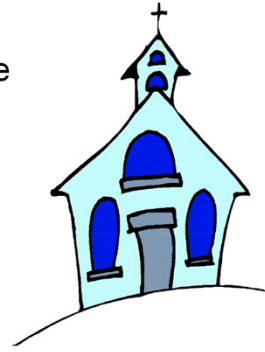


Habits, Norms and Expectations

Understanding a congregation's routines and norms can smooth one's entry into the system.



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Habits, Norms and Expectations - 1

Fresh Start

Talking Points

The young Christian community encountered differences of ritual and understanding when it sent missionaries to the Gentiles. God worked through his messengers and prophets to come up with solutions to these potentially divisive differences. The first step was to be able to talk about the differences and why they existed. So too, when we enter a new congregation we can encounter differences in routines and expectations. For our new relationship to work we need to be able to openly identify congregational habits, norms and expectations and to negotiate changes if needed. Open communication and prayer can help prevent misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

“But That’s The Way We’ve Always Done It!”

“Habit is habit and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs one at a time.”

Mark Twain

Habits, Norms and Expectations - 2

Fresh  Start

Talking Points

Congregations (like any organization) have certain things that define them – ways of doing or being that people want to remain constant. Sometimes these are deeply and obviously meaningful to an outsider such as being a historically black parish or having a reputation for outreach which is defined by a long-standing program of feeding the homeless. Sometimes the “norm” is less readily apparent or at least its significance is – for example using pita bread instead of wafers for communion. Regardless, attempts to change any of these routines – even when change is warranted – will meet with resistance.


Often these habits, norms and expectations are unspoken. Therefore it is easy for newcomers to inadvertently step on some of these beloved traditions.


In addition, as individuals we have our own habits, norms and expectations – and they may not be visible or known to the members of the congregation. When our habits, norms and expectations collide with those of the congregation (or individual members) misunderstandings can arise.

Name one habit, norm or expectation in your congregation.

Assumptions about How Things Are Done Arise From ...

- Traditions
- History
- Routines
- Expectations
- People's sense of worth/power



Habits, Norms and Expectations - 3
Fresh Start 

Talking Points

Traditions (e.g., the Christmas pageant, the Easter sunrise service) are an important – and often visible -- source of “the way things are done.”

History's contributions may be more obscure – the use of the modern form of the Lord's Prayer, for example, might have come from a gifted previous rector's teaching at the time of the Prayer Book revisions and the congregation may cling fiercely to that bit of liturgical history.

The sources for routines and expectations are even more hidden – routines because everyone simply “knows” that is how things are done (and written documentation is sparse) and expectations because people often don't express them clearly. A routine might have grown up, for example, around the rector buying the pita bread for communion on his way to church on Sunday morning (but no one tells the new rector about that until AFTER the first Sunday when no bread is available!). Or people might expect the rector to regularly attend all the adult education programs – and be hurt when the new rector doesn't show up.

Some assumptions are tied into people's sense of worth or power in the congregation. Knowing that Mrs. Smith has ALWAYS organized the annual parish dinner is an important fact to be aware of before appointing the annual dinner committee!

Describe one tradition, custom or routine you would identify as “sacred” and untouchable. What is the origin of that tradition, custom or routine?

The Christmas pageant?

Church suppers every month?

The decorations for Feast Days?

Staff meetings every Tuesday morning?

Never having staff meetings?

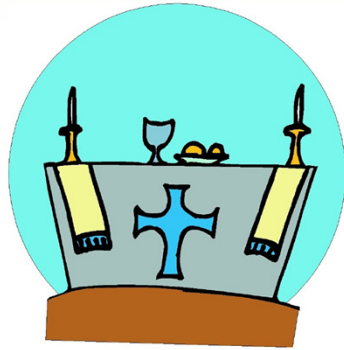
Key Areas Are:

Liturgy / Worship
Music
Programs and Structure
Staff

Talking Points

Changes in liturgy and worship, music, programs and structure are the ones most likely to bump against habits and norms in a congregation. What are the congregation's non-negotiable habits and norms in these areas? Let's look at each in turn.

