Polity 101: The Legal and Spiritual Obligations of the Vestryperson

Diocese of Newark
Vestry University
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Polity

Miriam Webster defines as “the form of government in a religious structure”

Single most important description of our polity is in our title: “episcopal” from the Greek word, “episcopas” meaning “overseer”.

Hierarchical in structure with chief authority over local church resting in a bishop. Bishop also chief authority of diocese, conference and synods.
Polity

- Bishop’s authority both sacramental and political: performs ordinations, confirmations, consecrations and supervises clergy

- Not usually a simple chain of command, some authority vested in lay and clerical counsels
Differ from Other Religious Organizations

- Presbyterian: authority rests primarily in assemblies of elders;
- Congregational: Self-governed local churches that are not answerable to elders or bishops
Levels of Our Church Polity

- Anglican Communion (Worldwide)
- The Episcopal Church (National plus some out of country provinces)
- Diocesan Level
Start with Catechism in BCP at 855:

“Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?
A. The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons.

Q. What is the ministry of the laity?
A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and according the gifts given them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship and governance of the Church.
Spiritual Responsibilities

BCP at 557, Letter of Institution of a Minister: [Minister] of the Church of God, you have been called to work together with your Bishop and fellow-[Ministers]….you are fully empowered and authorized to exercise the ministry, accepting its privileges ad responsibilities… Having committed yourself to this work, do not forget the trust of those who have chosen you. Care alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor. By your words and in your life, proclaim the Gospel, Love and service Christ’s people. Nourish them and strengthen them to glorify God in this life and in the life to come.
Spiritual Support for Vestrypersons

BCP, at 421 Form of Commitment to a Christian Service: “Almighty God, look with favor upon this person who has now reaffirmed his commitment to follow Christ and to serve in his name. Give him courage, patience and vision; and strengthen us all in our Christian vocation of witness to the world and of service to others, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen
Legal Responsibilities of Vestries

► Except as provided by the law of the State or Diocese, the Vestry shall be the legal representative and agent of the church in the conduct of the church’s affairs and its relations of the Parish to its Clergy (I.14 (b))

► It along with the Rector and Wardens shall constitute the corporation of the Parish (N.J.S.A. 16: 12-6)
Responsibility of Rectors

- Has full authority/responsibility for worship and all spiritual matters. (III.9.5 (a)(1))
- Has authority over use of all parish building and access thereto (III.9.5 (a)(2))
- Responsible for instruction in the faith. (III.9.5 (b)(1))
- Responsible for instruction in Christian Stewardship (III.9.5 (b)(2))
- Prepare persons for Baptism, Confirmation, Receipt and Reaffirmation (III.9.5 (b)(3) and ((4))
- Chairs vestry meeting (I.14.3)
- "Final authority in the administration of matters pertaining to music", but "shall seek assistance from persons skilled in music. Together they shall see that the music is appropriate..."(II.5)
Responsibility of Wardens

- Notify Bishop if Rector leaves and make provisions for Worship Service (III.17.1)

- Notify Bishop of proposed new rector by letter 30 days or more prior to election (III.17.2 and 3)

- Call Vestry meetings in the absence of rector (N.J.S.A. 12-8(b))

- In absence of rector, one must be elected a presiding officer of corporation (N.J.S.A. 16: 12-6)

- In absence of rector, one must be chosen to run Annual Meeting (N.J.S.A 16: 12-10)
Hypotheticals

- Church fails to pay salary to church employee and information is turned over to authorities;
- Church fails to conduct audit of finances and it is subsequently learned that treasurer used restricted funds to take trip to Hawaii;
- Church hires sexton, fails to do background check, sexton sexually assaults child in after-school program.