

Leadership - Vestry Conferences

Purposes

A yearly leadership conference that is a mix of:

1. Developing strategies and plans for the improvement of parish life & ministry. This would be based on a process of reflecting on and learning about, the whole, or some area of parish life
2. Community building among parish leaders
3. Spiritual development
4. Increasing the common competencies of parish leaders for the above. Part of our purpose is for the vestry and other leaders to increase their skills and knowledge for congregational development and leadership.

These four elements of the leadership conference are interrelated. The assumption is that they support and build on one another.

Conference Assumptions

1. The conference would take place around the same time each year
2. Make an agreement with a consultant to design and facilitate the conference for at least three consecutive years. The agreement can be extended for additional years or three-year periods. Begin with the assumption of working together for a long enough period to allow a building effect in both the work and the relationships. The agreement can be ended if either the consultant or the parish believes that there is an inadequate "fit" after the first year.
3. Participants would always include at least the rector and vestry.
 - Participation could be expanded to other parish leaders (e.g., leaders of ministries and committees, past vestry members, etc.).
 - It could also be an open-invitation event. All vestry members would be expected to participate but any member would be welcome. Those attending would fully participate in the conference work and in the initial follow-up efforts that flow out of the conference.
4. The conference would include work, worship, meals and social time. The consultants will usually officiate at the Daily Office during the conference and coach the participants in developing a common rhythm. If the conference includes a Sunday the clergy of the parish should make the needed arrangements, preside and preach.

The optimal conditions for a conference include a location away from the parish, two nights/three days, in a setting that is renewing while allowing for group work. The leadership conference is no less than a Friday night, Saturday 8:30 - 4:00 p.m. which could be on site at the parish or at a conference center; or a Friday night through Sunday lunch event at a conference center (have other clergy cover the HE in the parish, celebrate with the vestry; this format allows more time for building glue among people and time to not make it all too driven.).

5. Advance and follow up: The advance work might include phone and e-mail contact with a small working group, including the rector (usually a conference call to discuss where the parish is, the needs as that group sees them, etc.; The consultant writes up a set of objectives and possibly a few design ideas for the event and sends it to the group for suggestions, based on the suggestions the consultant produces a "final" draft for use). The group would be selected by the rector/vestry a few months before the conference. The group may be asked to gather information from the vestry and/or others to help establish the goals. The group would also manage conference logistical issues. There would be a follow up call or e-mail exchange after the conference with the rector.
6. Each year's conference would include all four of the purposes in some fashion while being designed around the current needs of the parish.
7. The conference design is understood as being adaptable. It is normal for issues to surface during the conference or for the group's attention and interest to be drawn to some aspects of the work over others. The group's energy needs to be taken into account as the conference progresses.

8. One aspect of the consultant's role is to ask the group to try new ways of exploring decision making, community building and spiritual development and for the group to generally be willing to enter into the exploration of those new ways.

Possible Effects of Having a Conference

There are a variety of ways in which the pattern of having leadership conferences may impact a parish:

1. Leadership formation as people gain confidence in being parish leaders
2. Greater sense of what it is to be a leader in the church. An ability to relate leadership to the unique purposes and dynamics of a parish.
3. Setting parish issues in a broader and deeper context. Relating issues to the parish's spiritual life and dynamics, to the trends and forces in the parish's environment, to the primary task of a parish church, etc.
4. Becoming more strategic
5. The identification of potential leaders (if the conference is an open-invitation event).
6. Increased follow-through on parish issues, e.g., focusing on the most strategic and primary task related work, membership growth, staff development, etc.
7. Having an additional way to hear and engage the "rubs" that naturally and usefully emerge in a parish as people have concerns and/or ideas for change. A Conference can be part of how parish leaders stay aware of external social and wider organizational forces and shifts from within the organization. This approach to managing organizational change can keep the system in touch with itself and its environment, create a "demand system" for continuous improvement, help negotiate differences, and prevent the development of high conflict levels.

We need to discuss the following items:

- Fee and expenses. Include any assumptions about increasing the fee over time or how added on work will be billed. A possible charge for travel time if any (many consultants bill travel time at half the rate)
- The anticipated time involved – on site, advance and follow up.
- Set a date for the consultant to talk with the working group that will help establish conference goals and deal with logistics.
- The consultant can provide a list of items and conditions needed for the conference: Easels, large newsprint pads, markers (dark color, chisel tip), masking or blue tape, how many meeting rooms will be needed (think about break out groups) and the arrangement of those rooms.

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