

The Secret to Good Stewardship

by Rev. Roger Janes, Community of Faith Stewardship Support Staff

Do you want to know the secret of how to improve your church's stewardship and grow generosity? It is simple, really. Well, in theory it is simple.

In practice, it may mean we have to let go of a few bad habits...and find the courage to ask for money! Ok, simple yes but easy no. But do you know what? We can do this!

Don't waste your precious time and energy

The single best advice I give to pastoral charges wanting to improve their financial stewardship is this: Forget about the money and focus on your mission. It may seem counterintuitive but it really works.

The truth is that no amount of worry is going to change our financial situation. Indeed, more often than not worry and a focus on the "bottom line" is leading us to inaction. If we are frozen and doing nothing new to change the situation, or focused on merely surviving another year, or annually ramping up our fundraising efforts to make ends meet, then we may be on a path to even more serious financial distress. Further, we are probably wearing ourselves out in the process—body and soul! How can we attract new folks to our church and involve them in ministry if they see us as overworked, frustrated, and despairing Christians? Who wants to join that church?!

Getting back to the basics

I sincerely believe that I am Christian today, over 2,000 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, in a place far away from Israel, because of the passion, energy, and mission focus of those early Christians. They not only had faith but also lived out their faith with such passion and commitment that others took notice. People of their day thought, "These people are willing to give up all they own to follow this Jesus. They are willing to even die for this faith. How can I be a part of something that incredible?"

Those early followers focused not on building and maintaining structures and property—their goal was to make a difference in people's lives, in Jesus' name. This, I think, needs to be our starting place.

Focus on your mission

In his book *Not Your Parents' Offering Plate*, author and stewardship consultant J. Clif Christopher shares the number one reason people give to the church: belief in the mission. People contribute to the church because they believe we make a difference in the lives of others in Jesus' name. They give to us because the church has a good reputation and because they see giving as a part of living their faith.

Therefore, to maintain and grow donations we have to focus on our mission. We need to stop

spending so much time and energy on finances and fundraising and concentrate on clarifying, communicating, and living out our mission.

Barb Fullerton, in her doctoral research on best stewardship practices within the United Church, confirms Christopher's assertion. Those pastoral charges that have a clear statement of mission, and update it regularly, have higher per-capita giving than those that do not.

Recently I read a book by John Pentland called *Fishing Tips*. Hillhurst United Church in Calgary is a congregation that has an incredible and ever-expanding ministry. They are seen as a vibrant place of ministry where people are daily given opportunities to live out their faith. They have no problem with finances and are growing their ministry all the time. For instance, in 1994 they were spending \$120,000 to do their mission. Eleven years later they had increased that amount to \$857,000! That is more than a seven-fold increase!

We could discount this story and say, sure but they are in a prosperous big city! The truth is we too can grow our ministry and our financial resources. You see, Hillhurst's success comes from their openness to creativity and change, and their incredible focus on mission. Their members know what their mission is. So does the neighbourhood and surrounding city. It is simply this: "radical hospitality, spiritual nurture, and social justice." These three values inform, give focus, and challenge everything they do as a congregation. It is this vision and mission that motivates people to participate and give generously.

What is your mission?

So, what is your congregation's mission? Do the members of your congregation know what it is? Do you discuss and pray about it regularly? Does your mission inform your ministry and future vision? Do people from the surrounding community know what it is you are about? If the answer to any of these questions is no, maybe that is a starting place.

There is truth to the idea that our mission is what we spend our time, energy, and focus on. In our congregations today, what is our focus? Is it the budget? If so, then maybe we have been unintentionally communicating to people that our vision as a congregation is to meet the budget!

Unfortunately, meeting a budget is probably only motivating to the small circle of very committed members of our congregations. Everyone else may be giving their extra, and living out their faith, by giving to another charity!

Don't be afraid to ask!

Once we focus on the mission and come to really get excited about it, we should have a lot less trouble asking our members for money to support that mission. Friends, we are doing God's work. God is calling us to make a difference. We need support to grow that mission. We need to ask. We can't assume that people feel they are being asked unless our ask is clear and direct. Research indicates that 8 out of 10 people who are asked give.

Resources

These days the United Church is producing great resources on how to inspire people to more fully participate in your congregation's ministry. We are teaching one another how to focus on mission and how to ask for money and volunteers for that mission.

Called to Be the Church: The Journey is a good place to start. The Stewardship Best Practices module and the Congregational Giving Program module both begin with a focus on your mission. Both include coaching and accountability so you can be successful. Find out more on the [United Church stewardship webpages](#) or e-mail called@united-church.ca.

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