

STEWARDSHIP WEBINAR
Episcopal Parish Network
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Church of the Holy Communion
Memphis, Tennessee

Good afternoon.

My name is Sandy Webb, and it has been the honor of my professional life to serve as Rector of Church of the Holy Communion in Memphis, Tennessee, for almost twelve years. Holy Communion shares the experience of daily life with St. Mary's Episcopal School, which brings more than 800 girls between Age 2 and Grade 12 to our campus every day.

Background

A little bit of background...

Holy Communion was in a statistical low spot when I came to serve with them twelve years ago, and I was an untested rector. (Though, what I lacked in experience, I made up for in self-confidence!) We have worked together in the years since to reverse our trajectory of congregational decline, to increase annual giving by more than 49%, and to grow our endowment by more than 45%.

We also partnered with our friends at St. Mary's to undertake the largest capital campaigns in either institution's history. The church's campaign began with a feasibility study that said we could raise \$5 million. But, in the end, the church alone had raised \$11.5 million in a three-phase effort and have followed-up with a few targeted fundraisers for special projects.

We have been careful about debt throughout, using it strategically when we needed it for cash flow, but paying it off quickly thereafter.

Relationship is the Coin of the Realm

The most important thing we learned in our fundraising efforts is the importance of relationship.

People give to people they know and to places they love. I spent my first several years of rectorship just getting to know people – visiting their homes and learning their stories. It was old-fashioned, shoe-leather priestcraft that laid the foundation not only for a successful ministry, but also for successful fundraising.

In annual giving, people knew who I was and what the church was trying to accomplish. They began investing in our future – slowly at first, but steadily.

When we started asking people to consider capital gifts, relationship was again critical. I don't think I ever called on a stranger. I knew the people I was asking, and they knew me. They knew that my interest in them was deeper than money.

Truth-telling is important in every healthy relationship. So, our fundraising case statements were direct: This is what we are trying to accomplish and this is what it is going to cost. As one of our campaign chairs likes to say, "If we always tell people the truth, we never have to remember what we said."

Each early fundraising success laid the foundation for the next. With every promise we fulfilled, we built credibility with our donors. With every visit we made, we deepened our relationships. People came to trust that we would do what we said with their money, and that gave them confidence to invest in future projects. In several cases, our donors even suggested future projects and offered the lead gifts that we would need to get them going.

Relational Strategies for Fundraising

I did not have any fundraising experience before coming to Holy Communion and let's just say that it was not a major feature of my seminary education. But, as I began to realize that fundraising is all about relationships, I also began to realize that I already had a lot of tools in my toolbox.

Good fundraising draws on four principles of good pastoral care:

- 1.) Focus on the other person: Giving flows not from the church's need to receive, but from the donor's excitement to give. Focus on what matters to them. Ask them what matters to them. Receive and incorporate their feedback. If you do this well, the day that a donor signs their commitment will be the most exciting day they have had in a long time.
- 2.) You are the only person in the conversation feeling awkward: If you have been honest with people in scheduling your fundraising visits, then they know why you're coming. And, they still invited you! And, they might even lay out some wine and snacks when you come. They are not feeling awkward about being asked, and you should not feel awkward about asking.
- 3.) Meet your parishioners where they are: Different people give for different reasons. Effective pastors and effective fundraisers need to meet people where they are, not where we wish they were. More on that in a moment.
- 4.) Believe in God. Believe in the Church: All that separates the church stewardship campaign from the NPR pledge drive is our faith in God. Lead with that and have confidence in it. Believe also in the future of the church. Don't focus on your financial crisis and declining attendance. No one wants to buy tickets on the Titanic. Focus on hope and success. Focus on excitement and vision.

Speaking Your Donor's Language

As to meeting your donors where they are: People give for different reasons and it is critical that we speak their language.

I suggest that there are four categories of church givers: Tithers, Institutionalists, Impactors, and Participators.

- Tithers give as a spiritual discipline. The Bible says ten percent, so they give ten percent, or they aspire to. The details don't matter. They are giving to God as a spiritual discipline.
- Institutionalists give because they believe in the role that the church plays in the community. These people are glad for their gifts to pay the electric bill or to cover payroll, because that's what the institution needs in order to survive.
- Impactors want to see results. If I give you \$500, how many people will you feed with it? How many children will you educate?
- Participators give because they want to be a part of the community, but aren't really moved to do much more. They usually give in small amounts and round numbers.

I once found myself talking with a Tither about the need to grow the endowment in order to ensure our long-run sustainability. I might as well have been speaking another language.

Similarly, I once asked an institutionalist to tithe. The results were similar.

As I have come to see it, the key to church fundraising is being in relationship with the people we are asking for money and in speaking to them in a language that they will understand.

Is there room to move people from one category of givers to another? Absolutely. But, over time, we shouldn't start there.

Where to Start?

So, let's say that you have listened to everything I have said thus far and that you find it thoroughly inspirational, as I'm sure you do. But, let's also say that you just don't know where to start. Let's say that your church is in numerical and financial decline and you just need to shore up your budget.

Here's what we did when we were in that situation...

In 2013, we took a small amount of cash from our reserves and established The Audacity Fund. In our case, the amount was \$7,500 but it could have been more or less in other circumstances.

The Audacity Fund existed for the purpose of supporting special projects. When someone came up with a new idea that could push the church forward, the Audacity Fund provided the money.

There were two rules: The Audacity Fund would not provide for anything that we had ever done before, and every Audacity Fund project had to be as big and bold as we could possibly manage.

Over the years, the Audacity Fund supported a concert on our front lawn, a festival of three sacred arts, and an urban outreach weekend. We expected that each Audacity Fund project would inject energy into the congregation, and they did. What we didn't expect was that people would start sending unsolicited gifts to replenish the fund. Parishioners wanted to be a part of what we were doing.

After a few years, the Audacity Fund faded away. It had accomplished its purpose, which was to shift us from a mindset of scarcity into a mindset of abundance, from a mindset of limitation into a mindset of possibility.

The Audacity Fund was the first deposit in our bank of credibility. It let our parishioners know that we were serious, that we would do what we said with the money they gave us, and that the church was once again a worthy charitable investment.

In Closing

In closing, my three major take-aways about church fundraising are these: Be in authentic relationship. Speak the language of your people. And, be excited about what your church is doing. These three strategies, combined with a measure of blessing from the Holy Spirit, have made all the difference for us, and I suspect it will for you as well.

I look forward to our conversation.

Further Reading

Four Principles of Pastoral Fundraising

Vital Practices Blog – March 9, 2023

<https://www.ecfvp.org/blogs/4027/four-principles-of-pastoral-fundraising>

Generations of Givers

Vital Practices Blog – September 13, 2021

<https://www.ecfvp.org/blogs/3899/generations-of-givers>

An Audacious Spirit of Abundance

Vital Practices – September 2019

<https://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/796/an-audacious-spirit-of-abundance>