

*Holy Work In and Out of the Parish Church:
Reorienting Parish Leadership and Christian Service*

A reflection on the baptized person's cycle between renewal and apostolate

Michelle Heyne

The year is just getting started. There are new vestries in place at parishes across the country. In many churches, leaders are looking at the (still relatively) fresh crop of recruits and imagining how to fill slots in committees and how to get more parish work done with increasingly strained parish resources. It got me thinking about the qualifications for the job.

Here's the Vestry and Committee application form I would like to see:

- Do you make regular attendance at weekly Eucharist a priority in your life?
- Do you know how to say the Office and do you incorporate that into your daily spiritual practice in some way?
- Do you make time and space for reflection? For getting perspective on your life and listening carefully for where God is calling you?
- Are you able to listen respectfully, openly, and curiously to others? Do you hold your opinions lightly? Do you pursue the things that matter, especially when that exposes your own vulnerability?
- Do you see your primary Christian service as being the stuff of daily life—in your workplace, with family and friends, and in civic life? Do you understand a leadership role with the parish as being an extension of that service that not everyone is called to?
- If you answered no to any of these, are you curious about learning more? Would you like to increase your knowledge and skill for participating in the spiritual practices of the church and for enhancing your understanding of the role of the parish in forming Christians?
- If you answered yes to these—and especially to the last two—you may be a good candidate for membership on the Vestry or one of several committees we're forming. If you don't answer yes to these questions, it's likely parish leadership is not the role for you. It also sounds like we could do a better job as a parish in helping you understand the role of the church and its spiritual practices in your own spiritual life.

If this describes the approach your parish takes in selecting leaders, please contact me! I'd like to consider moving to your town. (If my husband or my rector is reading this: I'm only kidding. For the rest of you, my contact information appears elsewhere on the website.) If, on the other hand,

this seems a little inexplicable but you wonder why I suggest these things, or even if you think I'm just another idealistic church consultant divorced from "real life," read on...

I do a lot of work with parishes and parish leaders. I often work with people and places that are struggling with dwindling numbers and limited income; people who face difficult decisions and have real fears about what will happen to their parishes. They are often responsible for significant property, sometimes significant endowments, and they have serious concerns about the temporal management of the parish church. I think it's absolutely critical that they approach these matters with realism, skill, and the competencies needed to provide useful oversight. I also think that if the leaders of the parish church do not understand the business they're in—the formation of Christians—we've got a problem.

And if the leaders' own spiritual lives are an after-thought or seen as secondary to their *true* value as accountants/lawyers/contractors/investment advisors who will give the church helpful accounting/legal/building/financial advice as Vestry members, or Heaven forbid, the Treasurer¹, then we've got a serious problem.

In my secular work, I consult with financial services companies. Brokerage firms, investment advisors, even some hedge funds. I help them play by a set of extremely complex rules, and also try to help them identify the gifts and competencies they bring to the marketplace, as well as their own values and passions, and to align those with their actual behavior.

I see what I do on behalf of the church, as well as what I do to earn a living, as essential elements of my Christian vocation. The work I do with financial services companies is as much an expression of my identity as a baptized person as is the work I do training parish leaders. I don't talk about baptismal identity with corporate clients, but that identity is nonetheless present: along with time I spend with family and friends, it is the primary way I struggle to see Christ in others and to "grow into the full stature of Christ."

And what most feeds my ability to carry that vocation into the world, week after week, and day after day, is my participation in the Eucharist and in the daily prayers of the Church. I attend worship to renew and rediscover my identity as God's own and to restore the inner resources I need to go back out to do the work I have been given to do. I gather at coffee hour with fellow parishioners to experience the reality of Christian community, in its joys, sorrows, petty annoyances, and basic comforts—all the things that come of being present in and part of the Body of Christ as it is lived in my own parish. I participate in parish meetings, in formation classes, in the structures and processes of the church that provide me with a framework for understanding who I am and who God is calling me to become. *These things are why the parish church exists.*

¹ I served several long, lonely, grouchy years as a parish Treasurer, admittedly not always with the care required in the last part of my tenure. It is worthy, important, and conflict-fraught work. It is also drastically under-appreciated. Those who fill this role with cheerfulness and gladness of heart are truly the Saints among us. Those who simply do it competently are to be blessed and commended.

And all the while we are being gathered, broken, renewed, and sent, the parish needs to pay its bills, it needs to keep the roof from leaking, and it needs to make ongoing decisions—both routine and extraordinary—about its communal life. All of these tasks, both explicitly religious and explicitly administrative, require specific competencies. Not everyone has the gifts to lead or otherwise serve the church in any these areas, but most regular members can develop an understanding of the parish’s primary purpose of formation and develop their own capacity to practice the basic spiritual disciplines of the church.

What often happens, though, is that we create a false dichotomy that assumes a division between spiritual work and non-spiritual work, between our “Christian service” directly in support of the church and our Christian service in our daily lives. Serving on the Vestry or the Buildings & Grounds Committee is Christian service. Volunteering at a soup kitchen is Christian service. So is being an electrician. And being a dad, or a bus driver. All work can be performed well or poorly. All work requires some skill or disposition, which we may or may not possess. And to the extent we make explicit the relationship between parish life and worship and our identity as Christians in the world, our capacity to do our work as an expression of our baptism is enriched and expanded. Understanding this fundamental idea is critical for parish leaders and one that can be widely shared in the broader congregation by focusing on the renewal central to common life and the outpouring of service represented in the lives of members.

