



The Power of Authentic Relationships in Church Stewardship

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A Personal Experience

Recently, I had a revealing experience with a nonprofit organization that I've known for nearly four decades. Despite this long-standing connection, I had never been personally asked to contribute to their cause. While I had received direct mail campaigns, social media outreach, and the occasional chain phone call, these efforts always felt impersonal. My response was minimal, revealing that even years of connection cannot replace the power of a personal relationship. It struck me how often fundraising – or, in the case of churches, stewardship efforts – can become a numbers game, driven by metrics rather than genuine relationships.

My perspective changed about this nonprofit when a newcomer to the advancement profession took a genuine interest in my family and me. This person's approach was not about a financial ask right from the start. Instead, the focus was on building an authentic relationship and showing a sincere commitment. As a potential contributor, I experienced the approach as both refreshing and effective. When I was eventually asked to consider making a gift to benefit the nonprofit, it felt like a natural progression of our relationship, rooted in mutual respect and understanding.

This experience brought two fundamental principles of effective fundraising and stewardship to light: the importance of building authentic relationships and making personal asks. Though these principles may seem straightforward, they are often overshadowed by a transactional approach – yes, even in the church – that prioritizes meeting financial goals over meaningful engagement.

Building Authentic Relationships

At the heart of successful generosity cultivation is the ability to forge genuine connections. For church leaders, this means going beyond simply recognizing congregants' names or faces on a Sunday morning. It's about understanding their

passions, interests, and motivations for supporting the church. Authentic relationships foster trust and a deeper sense of belonging. These relationships encourage people to feel more connected to the mission and ministry of the church.

As United Methodist pastors and church leaders, it's easy to get caught up in the administrative or programmatic aspects of our work, sometimes at the expense of relationships. We may focus primarily on long-time members or major contributors, unintentionally neglecting those who are newer to the congregation or who may not have been as visibly active. This reality can create a situation where some members feel valued only for their financial contributions, while others, despite their potential, feel overlooked.

During my encounter with this unnamed nonprofit, I interacted with several seasoned fundraising professionals. Many chose not to engage with me directly until I was seen as a potential donor. In contrast, this new team member's approach of instinctively building a relationship with me felt genuine. The same applies to churches. When pastors or lay leaders focus on authentic engagement, they create a foundation of trust and belonging. They set the context for deeper conversations about support, involvement, and mission and the theology of generosity undergirding giving.

For many pastors, stewardship campaigns can feel transactional and discouraging, especially when they focus solely on hitting financial goals. But when we emphasize relationships, we reframe stewardship as an act of discipleship – a partnership in ministry. Authentic relationships help shift the focus from the budget to the broader mission of the church. Over time, most of these relationships will naturally produce sustainable giving which are rooted in trust and shared vision.

The Art of the Ask

Once a relationship is established, the next step in stewardship is making a personal ask. This invitation is more than simply requesting financial support; it's about inviting people to be part of a shared vision. A personal ask, grounded in an authentic relationship, communicates that the church values each person's contribution – not just financially, but as a key participant in the mission.

In my case, the new staff member's request felt natural and sincere because it was built on the relationship that we had formed. This kind of personal approach is far more effective than generic asks or mass appeals. They can feel disconnected. When a congregant is personally invited into the life of the church and sees how their gift can make a difference, they are more likely to respond generously.

For pastors and church leaders, it's important to understand that asking for financial support is not simply a matter of meeting budgetary needs. It's about connecting people to the mission of the church and inviting them to play an active role in that mission. When the ask comes from a place of genuine relationship and shared vision, it becomes a part of discipleship rather than a transaction.

The Role of Leadership in Fostering Authentic Stewardship

As United Methodist pastors and leaders, we have a critical role to play in balancing the practical needs of the church with the Christian work of building relationships. While it's important to meet financial goals, it is even more important to cultivate a culture where personal engagement and relationship-building are prioritized. Creating space for this ministry requires a shift in how we think about stewardship. Instead of viewing it primarily as an annual campaign or a way to fund the budget, we can frame it as a ministry of discipleship, where giving is seen as part of a person's spiritual journey. Regularly reviewing progress with an emphasis on relationship-building – rather than just financial outcomes – can help shift the focus from transactions to transformation.

Additionally, offering training on relationship-building to lay leaders, staff, and stewardship teams can help ensure that the entire leadership of the church is equipped to engage with congregants in meaningful ways. Encouraging a relational approach to stewardship can strengthen the church's overall ministry and deepen the spiritual connection between members and the mission.

A Challenge to Church Leaders

We are called to foster a culture of generosity that is rooted in authentic relationships. In a world that often prioritizes metrics and results, I challenge you to return to the fundamentals of ministry: building genuine connections in the name of Jesus Christ and inviting people into discipleship.

Stewardship is not about balancing the church's budget; it is about nurturing relationships that lead to deeper engagement with the mission of the church. The next time you prepare to engage with a constituent or potential supporter, think beyond the ask. Focus on building a relationship. Authenticity matters! It is the key to transforming your stewardship efforts into meaningful partnerships that will ultimately support the church's mission in more profound and lasting ways.

In the end, by cultivating these genuine connections, both your ministry and your own life will be enriched. The stories and experiences of those in your congregation will inspire you and remind you of the power we share as the body of Christ. The bond that you forge with one another will go beyond stewardship. Indeed, you will transform lives and strengthen the church for years to come.

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