

Nurturing faithful stewards: 11 things to remember

A spiritual and practical guide to fundraising (part 2)

BY ROSEMARY C. MITCHELL



While I was attending a recent conference about church finances, a heated debate broke out in one of the workshops. After hearing the rate at which one participant's congregation was spending endowment funds to support mission, many others began chastising him for his congregation's risky depletion of funds. Exasperated by the direction of the conversation, another participant pointed a finger at the now contrite speaker and exploded, "YOU are talking about building the kingdom of God; WE are talking about maintaining an institution!"

And so it goes. We live in the "already but not yet" of church finance: Do we prayerfully trust that the Lord will provide for all our needs? Or do we use the good sense the Lord gave us and live within our current means? Every leader in every church is having this conversation.

It is a conversation that can easily become derailed by worldly concerns and unhealthy theologies. Here are 11 considerations for getting back on track.

Before you tackle any of these points, however, remember Meister Eckhart's famous quote: "If the only prayer you say in your life is 'thank you,' that is enough." Suppose this quote was, every Sunday, on the front cover of your worship bulletin or projected on a screen. There are so many demands on the lives of those who take the time to attend worship. To begin by meditating on the gracious blessings of God is to focus on why we have made the effort and why we give. All we have is by God's grace. Our generous gifts are a response to a generous God.

1. Remember who I am and whose I am. Everything I have and everything I am is a gift from God and belongs to God. My gifts are not *my* investment. My gifts are *my thank you* to God's creation of my life. I am a steward of that gift, nothing more.

2. I want you to engage my heart, mind, and spirit for giving. I am much more than a checking account. I want to be fully engaged, and I want my involvement to have meaning. God has given me gifts of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. I want to utilize these gifts to determine what and how I give. I expect an honest conversation about all aspects of my life, money being just one.

3. I am a member of the body of Christ. In secular fundraising, we must be prepared to respond to the question "What's in it for me?" What will the donor receive for this gift? It's a determining factor for a lot of charitable giving and philanthropy. In the religious world, we don't like this question. It seems selfish, and it often is. But we must meet people where they are and so must take this question seriously. The challenge is to help people see, over time, their presence within the body of Christ, a presence that means when "one member suffers, all suffer together with it" and when "one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). We are, in other words, to help members imagine themselves as part of a larger community in whose well-being they have a stake.

The task is twofold: First, be clear about the mission of the church. Is your church engaged in ministry as Jesus directed: healing the sick and casting out the demons of oppression? Develop an "elevator speech" that says what you're doing and why you're doing it, all in under a minute or two. Second, convey the importance and urgency of your ministry and remind your members that their gifts make all the difference.

Remind them that God will not test us on our theological orthodoxy, our community standing and prestige, our income level, or even our church attendance. The realm of God is inherited by those who have been the hands and feet of Christ, who have cared for and ministered to the

hungry, the sick, the naked, the lost, and the imprisoned (Matt. 25:34–40).

4. I hope to grow in grace and wisdom . . . whatever my age or capacity for giving. Giving statistics in the United States consistently report that the most generous donors are those with the lowest household incomes. Don't just go after the big donors. Give thanks for every gift. Make the person who places a single dollar bill in the offering plate feel special and valued.

5. I expect respect. Talking about money is not always comfortable, but it can always be respectful. You do not know another person's financial situation, so don't make assumptions about their relative wealth or poverty and what that means for their capacity to give. Leave your judgments at the door.

Consider this approach: Request an appointment with every member of your session to talk about giving. This is not a conversation about the person's particular gift but about giving. When you request the appointment, clearly state that you are coming to *ask for advice*. Here are some questions you might ask: How did you learn about giving? Why do you give to the church? How do you describe generosity? Listen carefully to their responses, and take notes. After completing all the interviews, consider compiling the

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responses into a report or series of articles for the congregation.

6. I want to be part of something that makes a difference! One of the most important (and often neglected) things a congregation can do is communicate the impact of giving. Tell me in specific terms how my money is creating a better world. Remind me of what it means to belong to a community of people holding each other up when we falter. Help me see how being a part of that community brings hope to a hurting, fearful, lonely, disillusioned world.

7. I want to be in relationship with others who care. I don't just want to write a check. I want to get to know the other people who are involved in this mission, and I want to know the people whom this mission is serving—not as stereotyped objects of charity but as complex human beings who have stories to tell and lessons to teach.

Create opportunities for members to talk about why they give to the church. It is inspirational for others to hear those stories.

8. I'm not sure I can give what you expect. We live in a time of fearfulness and perceived scarcity. The truth is that, for most of us, there has never been a good time to give. There are always job layoffs on the horizon, college funds to save

for, and hospital bills to pay. And for many it's just a question of whether they'll be able to afford to eat. This needs to be acknowledged publicly. But it also needs to be said that, as people of faith, we live in the promise of abundance. It may indeed be a difficult time to give, but it is always the right time to remember that God is good and that each is blessed to be a blessing for others.

9. I want to trust you. Trust is built on faithful relationships: I know you. You know me. You may know my family. We are present for each other's most important events. We are responsible to and for one another. And that includes financial management and reporting. When trust is destroyed, it can be rebuilt, but it will take time and consistent faithfulness in words and actions. Communication that is timely, accurate, and honest is a critical component of building a trusting relationship.

10. I want *what* I give to be difficult, not *how* I give. Giving should ask a lot of us. It shouldn't be easy; it should require sacrifice—at least when it comes to how much we give and to whom. But when it comes to *how* we give (such as cash in an offering plate), giving should be easy and convenient. All congregations should have a way for members to give online, safe in the knowledge that their information is protected.



11. How much should I give? I intentionally made this question the last point. The reason is that, if all the previous points are deeply contemplated, there is a good chance this question will not be asked.

“Life itself is stewardship,” says Robert Wood Lynn. “To have is to owe, not own.”

It is an especially important reminder in the midst of a crisis of meaning, a felt lack of connection between faith and money within a church that claims to be steward of them both. If a congregation is failing in fundraising, it's not ultimately because of a lack of strategy (though that may contribute); it's because of a lack of vision, a meager faith that claims an hour on Sunday morning instead of an entire life devoted to following Jesus in every radical way.

Fix the vision, and you'll fix the money problem.

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