

## Fundraising Beliefs

by Dan Hotchkiss

Why do people give to congregations? How you answer this question makes a difference to your fundraising efforts. Luckily, while stewardship theologies vary, there is little mystery or doubt about the motivations behind generous giving. Successful fundraisers, religious and secular, share certain practical beliefs.

Unsuccessful fundraisers, on the other hand, cling to beliefs that are optimistic, wishful, and mistaken. They allow beliefs about how people should ideally behave to cloud their understanding of why people actually decide to give.

At the risk of oversimplifying, people give money away for two main reasons: to extend their own accomplishments and to bond with a community.

Donors dislike giving money "away," but gladly give to institutions that have come to feel like an extension of themselves. Donors give when they respect the institution's plans and trust its leaders' competence.

Donors also give to bond with other donors, building relationship through reciprocity. To belong is one of our most basic human needs, and "doing my fair share" is one of our most ancient ways of joining.

Religious leaders often wish that people gave for more unselfish reasons, or that they would care more about God and less about what other people think. When such wishes turn into beliefs about how people actually are, they lead to fundraising approaches that fall short. Here are four beliefs I often hear espoused:

"A unified stewardship drive is better than a lot of special appeals." On the contrary, one of the clearest recent trends in philanthropy is that donors prefer to direct how their gifts will be used. Many congregations still hold one annual stewardship drive and discourage all but a few special appeals. Everything is put into a single budget; if the fund drive falls short, the budget has to be cut or left to run a deficit.

Some churches have broken free to the point of having 52 special appeals a year. They dedicate all cash from the offering plate each Sunday to a special purpose—a special project, an outside social agency, or a one-time purchase. The result, typically, is that the plate cash doubles or quadruples.

Governing boards worry that special drives compete with one another, which of course they do. But the practical solution is not to discourage them—which only reduces overall revenue—but to coordinate them so they achieve results the congregation as a whole selects. The wisest policy balances donors' desire for a feeling of accomplishment with the institution's need for a coherent sense of purpose.

"Donors want their gifts kept secret." Like most mistaken beliefs, this one has a core of truth in it. Any donor has a right to ask for anonymity, and all personal information should be treated with discretion. Larger donors sometimes want their gifts kept quiet to avoid excessive influence, and stingy givers prefer secrecy for reasons of their own.

But many congregations overgeneralize. In reality, almost no one expects complete secrecy about giving unless the institution itself teaches them to. New givers expect their information to be shared discreetly with clergy and fundraising volunteers, as any other charity would do. If your congregation assures members that their gifts will be kept secret, it should keep its promise. But leaders are free to exchange their own information among themselves, and that alone can shift the atmosphere tremendously.

Virtually all serious donors want their giving known—to someone—so they can feel the gratitude of those they trust and admire, and because the wish to be a respected member of a group is one of the main reasons people give at all. Without information, there can be no reciprocity.

"Only evangelicals can ask people to tithe." When the rector of a liberal Episcopal church made a pitch for the biblical idea of tithing, a member of his vestry said: "Now let me get this straight: so when it comes to stewardship, we're fundamentalists?" A liberal congregation can't suddenly shift to a legalistic standard and expect its members to obey.

People are quite good at separating truth from rhetoric. No standard of giving, whether from the Bible or the central office, will have much influence unless people believe other people—and especially designated leaders—actually adhere to it.

It follows that before anyone suggests the tithe or any other giving level, the governing board needs to approve it twice: once by voting and again by personally giving at the level they ask others to consider.

The strongest single influence on giving levels is the desire for reciprocity. Hardly anybody wants to give a lot more or a lot less than comparably situated peers. The most powerful way to ask for a gift is to say, "The members of our governing board and others, including me, have committed to give X. Would you consider giving X as well?"

"X" can be anything the group agrees on: a percentage of income, a number of dollars, or a multiple of the price of broccoli. What matters is that the prospective donor's peer group has agreed on it and personally said "yes" to it.

No standard is appropriate for everyone, and it is important to say often that you understand some will give less and others more. Inclusiveness is important, but it is no excuse for failing to ask clearly for financial gifts.

"Faith and gratitude are the most important influence on people's giving." This idea, too, contains a core of truth. The disposition to be generous (or not) has deep roots in personality. You can influence a few people to be a bit more generous by working on them for a long time. They will give more—but not necessarily to your congregation.

Generous people want their gifts to make a difference, and the best way to make them feel that way is by building trust in your institution's competence and communicating your specific plans for doing good.

The two main reasons people give are to extend their own accomplishments and to bond with a community. It follows that the most important factors that determine your congregation's gift income are how successfully you say what good you plan to do, your track record at doing what you say you'll do, and how effectively your leaders lead by their example and enable peers to influence each other.

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