The Consent Calendar

By Ron Byrd, part of the Vestry Papers issue on ‘Reboot’ Your Vestry (January 2016)

Have you ever asked a member of your congregation to consider joining the vestry? If so, it’s likely this person asked, “When are the vestry meetings and how long are they?” The first part of the question is easily answered: “Oh, during the first orientation meeting for the newly seated vestry, members decide together the best day and time for all members to meet.” Your answer to the second question, regarding the length of meetings, may often be hedged by saying something similar to my response: “Well we have good meetings, and they’re not too long.”

Perhaps the most discouraging complaint by vestry members is that meetings are long.

Long ago our vestry set a goal of limiting vestry meetings to ninety minutes. We usually failed. Over the years we struggled to accomplish our business in under two hours. Typically, to avert a meeting lasting more than two hours, the chair would limit discussion or cut-off debate and ask for some hurried action by the body, usually to set the matter aside until the next meeting or to refer it back to a subcommittee for further review.

It was frustrating. We knew a different approach was needed.

What I learned at General Convention

This past summer I had the honor of serving as a deputy at the 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Most deputies are assigned to a committee for the purpose of considering and approving resolutions before sending to the full House of Deputies for a vote. It was my privilege to be assigned to the Dispatch of Business team. I use the term team because Dispatch of Business’ function was different than many of the other committees. Our responsibility was to review, push, and monitor all legislation as it moved through the various committees to the floor of the House. Our job was to schedule the daily legislative agenda for the House. In 2015 the House of Deputies passed a special rule of order calling for all legislation, with a limited few exceptions such as electing a new primate and presiding bishop, to be placed on the consent calendar. At past conventions all resolutions had to go to the full House unless intentionally placed on the consent calendar. The old procedural rule left the determination of which items to add to the consent calendar to the discretion of the Dispatch of Business team, principally the responsibility of the chairperson.

Under the former system, in the closing days of the convention, the House of Deputies found it challenging to accomplish all of its work. Following this new rule of order the House of Deputies was more efficient, able to dispatch many resolutions more quickly thus allowing more time to focus on resolutions that were of high priority and greater importance. Because of this change to the special rule of order, during the final days of the convention our Dispatch of Business team was concerned there might not be any legislative business to hold the House of Deputies in session until the end of the convention.

In the thousands of meetings I’d participated in my professional life before the 2015 General Convention, I can’t remember ever using a consent calendar. This experience taught me how useful and effective a consent calendar can be for improving efficiency and managing meeting time and improving efficiency. Thinking this approach might help my vestry, I did some
additional research on using consent calendars. I discovered that Robert's Rule of Order has long provided for this parliamentary procedure as a good way to dispose of business that is noncontroversial or routine. I decided to try this approach with my vestry in the hope of meeting our goal of keeping our meeting time to ninety minutes.

**Consent calendars**

Using a consent calendar to handle nonactionable or routine matters in a meeting can shave thirty minutes or more off your vestry meeting time. Vestries that have employed the consent calendar approach to meeting management have found it an effective way towards improving their team's productivity. The genius of using the consent calendar is that it provides more time for the team to focus on actions and results that will move the community towards accomplishing its mission.

As a stand-alone item, the consent calendar is typically the second item on the vestry agenda, immediately following the opening prayer or reflective meditation. The consent calendar includes organizing all reports and perfunctory matters before the vestry into one single agenda line item and without discussion a vote is taken to approve agenda items as a group. Traditional agenda items that may be appropriate for the consent calendar include: minutes of the previous meeting, rector's annual housing declaration, grammatical or clarifying changes to bylaws, treasurer reports, project or program progress reports, the priest-in-charge and warden reports. The consent calendar is ideal for reports and other agenda items which are informational only or that require no discussion or debate.

For the consent calendar to be effective, all items on the calendar must be made available to members well in advance of a vestry meeting. With today’s technology, this is easily accomplished through email. (Distributing documents before meeting via email has an added advantage of saving paper, copier toner, and administrative time.) If a vestry member, after reading materials placed on the consent calendar, has questions, concerns or believes a particular matter requires discussion, before the meeting begins he or she can ask the item be removed from the consent calendar and placed on the regular agenda.

With the implementation of a consent calendar, your vestry will have more time to address pending actionable items and explore new opportunities. The consent calendar will focus your vestry on business that matters that are of importance to the life and health of the parish and can also serve to reduce the time members spend in vestry meetings.

**Our Experience at St. Katherine’s**

The vestry agreed to try the consent calendar model and, for some months now, has been using a version that works for us. All reports, including financial reports and the minutes from the previous vestry meeting, are emailed to members at least a week before our meeting. Over time, we've added additional items to the consent calendar. A first for us was the decision to use the consent calendar approach at our recent annual meeting; I'm pleased to report it was well received.

**Try This:**
Interested in learning more about consent agendas and if they might be a good fit for your vestry? The resource list at the end of this article is a good place to start. For the consent agenda model to work:
All vestry members must agree to adopt a consent agenda practice.

The vestry should craft and approve a policy of what may or may not be included in the consent portion of the agenda.

The vestry should also craft and approve a policy of how to move items to and from the overall consent agenda.

For a consent agenda to work, it is important that all the reports and items on the agenda are identified in advance and materials sent to members in a timely manner, giving all members time to read the material before coming to the meeting as well as time to submit and changes or corrections so that members also receive corrected copy in advance so they have time to review the updated material.

Ron Byrd serves as rector of St. Katherine’s Church in Williamston, Michigan. In 2011, Ron and St. Katherine’s developed and successfully launched the Forster Woods Day Center, a day care facility that provides assistance to persons living with dementia and other physical and mental impairments.

Ron is also lead consultant for the Episcopal Church Foundation’s Vital Teams program. This program initiative includes curriculum development and training, encouraging partnerships and advocacy support and the creation and implementation of tools to assist congregations in selecting collaborative leaders.

Prior to becoming an Episcopal priest in 2007, Ron was employed for over 20 years in executive management and leadership positions at four Fortune 500 companies. Ron is a certified dementia practitioner and hold degrees in marketing, management, finance, and business administration.

Resources

- 2015 General Convention House Deputies Revised Rules of Order: Resolution A152
- “Consent Agendas: Sample” ECF Vital Practices Your Turn
- Consent Agenda guide, BoardStar
- The Roberts Rules of Order Article 11-A The Order of Business Meetings (You'll find “Consent and Priority Agendas” at the end of Article 11-A)
- “Using the Consent Agenda” by Phil Kenkel, Bill Fitzwater Cooperative Center Chair, Oklahoma State University

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