
From the Pastor's Desk

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On Telling Familiar Stories

One of the challenges that we pastors face is that of finding new ways to tell the same stories. Take Christmas for instance. There is probably no story in all scripture that is more familiar than that of the birth of Baby Jesus in Bethlehem, and yet every December we tell the story again. What else are we going to do? Skip it? And so each year we face the task of somehow making this loved and familiar story feel new. It's the same with Easter. Of course we're going to tell the story of Christ's resurrection again. It's who we are. But how do we keep the story from feeling stale? How do we repeat the old, old story without sounding repetitious?

But you know what's even harder? Stewardship season. Every year about this time, as we prepare our budget for the following year and ask our faithful to consider pledging their gifts to the church – or increasing their pledge from last year – we are faced with the same challenge. How are we going to say it this year? The Christmas and Easter stories are stories of grace and hope, about what God has given to us. The stewardship story, about giving back to God through the church, is a harder story to tell even the first time. Telling it again and again . . . Well? How do we repeat this story without sounding repetitious?

There's actually a whole industry devoted to helping pastors tell the stewardship story. I get mail every week from some other business who has a sure-fire way to **ENHANCE YOUR CHURCH'S GIVING THIS YEAR!** Most are scams, promising immediate dramatic results. I sometimes feel that that these offers should come with FDA-mandated disclaimers, like prescription drugs do. (DISCLAIMER: Results not guaranteed. May cause irritation of parishioners and temporary disgruntledness. If you have been diagnosed with a shred of integrity, do not use this product. Talk to your spiritual advisor to see if the "Faith Power Spirit Other-Buzzword Giving Plan" is right for you.)

But even if we reject the Madison Avenue approach to stewardship, with implied false promises and manufactured enthusiasm, we still have to figure out some way to talk about giving to the church, Here are the two major options:

The Sober Assessment. Even as many individuals have increased their giving over the past few years, our giving as a whole has not had a net increase since at

least 2006. In the years since then, we have cut staff and operating budgets dramatically, but we are still struggling to keep up with the decline, and we are still drawing from endowed funds to pay our bills at the end of the year.

All of that is true, but there's a better way.

The Mission of Our Church. In the ten years since our last increase in giving, we have started the Personal Needs Closet, the Homelessness Project with the United Way, the Downtown Memory Cafe, and the partnership with the new church sharing the building with us, New Life United Methodist Church. We have renewed ourselves by fostering community in small groups, the new Men's Group, Family Camps, and by intentionally sending the church out to our home-bound in the new Visitation Team. We have reinvented Confirmation for our young people, begun new retreats to foster their growth, planned an overseas mission trip to Guatemala, and begun a new Vacation Bible School plan in partnership with North Central College.

This story is true, too, but this story matters more. In the past decade, which has been a hard decade for churches all over America, our church has responded by reinventing itself, reclaiming its mission, and rediscovering our calling to our community. And the fact that we've done all this in a time of financial strain is an even greater testimony to the people that we are.

That's our story. This month, as you receive mailings about your pledge, as you hear sermons about giving, remember this second story. There is a reason that we are here. There are lives that God is changing through the ministry of this church. Thank you.