



Growing Generous Givers

Why pastors should know who gives what

Several years ago, fundraising consultant and former pastor J. Clif Christopher wrote *Not Your Parents' Offering Plate*, a book that calls on churches to take a page from the not-for-profit sector to strengthen fundraising. While many pastors and church leaders shy away from talking about money, and prefer to talk about *stewardship* rather than *fundraising*, local churches pay a growing price for their reluctance to tackle money issues in direct terms. One of the points about which Rev. Christopher is unambivalent: the pastor needs to know how much each member is giving to their church.

Giving is a spiritual discipline

Few pastors would be reluctant to talk to a parishioner about their prayer discipline or church attendance — yet while giving remains a discipline like any other, pastors and church members have traditionally considered money discussions out of bounds. Perhaps many parishioners want their giving to remain private because their contribution is so easily quantified, so easily confirmed. But a person's giving reflects both their spiritual life and their relationship with their local church.

We invite God into nearly every important element of our lives — and we expect our pastor to help us deepen our experience of our faith. We marry in the church, we baptize children and raise them in Sunday School, we ask for prayer when family members fall ill and when trouble comes. Yet while money daily colors our experience, our work and our relationships, we tend to separate our spiritual and financial lives. We prefer our pastor remain blind to our capacity for giving or our willingness to share our financial gifts. But for a pastor to fulfill her/his responsibility to encourage and exhort church members to greater faithfulness with their money, a pastor needs to know how much each member gives.

Yes, this information should remain confidential — but that doesn't mean the information is *secret*.

A SNAPSHOT

- We welcome God into most parts of our lives, but often draw the line at money. Yet money is a gift like any other, and our use of it a spiritual discipline.
- *Confidentiality* is not the same as secrecy. While a pastor is expected to possess confidential information about parishioners, and to treat that information with appropriate care, secrecy has no place in church management or leadership.
- Books like *Not Your Parents' Offering Plate* by J. Clif Christopher offer new ways of thinking about church giving practices.

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The very nature of the pastor's role demands the ability to handle confidential information appropriately, and to use that trust to walk with parishioners in the deepening of their life of faith.

The classic dissent

The argument often rises that if the pastor knows who gives what, the pastor will show favoritism to the biggest givers. But shouldn't the entire congregation be celebrating the generosity of people who are big givers? Churches often depend mightily on these generous souls. We're quick to celebrate and honor the gifts of people with good voices or artistic talent — yet we somehow think it acceptable to essentially ignore those with a gift for generosity and the means to express that gift.

Just as musicians' gifts need to be encouraged and cultivated, so too do donors' gifts. Pastors, and by extension their churches, miss a huge opportunity to celebrate generosity when the pastor doesn't know who gives what. They miss the opportunity to thank the donor appropriately, and to encourage the gift of giving that can extend and expand ministry in the local church, the community, and in the wider world. Universities, hospitals and other not-for-profits long ago learned the value of honoring their largest donors. Churches can adopt and adapt many charitable fundraising tactics to strengthen their ministries and grow the gifts of generosity in their congregations.

Realistically, most pastors and church members have already made assumptions about the people they believe give the most, assuming the biggest givers are the people with the most expensive cars, the most prestigious jobs, or with the most to say about church decisions and management. But many a church has been surprised to learn the quiet, unassuming widow who never missed a Sunday has left the church a huge gift in her will.

Giving is a practical concern

Beyond the spiritual dimension of giving, the practical need for funding presses on a pastor as on any not-for-profit leader. And every not-for-profit leader worth their salt knows *exactly* who provides their funding. They know their big givers, and develop those relationships out of both gratitude and continuing need. A good leader also knows that over-reliance on a few givers can place an organization in financial jeopardy. Should a large giver move, die, or shift their allegiance, the organization could be unable to pay its bills!

Many churches have a handful of donors who supply the majority of the budget. The pastor needs to know who those people are not only to appreciate those givers, but to encourage others to give more generously.

Funding a church's ministry remains a responsibility shared by the entire community of faith — from the newly confirmed to the regular visitor to the long-timer on a fixed income.

CONSIDERATIONS

When candidating for the senior pastorate at a Southern California church, a pastor conditioned his acceptance of the call on the church's willingness to provide a list of who gave what. Somewhat reluctantly, the church agreed.

When the pastor received the list, he saw a surgeon in the congregation was giving \$1,000 a year. The pastor invited the member to lunch, and in the course of a getting-to-know-you conversation, asked the physician how he decided the amount he would give to charitable organizations and to the church.

The physician had never thought about his giving in an intentional way — he just wrote what seemed a generous check. And for many charities, \$1,000 would be great. But church giving carries deeper spiritual implications.

Over the course of a developing relationship, the pastor explored giving as a spiritual discipline with the surgeon. After the first lunch, the member's giving increased — and over the years became very generous.

But the best part of this story is not about money. Now that he was thinking of all his gifts as blessings from God, the surgeon began to join mission trips, using his medical skills in a meaningful new way!

Because this man's pastor had the information to initiate a conversation, he could pastor his parishioner to a much deeper experience of faith and faithfulness.

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700 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44115
888-822-3863 cornerstonefund.org