Sometimes, parishes will attempt to deal with this through the similar mistake of trying to “spiritualize” meetings by replacing agenda items with prayer, avoiding difficult conversations through unfocused “discernment,” or requiring all Vestry members to enroll in EFM. While it can be helpful to ground Vestry meetings in specific reminders of the church’s mission, it is better still to root the parish overall in the church’s mission.

Rather than spending energy adding discrete religious elements to a meeting, instead attend to building spiritual awareness and competence for spiritual practice in worship, formation opportunities, and the parish’s community structures. Teaching members of the Vestry how to give and receive useful feedback may be the most critical skill in Christian community they ever learn. Similarly, giving all members the chance to learn how to participate in the Eucharist could be the most important step they take toward a new sense of responsibility for their own spiritual lives.

The temptation to add on superficial religious elements to shift the character of administrative work is ultimately denying the basic truth that all the good work of holy people is holy work. Vestries function best when they attend to the tasks they have been given to do. They need to build or expand on the skills required for oversight, communication, governance, and decision-making. At the same time, leaders should work to encourage a climate that makes the spiritual formation of all members—whether on the Vestry or not—the most important thing it does.

The end of the work will be decided by our religious outlook: as we *are* so we *make*. It is the business of religion to make Christian people, and then our work will naturally be turned to Christian ends, because our work is the expression of ourselves. But the way in which the work is done is governed by no sanction except the good of the work itself; and religion has no direct connection with that, except to insist that the workman should be free to do his work well according to its own integrity.²

What becomes really tricky about all of this is that institutions have important practical needs, and the church is no exception. The natural tendency of any institution is to make those needs paramount. This becomes evident in statements made by parishes and dioceses that talk about service solely in terms of church-related functions or outreach projects and largely ignores the lives of its members as the primary place of service. It becomes evident in the frequent expression of frustration about how “it’s always the same small group of people who do everything around here,” and the related attempts to “get everyone involved.”

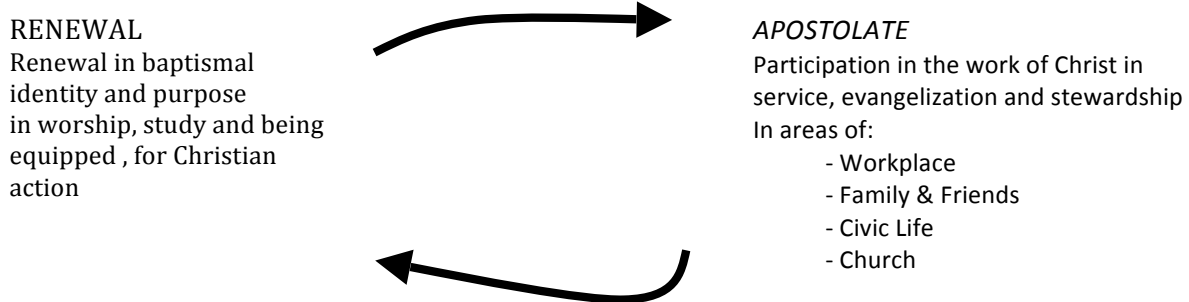
Some percentage of us will choose to express a significant part of our Christian vocation in work directly in support of the church. A larger group will give some time here and there in formal roles such as Vestry member, altar server, or working on a committee. Many will donate money and show up at parish meetings.

All of us need the space to simply show up to worship and so partake of the peace and refreshment—the spiritual food and drink—offered freely by the church as an instrument of God’s love and grace. If that becomes the institutional priority, it won’t magically make the limited numbers, the limited dollars, and the limited resources go away. But those who then choose to serve the church directly in leadership roles are much more likely to do so from a place of sustained nourishment and out of a sense of calling. In reorienting our priorities, we drastically improve the chances that their service, while challenging and at times exhausting, will not actually drain them dry.

² Dorothy L. Sayers. *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine*.

The Renewal – Apostolate Cycle

The Renewal - Apostolate Cycle is a way of describing a central dynamic of Christian life. The Cycle focuses our attention on the Christian’s movement between being renewed in baptismal identity and purpose and living as instruments of God’s love and grace in daily life. The Cycle is interested in both the individual’s movement and in the ways in which the parish church supports and facilitates that movement and in the ways in which the parish church supports and facilitates that movement. This is the primary task of any parish church.



A Cycle

The cycle is between a conscious and intentional attention to God, prayer life, our relationships, Christian formation **and** a subconscious reliance upon God as members of the Body of Christ, in the workplace, family, civic life and congregational life.

In that Cycle:

We need:	Which is helped by:	Which the parish helps by:
To accept our dependence on God	Openness to spiritual guidance	An emphasis in its life on worship; nothing comes before the Eucharist and Daily Office. Also, more attention to formation and spiritual growth than other programs or ministries.
To accept responsibility for ordering our spiritual life	Establishing a rule of life	Offering programs and guidance in creating, experimenting with, and revising a spiritual discipline.
To accept our interdependence with others in the Church	Life in Christian community, a parish church	Being a healthy and faithful parish church and by helping people relate to the parish community in ways appropriate to their personality and the parish’s capacities.

From *Fill All Things: The Spiritual Dynamics of the Parish Church*, © Robert A Gallagher, 2008