



ALBAN
AT DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL

Nathan Kirkpatrick: Beginning Your Board's Leadership Together

Posted on January 19, 2016 by Alban

101

At the beginning of any new leadership role, you find that there is an existing to-do list. There are pre-existing challenges to be addressed, crises to be managed, opportunities to be pursued. For the new leader, there are both internal and external pressures to get “the work” underway, to show and feel forward momentum on the priorities that made you seek a leadership role in the first place.

This is equally true for the collective leadership of a church board. In every congregation I've ever worked with, the new board begins their year of service with a demanding agenda from the first day. There are staffing questions to be cared for, budget matters that need attention, facility issues that simply cannot wait; on top of these, there is the actual ministry of the congregation that needs to be reviewed and, in some cases, renewed or reimagined. The agenda for the first board meeting can be dauntingly full even before the board is seated.

Consider this a plea to press pause on that agenda – not indefinitely but more than momentarily – to care for the other vital work that must happen at the beginning of the board's work together. Invest some time in intentionally forming the board as a group of leaders and disciples. Doing so lays a foundation that can pay dividends later in the year when questions get more complicated, stakes get higher, and disagreements may get more intense.

The first priority for any new group at the beginning of its work together is that they *get to know one another*. This sounds obvious, and yet, I am surprised by the number of church boards that are still largely strangers to one another months into their work together. Senior leaders, specifically the rector and the wardens, can help facilitate this meeting process by publicly acknowledging the fact that board members may be familiar faces to one another but unknown to each other, representing different preferred services and different ministries within the life of the congregation, and then, by helping people get to know one another. For this work, I have found the oft-employed icebreaker the least imaginative and least helpful way of getting to know each other.

Getting to know one another, as I am envisioning it here, depends on getting to know what one another values. This is the place of real human connection; this is the well that you will want to return to later on when the going gets rough. One way to do this in your first gathering is to ask each member to introduce themselves and to say what brought them to the congregation in the first place and what made them stay. Stories about finding welcome for personal conviction and room for lingering questions, about the reputation of children's ministries, about the beauty of music programs or the pageantry of the worship all begin to build camaraderie among the new board members as folks realize that what I value about this congregation is similar to what you value about it – or, perhaps even better, we build a list of things we value about this congregation that is so extensive that our work can begin with a celebration of who we are.

The second priority for a new leadership group is to *help people learn their role*. A colleague of mine used to say that people want to know what it looks like when they are doing their work “correctly.” Some of your board members will be old hat at the work and responsibility of this ministry, but as we have an increasing number of people in our pews who were not raised in the church, the church board can seem like a mysterious body with secret handshakes and unknown customs. Those who are new can use some help understanding the balance of speaking for self yet serving on behalf of the entire congregation. Rather than leaving it to chance (or worse still, to the most misanthropic of your incumbent board members mentoring the new folks into bad behavior), as senior leaders, take some time to talk about what this particular ministry looks like when it is alive, thriving, and effective.

The third priority in forming a board at the beginning of its work together is to *define common expectations*. I often hear clergy and lay leaders complain about board members that they have decided are underperforming or misbehaving. My question in reply is always, "what did you tell them before they were elected?" If expectations are unclear, then we cannot fault the person who is not living up to our imagined but unstated expectations. Early on, define how you will be together. If attendance at board meetings is presumed, which I cannot imagine that it wouldn't be, then state that explicitly. If the expectation of board members is that they will make a pledge to the church's budget, state that clearly, as well. Beyond those two examples also consider what the expectations are for board member behavior - how will we treat each other? How will we disagree? How will we make decisions? Clarity around these matters is just as important as clarity around attendance.

One final note, one gift that the board's senior lay leadership can give is to describe how this *service is a way that each person on the board answers Christ's call to discipleship*. Sharing in responsibility for the welfare of the church, which is another way of saying stewarding the life of the congregation, is an act of faith. In the hail of revenue and expense statements, insurance reviews, denominational funding requests, and mediation of staff conflict, it can feel otherwise, but the reason we serve on a board is because Jesus says, "follow me," and we answered "wherever you lead." To that end, early on, it is important that we talk about and demonstrate how these years of service can be a spiritually-enriching experience, how they can nurture (or refresh) a life of prayer, how they can awaken hope and confirm faith, how they can incline our hearts to love God and our neighbor in new and deeper ways. Why else would we do this?

Before the pre-existing agenda takes hold of our time and imagination, I plead with you to invest in the gift of one another. Get to know each other. Help people learn their role. Define mutual expectations. And keep before us the persistent and transforming call of God to serve. Then, let's get to work.

This article was originally published by and has been adapted from "The Vestry Papers" published by The Episcopal Church Foundation.

101

TOPICS: FEATURED POSTS, LEADERSHIP, VOCATION

More on this topic

[Judy Urban: Bringing New Life to Your Congregation](#)

Many congregations are struggling to keep existing members and attract new ones. Today's faith communities are reexamining everything in an effort t...

[Dan Hotchkiss: Consulting in the Alban Tradition Continues](#)

Alban Institute was known for the strength of its consultants. Here, Dan Hotchkiss reflects on the legacy of and the values inherent within Alban cons...

[Bruce Epperly: Congregational Leadership as Spiritual Practice](#)

Claiming the pastor's role as spiritual guide is a matter of seeing God's presence and then encouraging its emergence within the congregation, write...

Subscribe to Alban Weekly

Our weekly e-newsletter offers practical wisdom on how to lead congregations today

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

[About Us](#)