Stewardship Ministry: It Doesn’t Get Any Better Than This

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When August rolls around, many leaders in the church begin to turn their attention to preparations for the Fall annual response program in their church—also known as the Fall Stewardship or Pledge Campaign. As many of you know, I dislike the idea of running an annual stewardship appeal as if it were a bake sale, attempting to convince people to support our church like it’s just another non-profit or charity. While we do “compete” (if you will) with other non-profits for people’s “charitable dollars,” let me make it plain: the Church is not a charity.

We are the Church—you are the Church: the Body of Christ assembled for worship, for outreach in Christ’s name, for formation of persons into the fullness of Christ, who then learn their spiritual giftedness and use it for the spread of the Good News and the advancement of God’s reign in the world. All baptized persons comprise the Church. No charity comes even close to that kind of identification with a cause—the cause of Christ.

Ministry’s Financial Reality

As much as I wish that everyone would give generously to their church out of their own sense of gratitude to God and their own practice of stewardship, most people in church are not quite there yet. Still, the Church requires financial resources—money—to do the work of ministry in the world, to prepare and shape all baptized persons for ministry, and to send people out into the world week-by-week, from Sunday to Sunday, to serve the world in Jesus’ name. In his remarkable little book, “A Spirituality of Fundraising,” the late Henri Nouwen says:

Fundraising is, first and foremost, a form of ministry. It is a way of announcing our vision and inviting other people into our mission… [it is] also always a call to conversion. And this call comes to both those who seek funds and those who have funds. Whether we are asking for money or giving money we are drawn together by God, who is about to do a new thing through our collaboration (pp. 3-4).

Congregations must have a clear, compelling vision that guides their efforts and actions in ministry and to which we can invite people’s participation and support. A compelling vision is the most important factor that inspires giving. What is your vision, your compelling mission that inspires your people to serve and give? Without a definitive answer to these questions, our efforts at garnering the resources necessary to do our work of ministry will fall short, depending only on people’s good will giving, rather than their converted minds and inflamed hearts driving their generosity—sometimes even sacrificial giving—for the right vision, the most compelling mission.

Regardless of where you are in your plans for your annual response program, begin now to remind people of your church’s vision, your compelling mission. Keep your “why” in front of people and tell stories of how you have accomplished elements of that vision. Make the connection for people that their generous giving—giving from the heart—changes lives and show examples or tell stories of how their giving changes lives. People want to know that their giving matters; show them how it does. Make these stories not just a part of the fall program, but sprinkle these stories of transformation in your communications and announcements throughout the year. And thank people: “Without your generous giving, your financial support of this congregation, these things would never have happened. Thank you. Thank you for your generosity, for your unselfish giving. God bless you.” How hard is that? And yet even hearing that can mean so much to people; a note expressing it goes even further.

“Not What I Signed Up For”

Sometimes I hear from clergy that this type of talk about raising funds for ministry is not what they signed up for. I get that. In the blush of discernment and amid a growing sense of call, few of us who are ordained ever gave serious thought to some of the practical aspects of parish ministry: leaky roofs, the occasional disgruntled member, vestry meetings (“Every month? Seriously?”), and church finances, particularly stewardship—fundraising. To that, I ask: “Well, what did you sign up for? Was it not to help people be transformed? To be changed, converted?” Well, what could be more life-transforming than to convert people from a life of fear about money, a paralyzing sense of scarcity, to a life of gratefulness and gratitude to God, and generosity in giving as a response to all God’s blessings (perhaps starting with ourselves and our own fears about money)? As preachers and teachers, we have the privilege to help people do this, to overcome money fears and realize the joy and fulfillment that comes from being a generous giver to the church’s mission.

Free To Ask Without Fear

If you believe in your church and its vision for mission, then what more holy work is there than to help garner the financial resources necessary to accomplish that mission? Let me tell you: the Stewardship ministry is one of the best ministries to be involved in because of the impact the success of that ministry will have on the church and its community, the result of it fulfilling its mission. It doesn't get any better than this. When we engage people in a vision-oriented conversation, in a mission driven conversation, asking for money is a joy and privilege, as much as it is a joy and privilege to say “Yes” to someone who asks you to give.

I draw on a quote from Henri Nouwen to conclude, knowing he says things better than I ever could:

“As a form of ministry, fundraising is as spiritual as giving a sermon, entering a time of prayer, visiting the sick, or feeding the hungry. So fundraising has to help us with our conversion, too. Are we willing to be converted from our fear of asking, our anxiety about being rejected or feeling humiliated, our depression when someone says “No, I’m not going to get involved in your project”? When we have gained the freedom to ask without fear, to love fundraising as a form of ministry, then fundraising will be good for our spiritual life.” (Nouwen, 6-7.)


This article first appeared on August 8, 2013 on: http://www.azdiocese.org/dfc/newsdetail_2/3160947