



EQUIPPING FOR... **ELDERSHIP**

Encouraging Generosity in Ministry

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Has your congregation been wondering how to encourage giving? Has “our offering this month is behind budget” become a common refrain? If so, you are not alone. I want to share some practical tips for how your communications with members, adherents and friends can help build a culture of generosity and increase support for your congregation.

Form a theology of abundance

Begin by examining your theology of money. As eminent scholar Walter Brueggemann notes, the greatest contradiction in the West is that we are accumulating more and more wealth and becoming less and less generous.¹ Too often, in our culture and churches, we convince ourselves that resources are too scarce for people to be generous.

I’ve always loved the movie *Babette’s Feast*, for the same reason that I love the parable of The Wedding at Cana in the Gospel of John 2: 1-12. These two stories are about the theology of abundance.

In *Babette’s Feast*, Babette, a French refugee, becomes a housekeeper for two sisters in rural Denmark. While she is a trained chef, she doesn’t let them know, because the sisters want their meals prepared the way they’ve always had them to honour their deceased father. After many years, Babette wins a lottery. She decides to use all her wealth to cook a wonderful French dinner for the sisters and the village elders. Babette’s extravagant generosity



Babette’s Feast is a metaphor of generosity.
(©1987 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc.)

changes her life and the lives of everyone in the village.

Similarly, The Wedding at Cana gives us a glimpse not only of the first sign of Jesus’ power and God’s presence in him, but of God’s extravagant generosity with us. The wine has run out. Can you feel the panic not only in Mary but in the guests and the hosts? When we feel there is not enough to go around we tend to panic and lose sight of the abundance that surrounds us. Instead, Jesus turns the water into wine, and there is not only enough to go around, but it is the best wine of the evening.

A theology of abundance – not our abundance, but God’s abundance – leads to acts of generosity. With this in mind, here are some practical tips for ways to inspire, ask, and thank your congregation.

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity.” www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533. Accessed 22 November 2016.

Inspire

Before there is an invitation for donations, consider how you are inspiring people to contribute. It is challenging to raise funds when donors are not inspired.

- 1.** Does your congregation have an inspiring mission, vision or specific project? Ask why your congregation exists? What is God's mission for you? How are you fulfilling that mission and ministry in your congregation and community?
- 2.** Draft some statements. Test out your vision, mission or project idea on an intergenerational (if possible) group. Amend what doesn't work. Celebrate what does.
- 3.** If you don't have a stated vision or mission but your congregation has a compelling project, clearly articulate the reasons why someone would want to give. State the purpose of the project; why it is needed; what you hope it will accomplish; how much it will cost and how long it will take; what the impact of the project will be; and how many updates on the funding of the project you will provide.

Ask

Once you have a clear understanding of how your congregation is answering God's mission and you have an impactful story, think about how you want to ask or invite people to give. Are you speaking the language of abundance or scarcity?

- 4.** Use different ways to ask people to give: invitations from members of the congregation during worship, letters to members, adherents, friends, posts on social media, face-to-face meetings.
- 5.** Examine the language in your communications. Are you extending an invitation to participate in generously supporting the mission and vision of your congregation or is your language more of a plea? Instead of saying, "We've only raised \$80,000 of our \$100,000 budget," consider saying, "Hurray! We've raised \$80,000 (or 80%) of our budget so far. Thank you! We look forward to meeting our

budget in the coming months." Instead of saying, "We are behind budget and need to keep the youth program going," consider saying, "God has called us into a ministry with youth. We invite you to come on the journey with us. Will you financially support us and share in this exciting mission?" Can you feel the difference?

- 6.** If you have a compelling story or testimonial, share it in your communications. Pictures of projects and people impacted by your mission and ministry are extremely helpful.

Thank

Always say thank you! Everyone should be thanked. Research shows that 91% of donors would appreciate a simple phone call thanking them for the donation.² Consider:

- 7.** Does your session call everyone in January thanking them for their time, talents and treasures for the past year? Session members should not know the amounts given by members, only their names and phone numbers. This is a simple and cost-effective way to say thank you and enjoy a conversation with people in your congregation. You may also ask members if they have any questions about the church or what they are enjoying about the congregation. When donors are honestly thanked they are likely to contribute more when asked again.
- 8.** Personal, hand-written notes can be sent out with annual tax receipts.
- 9.** Letters thanking the congregation can include photos or stories of the impact the donation is having.
- 10.** And remember – never combine a thank-you with an additional "ask." Never. You want your thank-you to be sincere and genuine, and not seen as a way to ask for more money.

Just as God has been abundant and generous with each one of us – we can empower the generosity that already exists in every human heart.

¹ Burk, Penelope. "Saying Thank You the Donor Centred Way." Thanks!: A Guide to Donor-Centred Fundraising. Burlington: ON, 2000. 46.