact the [Rev. Todd Thomas](#), Missioner for Revitalization and Young Adult Ministry.

### **School for Christian Faith and Leadership**

Launched in 2020, the School for Christian Faith and Leadership seeks to inspire, equip, and empower lay and ordained leaders and individuals in order to revitalize congregations, advocate for equity and justice, and grow as faithful followers of Jesus in everyday life. If you have questions, contact the [Rev. Jenifer Gamber](#), Special Missioner for the School for Christian Faith and Leadership.

### **Mutual Ministry Review**

An annual mutual ministry review is the opportunity to consider the partnership between clergy and laity and assess the health of a congregation. It is a time to celebrate fruitful endeavors and identify areas of growth. The focus is the common ministry



shared by the whole community. For the tools to engage in a strategic ministry review go [here](#). If you have questions, contact the [Rev. Robert Phillips](#), Canon for Leadership Development and Congregational Care.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Episcopal Church Foundation Vital Practices](#) (website) offers timely reflections and webinars for vestries.

[Finance Resource Guide](#) (book) by Demi Prentiss and Nicole Seiferth, [Beyond Business as Usual: Vestry Leadership Development](#) by Neal O. Michell, and [Vestry Resource Guide](#) by Nancy Davidge provide helpful guides for vestries.

[Community Rules: An Episcopal Manual](#) (book) by Ian S. Markham and Kathryn Glover offers a short, light-hearted look at life in Episcopal communities of faith. In particular, “the vestry can use this book to start discussions around the responsibilities of leadership and Christian community.”

[Growing a Rule of Life](#) (website) by the Society of St. John the Evangelist offers a six-week program with daily videos and workbook to help individuals and communities write a rule of life.

[Manual of Business Methods in Church Affair \(2019\)](#) (pdf) identifies Canonical requirements and seeks to provide helpful advice on sound, practical internal controls, accounting guidelines and business practices.

The [Way of Love](#) (website) is a set of seven practices for a Jesus-centered life. These seven practices are supported by a growing set of small group curriculum, videos, and other resources produced throughout the Episcopal Church.

## KEY DEFINITIONS

**Book of Common Prayer.** The Book of Common Prayer contains the words and directions for Episcopal worship, prayers for a variety of occasions, theological and

historical documents, and much, much more. It is a sign of unity within the Episcopal Church. The *Book of Common Prayer* is available online [here](#).

**Diocesan Convention.** Convention is the yearly legislative meeting presided over by the Bishop and consisting of the clergy of the diocese and elected representatives of its congregations. The convention usually gathers on the last weekend of January to consider the diocesan budget and other matters regarding the mission and ministry of the diocese.

**Diocesan Council.** Diocesan Council is the governing board of the Diocese. Members serve a 3-year term, renewable once. Each region elects 1 clergy and 1 lay member, 2 clergy and 2 lay at-large members are elected at the annual meeting of the Convention, and the Bishop appoints 3 members. Also, the officers of Convention serve *ex officio*.

**Lay people.** Lay people, also known as “laity” are all baptized members of the congregation. They are the ministers of the Church, along with bishops, priests and deacons.

**Normal operating income.** Normal operating income includes the following sources of congregational revenue: (i) Plate offerings, pledge payments and regular financial support; (ii) Monies available (and actually used) for operations from investments; (iii) Other operating income, including unrestricted gifts and restricted gifts used for operations and contributions from congregational organizations; and (iv) Unrestricted bequests used for operations. [Diocesan Canon 52, Section 2]

**Vestry.** The vestry is the legal representative of the congregation. The number of vestry members, the term of office, and officers is determined by Diocesan Canons and the bylaws of a congregation. varies from parish to parish.