

Year-round congregational stewardship: six best practices

To be effective within congregations, the message of stewardship needs year-round attention – not just an end-of-the-year reminder “to give to the lagging budget.”

The following best practices are a guide to help congregational leaders assess the stewardship initiatives they have in place, as well as areas that may not be reflected now in the congregation’s stewardship plan.

By reviewing these practices, pastors and lay leaders can better identify two to three areas they may want to focus special attention on next year as they develop their congregational stewardship plan.

By attending to these practices over the next three to five years, the desired result would be a holistic approach to stewardship. The goal of this comprehensive approach is to bring out the best in your congregation, as well as provide the opportunity for everyone within your church to gratefully receive God’s many blessings and joyfully give to God’s ongoing work in the world.

1. Operational management: sound fundraising methods

- A. Mission clarity: Review and adjust your congregation’s mission at least every three years.
- B. Narrative budget: Develop a narrative statement that tells the congregation’s story and connects dollar amounts with congregational ministries.
- C. Annual giving program: Before each fiscal year, ask members and attendees to estimate their expected annual giving. Or ask them to commit to a statement that they will make financial giving to the congregation a priority.
- D. Multiple giving opportunities: Make multiple avenues for giving available throughout the year (for example, regular giving on Sunday morning, an automatic electronic giving option, a credit card giving option, special fundraising events, planned giving arrangements, monthly thanksgiving offerings and specific mission or service offerings).
- E. Express appreciation: Whenever updates on the annual giving plan are presented, be sure to thank those who make giving to the local congregation a priority. Our church institutions do well at thanking donors from their constituencies. Find ways your congregation can thank your members while ensuring confidentiality about their giving practices.



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2. Integration into worship: stewardship messages every Sunday

- A. Schedule regular teaching opportunities on stewardship in creative and informative ways within worship services, such as:
 - 1. Make time for “moments in mission.”
 - 2. Place stewardship messages on bulletin covers.
 - 3. Include stewardship prayers and litanies.
 - 4. Place quotes on holistic stewardship in your bulletins and/or read them before receiving the offering.
 - 5. Before mailing missions checks to agencies, have the worship leader hold them up in front of the congregation. Have a special prayer for those who will benefit from the gifts.
- B. Preach and teach on stewardship as biblical texts invite and allow.
 - 1. Stewardship themes on money and possessions are addressed more frequently than any other subject in Scripture, with the exception of the “Kingdom of God.” Conduct a sermon audit to identify how frequently stewardship sermons have been preached in the last three years.
 - 2. Note references to stewardship themes within Scripture texts even when preaching on broader themes. Jesus and the prophets were not shy about this subject and neither should we be today.
- C. Nurture young stewards during worship (see 3, B below).
- D. Celebrate the offering as an act of worship.
 - 1. Invite people to give as an expression of worship and their faith.
 - 2. Use language like “receiving” instead of “lifting” when introducing offering time. Our giving to God is like the offerings in the Old Testament. They aren’t about meeting the budget.
 - 3. The offering experience is first and foremost a sacrifice (worshiping God), not a gift to your church or a project. In the Hebrew Bible, the offering was burnt on an altar because it was given as an extravagant gift to God. It was an expression of faith that God would provide and that we are to be faithful and sacrificial with our offerings in worship.
 - 4. Have regular bulletin and spoken announcements on Sundays, sharing the various ways people can give to God through the church.

3. Stewardship formation: creating a culture of gratitude and generosity

- A. Forming our identity as disciples, including as stewards, will help counter the cultural emphasis that we are primarily consumers.
 - 1. This is reinforced when we emphasize that we come to church to offer worship to God instead of to “be fed.” Being fed reinforces an identity of consumer instead of worshipful giver.
- B. Formation opportunities are needed for children and youth.
 - 1. Address the call to be stewards in membership preparation, catechism and baptism classes.
 - 2. Look for stewardship education materials for youth and children on the Everence website at www.everence.com/stewardshipeducation.
 - 3. Use children’s lessons during Sunday worship to talk about generosity as a characteristic of followers of Jesus.
 - 4. Create special fundraising projects for children within your Sunday school department.
- C. Include stewardship in adult education classes and small-group ministries.
 - 1. Teach the worship component of giving in membership classes.
 - 2. Use a wide range of adult education materials from the Everence website at www.everence.com/stewardshipeducation.

3. Encourage use of sermon series material that incorporates small group discussions as follow up, such as *30 days of generosity* from Everence.
4. Offer educational sessions on planned giving led by Everence foundation and trust representatives (or staff from your denomination's foundation). Discuss the benefits of making planned gifts to the congregation through a will or special memorial gift.
5. Arrange for personal budget training classes, using *Freed up financially* or Financial Peace University resources – both available through Everence.

4. Stewardship leadership

Unless someone is assigned the role and responsibility of tending the stewardship mission of your congregation, it probably will not get done. A stewardship or finance committee within the congregation is typically responsible for the budget. But beyond this task, often little attention goes into a holistic stewardship focus for the church.

Studies done by the United Church of Canada have shown that congregational leaders involved in wider church roles experience per capita giving that is 50 percent higher than most other congregations within their denomination. Another UCC study indicated that churches that sent leaders to stewardship training events experienced per capita giving of 29 to 36 percent higher than most other congregations within the UCC.

5. Spiritual nurture opportunities

Understanding one's identity as a steward goes hand-in-hand with spiritual growth. People who take their journeys as disciples of Jesus seriously tend to reflect and express generosity, including in their use of money.

Congregations that provide stewardship education to people so they can develop their own stewardship goals and plans have higher per capita giving as a result, according to other UCC studies.

6. Engagement in social justice and peace concerns

How we use our resources reflects the level of concern we have for people beyond our congregation. Some suggest that a church's giving plan/budget is the best window into its soul. How we distribute our money as congregations suggests whether we are concerned only for ourselves or also for those who live across the street and around the world.

The resources a congregation commits to assisting others – beyond its own needs – reflects its commitment to justice and peace. A congregation should be challenged to consider giving to mission, service and relief ministries around the world as part of its stewardship responsibility as a first-world church.

This resource was inspired by and uses categories from, "Year-Round Congregational Stewardship: Six Best Practices." © The United Church of Canada, 2009, http://www.unitedchurch.ca/files/exploringstewardship/best_practices.pdf.

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