

Planting the Seeds of Change

5 Proven Tenets for Growing Generosity at Your Church

By John Weinstein

"But it's a dry heat!"

My wife and I heard that statement a lot when we moved to Fresno, Calif. So is a *blast furnace!* I thought.

The 100-degree summers of our new home required lots of water to keep plants alive, so we hired an irrigation specialist to put in a sprinkler system and prepare our backyard for sod. My wife told him how we wanted it arranged. In a few hours, he and his crew had the yard ready.

Now that the sod is in, we've found that our trust in him wasn't misplaced. His good job of laying the pipes, positioning the sprinklers and setting the timers simplified growing grass, shrubs and trees. When you give plants water, they'll grow.

Likewise, when you give Christians five kinds of motivation, the fruits of your labor will be generous giving.

1 A Reason to Give

People want to do more than support the church staff, cover the electric bill or meet the mortgage payment — they want to make a difference in people's lives. A survey of major donors shows the primary reason people support a group is because they believe in its mission. In other words, they'll give to a church that has changed lives and saved souls.

What's your church's mission? What about its vision? Why does your church exist? Answer these questions in short, simple sentences everyone can remember and you're on the path to giving people reasons to give.

Through scripture, build in your church a love for Christ and for the world. By your passion, move people to join the greatest mission of the ages: reaching the world with news of God's love. Every day in every way, call your people upward and outward.

Remind your members through newsletters, testimonies, video presentations, interviews, posters and sermons what their giving is really accomplishing. Don't ask for money to pay the bills — challenge your members to join the giving team that's accomplishing the will of God through your church. This gives every woman, man, girl and boy a reason to give.

2 Examples to Follow

I've conducted informal surveys in 35 churches asking a very important question: *Why are you a tither?* Ninety-percent of the respondents answered the same: "The example of someone else." Your people need regular, authentic testimonies from Biblical stewards. In evangelical churches, members share their salvation testimonies. In charismatic churches, they impart their healing testimonies. But who's sharing their *stewardship* testimonies?

By using testimonies and interviews, hosting panel discussions and writing brief articles in the church newsletter — or by presenting videos during worship or an inserting notes in your regular financial statements — you can share the stories of those people who have adopted stewardship as a way of life. Christians will be challenged by their faith, struggles, faithfulness and joy as stewards. One real-life example is worth a thousand words.

Enlist, coach and schedule members to share their stewardship testimonies. Since 1996, for example, a church in Lubbock, Texas, has asked laypeople to share their giving testimonies every time an offering is taken. He or she shares how God has led them to give and offers a blessing for the offering. Authentic stewardship testimonies are effective.

3 Freedom from Debt

Does anyone need to be reminded of their debt? Credit card debt in excess of \$9,200 per family is one of the many sources of financial strain on Christians. When large sums of money are needed to pay off debt, there are fewer discretionary funds to give to the Church. Help your members get out of debt any way you can. Preach sermon series and provide personal financial counseling.

Don't neglect the cause of such debt: misplaced priorities. Even Christians are apt to believe the advertising hype and think the path to happiness is paved with gold, lined with BMWs and walked on in Manolo Blahniks. Preach and teach to counter the wisdom of this age that screams the lie that fulfillment is in what you have. Preach and teach the changeless truth that what this world offers is fleeting, but what we do for Christ will stand the test of time and eternity. Replace the values the world advocates; transform hearts and minds to God's perspective. Many members of your church need freedom from debt and from the misplaced values that often lead to it.

4 Give Them Options

Today, Americans have more options for every decision, including how to make their gifts to a church or charity. Online giving, automated withdrawal, or transfers of stocks and bonds are just a few of the newer options.

How many options does your church offer? Do you provide guidance regarding how to make a "final gift" to your church through a bequest or trust? Do you send envelopes to your church members? Doing so increases giving.

I'm not advocating the use of credit cards for online donations, but some churches do so and receive gifts from credit-responsible members.

Does your church have a brokerage account to make possible the gifts of securities? In one California church I know of, a family makes their tithe through a once-a-year transfer of stock.

5 Responsible, Open Stewardship

In the aforementioned survey of major donors, the second highest motivating factor is an organization's good stewardship of the funds collected. We need only refer to the example of the American Red Cross and its 9/11 funds to know this is true.

Regular reporting of church giving in the bulletin and newsletter and on the website reminds members their gifts are being accurately accounted for, and in the account(s) they intended. Good financial practices concerning expenditures (purchase orders, specific budget accounts, committee reviews of major expenditures, and competitive bidding of contracts) gives donors the assurance that the Lord's money is spent wisely for the Lord's work.

Mailing regular, written statements to donors — accompanied by a note of thanks, a report of what God is doing, or another insert — serves to remind givers that their money is doing something good for God and His Kingdom.

We ask church members to give to our ministries. Put these five motivators in place and see if they don't offer more.

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