

Church Stewardship in a Time of Economic Uncertainty by Patricia (Patsy) R. Bjorling

It would be an understatement to say we are living in unsettling times. There is probably not a single segment of society—from individuals to institutions—that is not experiencing a measure of fear and anxiety about the financial future. As Christians our response must focus both on the spiritual and the practical. A spiritual response is needed because, as the rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Ellicott City, MD recently observed, "The current crisis is a spiritual crisis of amnesia, of forgetting who we are and whose we are." Giving and stewardship are a faith response, and giving and stewardship suffer when our trust in God wavers.

Achieving better-than-normal stewardship results in less-than-normal times also requires practical responses. We must move stewardship to the center of our lives together as Christians, and we must make sure we are constantly educating about stewardship and using best practices in how we carry out the "mechanics" of annual stewardship efforts.

Here are ten "tips" for approaching stewardship during a time such as this.

- 1) Pray intentionally for generous hearts. So frequently we approach the vital undertaking of raising funds for ministry without asking for the help of the Holy Spirit. Nothing is impossible with God's help, and if your vestry, your prayer team, your staff, and your church's members are all praying for abundant funding for the work of the church, hearts will be opened, new resources will be uncovered, and unexpected possibilities will be revealed.
- 2) Teach abundance. The media bombards us daily with stories of economic gloom and doom, and it is only natural that people are feeling anxious. The messages of the world encourage us to focus on scarcity, and worry about not having enough makes us blind to the abundance that is all around us. A time of economic crisis is an excellent time to study anew the stories in the Bible that reveal the providential nature of God. How are we like the Israelites in the wilderness crying out for bread and water? How are we like the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field?
- 3) Be an example to your parishioners. If the church's first response to declining revenues is to cut the budget—and to publicize the fact—then the individual's first impulse may be to cut or simply not to make a pledge. In effect the church is saying to the parishioners, we don't really trust that God is going to provide for the ministries our church feels called by God to undertake. That gives 'permission' for parishioners to give in to their own fears of not having enough. Instead, if budget cuts seem the only solution, hold a congregational meeting and present the problem to the church's members. Let them help think through what should be cut (and the church's pledge to the wider church should *not* be included in the list of possible cuts). Chances are when people understand the real impact of budget cuts on ministries they value, they will find ways to give more sacrificially.
- 4) Emphasize the act of pledging and proportional giving as the goal of the annual stewardship campaign, as opposed to specific dollar amounts. Pledging is a tangible demonstration of our personal commitment to being workers in God's field. Pledging is also a way of recalling God's

abundance in our lives and reaffirming our belief that in spite of the economic circumstances in which the world finds itself, we have faith in God's love and in God's promises.

5) Be aware that drops in pledge amounts, or no pledges at all, may be a sign that individuals are experiencing great stress in their lives. Often people who may be perfectly willing to ask for help with family and other personal issues are too embarrassed or upset to seek pastoral care when financial difficulties are the root of their problems. We cannot support one another as Christian brothers and sisters in times of financial distress if we don't know about the distress. It is imperative that pastors at least be given information about changes in pledging habits so that appropriate pastoral care can be initiated. Ideally, the minister—as shepherd of the flock—should have full access to pledging information.

6) Provide a graceful way for people to make changes in pledge amounts during the year if necessary. Most churches let parishioners know that pledge amounts may be changed at any time, but frequently the process offered for this requires a potentially embarrassing phone call to someone in the church office or a fellow parishioner. Instead, consider creating a 'pledge change form' that is always available in the church narthex or in a literature rack. Individuals can pick up the form, fill it out, and mail it in without having to talk to anyone. This allows 'face-saving' for someone who may already be feeling badly about having to lower a pledge. And remember that pledge change forms can also be used to *increase* pledges during the year.

7) Make it easier for your church members to give out of their abundance—'off the top' instead of from what is leftover. "*Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine,*" we are admonished in Proverbs 3: 9-10. Old Testament cultures were agricultural, so the people brought crops and animals for their first fruits offerings. By giving to God the best of what they had produced, Old Testament believers were acknowledging that God was the owner of the harvest. In our modern society our fruits tend to be financial, and it takes more discipline to give our first fruits. We can encourage first fruits giving by implementing Electronic Funds Transfer as a method of giving in our congregations. The individual simply fills out a form specifying how much they wish to pledge over a period of time, and the gifts are transferred to the church directly from the individual's bank account. The cost to the church can be no more than \$4.50 a year per person for monthly pledge payments; the peace of mind and joy the individual giver experiences as a result of such first fruits giving can be immeasurable.

8) If your stewardship results are not what you would like them to be, make changes in how you "do" stewardship in your congregation. Relying on "how we've always done things" when it comes to teaching stewardship and asking for pledges is not a recipe for different results. Stellar stewardship results in the local church setting require an intentional year-round stewardship education that connects giving to the spiritual journey. The annual stewardship campaign requires its own plan, and such a plan is not a substitute for stewardship education throughout the year. Stewardship should not be a synonym for funding the annual budget, but rather an understanding that a Christian's life must be Christ-centered rather than self-centered. Stewardship requires a conversion of the heart that is the result of a lifelong journey—with each person at a different place on the path.

9) Give thanks! Just as stewardship campaigns should begin with and be supported by prayer, stewardship milestones during the year should be commemorated with thanksgiving and praise. Does your church give God public thanks for the gift commitments received through the pledge campaign *and* for the specific givers? Does your church give thanks for the Holy Spirit's role in stimulating generosity of spirit? Does your church remind its members that they are richly blessed? It would be wonderful to schedule at least four Sundays during the year for special prayers of thanksgiving for the all of resources God has seen fit to provide for the church through its members. After all, many churches send giving 'statements' to their parishioners four times a year!

10) Ask for help! The Connecticut Conference can help your congregation rethink its stewardship efforts and create exciting new plans for stewardship education and your annual campaign. You can also receive assistance in thinking through how to fund new ministries, starting and building endowments, encouraging planned gifts, and planning capital campaigns. All of this help is free to your congregation, is offered to you on-site, and is customized to address your congregation's unique situation, history, and goals.

To ask for stewardship assistance, simply email Patricia Bjorling, Associate Conference Minister for Generosity Ministries, at: patsyb@ctucc.org, or call: 866.367.2822 x123 (in the Hartford area: 860.761.7123).