

Connecting Stewardship with Thanks

By Hunt Priest

Emmanuel Episcopal Church is a well-established, stable congregation in an affluent island community on Lake Washington between Seattle and Bellevue. And like many mainline congregations, we are a congregation that needs to be more responsive to the spiritual needs of a new generation of children and their parents. Sometimes that simply means reminding people of why it is we gather and why it is we support our congregation with offerings of money, time and talents.



One of our stewardship goals in the last few years has been to deepen the spiritual connections people make with the financial offerings they make to Emmanuel's ministry. In other words, our gifts to the church are different that our gifts to United Way or other charities. We are a community. Our striving toward this goal has been reflected in the materials we produce for the Fall Campaign, in the ways we thank parishioners for their pledges and, most recently, in our quarterly giving records.

Giving records that don't look like a bank statement.

A couple years ago one of our parish leaders told me that the giving record she received from Emmanuel, as well as those she had received from other churches where she had been a member over the years, were blasé and lacked any information about how her offerings were actually being used. "They look exactly like my bank statement," she said, "and consequently they end up on a stack of other papers that will need attention at some point." She noted that other groups she and her family support often include with their mailings an engaging photo and some information about who has benefited from the work of the organization.

So, now, in addition to a generic thank-you sentence on the statement itself, with instructions to contact the bookkeeper if there's an error, we also include a 8 ½ x 11 "newsletter" with a color photo or two of life in our church community or ministry projects we have supported or participated. Under the photos is a paragraph making the connection between our parishioners' offering of time, talent and treasure and the work we are doing together. Not only do these letters go out to parishioners quarterly, but the end-of-year giving records that go to all who have given money also include a similar newsletter, but with a more end-of-year focus.

The end-of-year giving records included a photograph from a parish-wide picnic. One of the real gifts of this congregation is that there are a wide variety of age groups worshipping and working together on projects. The photo was of an older and younger member enjoying each other's company, with a written reminder of this aspect of Emmanuel's common life.

The newsletter after the First Quarter of this year will include a photo a youth group trip to a nearby ski area. In addition to reminding people to "catch up" if they need to and thanking them for their generosity, we will make it clear we are able to add a paid staff position to lead our children's ministry efforts this year because of parishioner generosity of both money and time.

Personal thank-you phone calls

Another innovation that has been well received is the practice of personal phone calls from members of the Stewardship Ministry to pledging members. Once we receive a pledge card, the bookkeeper notifies the leader of the ministry, who then divides the names up among the group. Even if the caller reaches an answering machine, it is not unusual for the parishioner to call back and thank the person for the call. New connections are made, people truly feel appreciated and part of something larger, and realize that their pledge card is not dropping into a big bucket of other cards, but is instead noticed and appreciated. Of course, the amount of the pledge itself remains confidential.

The Rev. Hunt Priest is rector of St. Peter's Church in Savannah, Georgia. He is grateful to work with the committed group of lay leaders who make up the Stewardship Ministry.