Liturgy / Worship



- Rite used
- Length and formality
- Style of dress
- Space
- Participation
- Degree of ritual
- Children
- Special traditions

Habits, Norms and Expectations - 5

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Liturgical habits involve things like what rite is used, how formal or informal the service is, etc. What happens during worship? Are congregants casually or more formally dressed? Is there a lot of body movement or call and response during the service? How is the space arranged? Does it get adapted for different uses? To what extent does the space reinforce the formality or casualness of the service? Do people talk before and/or after the service? How participatory is the worship? Who participates – everyone or just a select few? Are children involved in the service and, if so, how? Are there special traditions around given feast days (a patron saint's festival, an Easter sunrise service, Christmas pageant) – what are they?

Facilitate a general sharing of observations.

Music



- Style
- Choirs
- Participation
- Diversity
- Instruments
- Special traditions

Habits, Norms and Expectations - 6

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Closely related to liturgy and worship is music. What style of music is used? How many choirs are there? Who participates in them? What about instruments? Is there diversity of style among worship services or within a given service? Are there special traditions (e.g. a trumpet-led parade on Rogation Sunday)?

Distribute Handout 1 and give participants a few minutes to jot down their responses, then have them share these with a partner or small group or lead a large group discussion. If the discussion occurs in small groups, debrief in the large group to share observations.

Programs and Structure



- Christian formation
- Outreach
- Social
- Participation
- Membership

Habits, Norms and Expectations - 7

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Looking at the types of programs, how committees are structured, and who participates in both governance and the program activities will tell you more about a congregation's habits and norms. What kinds of programs for Christian formation, outreach, and social activities seem to "have a life of their own"? How are they organized? Who participates in committees? Who participates in the programs – are there assumptions about participation or membership? Are certain people "always" in charge of some events? Do assignments to head certain activities or committees rotate or are people there "for life"?

Distribute Handout 2 and give participants a few minutes to jot down their responses, then have them share these with a partner or small group or lead a large group discussion. If the discussion occurs in small groups, debrief in the large group to share observations.

Staff

- Schedule
- Duties
- Authority
- Degree of formality
- Degree of collegiality
- Employment restrictions



Habits, Norms and Expectations - 8

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Parish staff are used to the management style of the previous clergyman. Established norms around schedules (including vacation, sick leave, and other time off), duties, and degree of authority all form expectations for what are called “working conditions and environment.” Less formal habits such as the degree of familiarity in speech (is everyone called by his/her first name?), casualness of dress, and extent of collegiality in working relationships also form part of the office culture. Some parishes have very strict rules about members NOT being part of the paid staff – others are more relaxed in their attitudes toward this issue.

Distribute Handout 3 and give participants a few minutes to jot down their responses, then have them share these with a partner or small group or lead a large group discussion. If the discussion occurs in small groups, debrief in the large group to share observations.

Another Thing about Expectations ...

They can be about an individual's:

- Tasks
- Performance
- Responsibility

Habits, Norms and Expectations - 9

Fresh Start 

Talking Points

Both clergy and lay leaders have expectations of each other regarding how work gets done – and some of these expectations are viewed as non-negotiable indeed. For example, is it assumed that the rector will be present at all parish social gatherings? Do clergy expect lay leaders to do written reports and provide handouts at the annual meeting? Are parishioners expected to make an appointment, or is it their habit is to simply “drop in”?

Distribute Handout 4. Have participants jot down their responses, and then share them in a small group or lead a large group discussion. If discussion is in small groups, debrief in the large group so the groups can share their observations.

Not Everyone May Agree on Habits, Norms and Expectations

Individual – Generational – History with Congregation –
Religious or Cultural Heritage



Habits, Norms and Expectations - 10

Fresh Start

Talking Points

While some habits, norms and expectations may be congregation-wide, there are probably differences of opinion among members about what is important to keep. These differences can be driven by individual preferences (“I really don’t care whether we use Rite I or Rite II.”), by generational differences (“I know high tea is a Christmas tradition, but couldn’t we have a pizza night instead?”), or length of time with the congregation (“You can replace the memorial cross above the altar, it has no special significance to me.”). Religious or cultural heritage can also be an influence, particularly when you have a large group which has come from another culture (for example, immigrants from another Anglican tradition may have very different expectations of the clergy than those raised in the American Episcopal church).

What mixed messages about what is “routine” or “the norm” does the congregation send? Are there large subgroups in your congregation who come from another Anglican tradition or from another denomination? How do their expectations vary from those of the “cradle Episcopalians”? Figuring out the formal and informal power structure is a necessary adjunct to identifying habits, norms and expectations.

Facilitate a general discussion of these differences in habits, norms, and expectations – and the source(s) of these differences.

“... clergy ... carry around ... a cloud of fantasies and images from other people’s minds. It isn’t always easy to keep the truth about yourself in view when you’re surrounded by the legacy of generations of stories and portraits of what it is like to be a cleric. And every generation produces a few fresh refinements of the fantasy.”

Rowan Williams

Habits, Norms and Expectations - 11

Fresh Start 

Talking Points

Note: This is an optional slide to be used with clergy-only groups.


We, of course, have our own habits and norms that come from our personal history, traditions, education, and preferences. Sometimes these can conflict with those of our new congregation. For example, we may feel strongly that children need to be incorporated in the service while the congregation has traditionally kept children in Sunday School during the service time.

Respond to the same questions about yourself that you just answered for your congregation. Are there differences between what you view as the “norm” and what the congregation does?

Distribute Handout 5 and have participants jot down their responses, then share them in a small group or lead a general discussion in the large group. If discussions occur in small groups, debrief the groups’ observations in the large group.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams’ quote comes from his Foreword to Joy Carroll Wallis’ book, The Woman Behind the Collar: The Pioneering Journey of an Episcopal Priest (New York, NY, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004)

How Do You Uncover Habits, Norms and Expectations?



- Observe
- Interview
- Research
- Ask

Habits, Norms and Expectations - 12

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Note: This is an optional slide to use with clergy-only groups.

If you are unsure about your congregation's habits, norms and expectations there are a number of ways to uncover them.

Observe – how does worship unfold, how are people dressed, what happens with the children, what form of the Lord's Prayer is used? How do committees seem to function? What do people do when they need to see you? Be observant and document what you see.

Interview the Vestry, the Altar Guild, the Choir, the Sunday School teachers etc. with a set of prepared questions or hold focus groups to get at the history and expectations of groups of people. Be aware that some individuals may be more vocal than others, but not necessarily be representative of the congregation as a whole (or even a subgroup within it).

Research – read through all the newsletters or orders of service or Vestry minutes to get a grasp of the culture of the congregation.

Ask – when something comes up that you don't understand, ask about it. Communication is always the best strategy – how will you find out about your congregation's habits, norms and expectations? Who can you talk to? What documents might you want to research?

Even With the Best of Intentions and Processes ...

There will still be misunderstandings ...

or ...

Some of our expectations of each other
will be incongruent.

Habits, Norms and Expectations - 13

Fresh  Start

Talking Points

Of course misunderstandings, large and small, are inevitable. Neither the best of techniques nor the best of intentions will prevent us from stepping on someone's toes.

Especially when things are changing, missteps can occur. This is normal!

And as with all of life, we find that there is not a perfect fit between our expectations and that of the congregation. In this circumstance both lay leaders and clergy need to be willing to bend, and usually they are. None of these differences are bad ... they just are differences!

When in Doubt, Communicate



- Speak for self
- Listen
- Arrange for feedback

Habits, Norms and Expectations - 14

Fresh Start

Talking Points

When misunderstandings arise, honest communication and feedback can go a long way to preventing them from escalating. Listening to what the other person has to say and gaining an understanding of the values behind the norms and expectations is key. What kind of regular feedback mechanisms are already in place where assumptions about expectations can be checked? If none, what ideas do you have for introducing them into the congregational system?

Hold a large group discussion about creating opportunities for getting and giving feedback. Capture the ideas on a flip chart.

What questions has this discussion raised for you? Are there things you need to do?

Note: Renegotiating Roles and Expectations is a logical follow-on to either this module or the one on Role Clarity.