

CREATING A CULTURE OF GIVING

John Lennon promoted the use of the imagination as a way to change the way people thought about the world, their place in it, and what it might take to change the world. He invited us to dream and hope and invite others into imagining what life could be.

Congregational life deserves the same gift of imagination. What might life be if everyone in the congregation grounded their sense of self-worth, accomplishment, and meaning in the way they practiced sharing their bounty? Idealism? Wild Dream? Or a realistic goal toward which congregational leadership might strive.

Want to take on the challenge? One very important tool in such an endeavor is the crafting of a financial stewardship statement by the Vestry. The purpose of the statement is twofold: 1) to give the Vestry leadership a vehicle to offer public reflection about how each experiences God in the midst of financial decision making, and , 2) a basis for discussing financial leadership with prospective Vestry members.

The decision to compose the statement is best preceded by developing a plan for specific plan for how to use the statement. The process of developing the statement is highly beneficial to those who participate in its drafting. But the ultimate goal of the statement is begin to change the culture of the congregation; therefore, a plan of action is equally important to the process of drafting the statement.

It is possible to draft the “essence” of a statement in two hours. The core of the process is forty-five minutes of Bible study and reflection that is carefully designed to bring the tenets of Christian faith to bear on the pervasive anxiety about money that characterizes our culture. One particularly helpful passage is Matthew 6: 24-33. Give everyone a copy of the passage. Have someone read the passage aloud and ask everyone to listen for and underline the things that God is asking of us in the passage. Compile their answers in a column on the left side of an easel pad. Read the passage a second time and ask people to listen for and mark the things that God is promising us in the passage. Record the answers on a column on the right hand side of the easel pad. Lastly, pose the question: What are the barriers that keep us from both responding to what God asks of us and from enjoying the promises? Record those answers in a column in between the columns of demands and promises. Reflect with the group on how Jesus comes to reconcile us to God and to help us respond in faithfulness and then enjoy the fullness of His blessing.

Following the Bible study and reflection the Vestry is divided into three small groups each assigned to answer one of the following questions:

- 1) What do I believe about God and money? The statement begins with:

WE BELIEVE

- 2) What am I committed to doing about making my faith and my relationship with God a more integral part of how I think and act about financial decision? The second paragraph begins with:

WE COMMIT...

- 3) To what action, process, practice and/or reflection do I want to invite the congregation? The last paragraph begins with:

WE INVITE...

The three groups are given twenty to thirty minutes to compose a statement that answers each of these questions. The statement of each small group is shared with the whole group and notes are made of the feedback. A small group is then formed to take the feedback and the small group statements and craft a proposed draft of a complete statement. The draft is presented for a period of reflection and feedback at a subsequent vestry meeting for approval. The goal is not to get the strongest theological statement possible. The goal is articulate a statement that everyone on the Vestry can honestly endorse and reflect publicly on what it means in his or her own life.

The written statement can also take the form of a collect such as this one written by the Vestry of Trinity Episcopal Church in Swanton Vt as part of their annual commitment program:

[We believe that] God, who is the giver of every good gift, You are ever present in our lives and in the world. You act through us, your people, to care for and provide for everyone.

[We invite] We pray for the courage to break out of our insecurity and fear around money as we deepen our understanding of our relationship to You and how we use our financial resources to do Your work in the world.

[We commit] We pray these things that we might know You better, that You will increase our desire and ability to give and help others thru ministry and friendship and to gratefully commit ourselves to the work You have given us to do. AMEN”

(Trinity Episcopal Church, Swanton VT. October 2010)

Imagine... just imagine what our faith communities might be and do if our notions or “success” was measured by our ability and capacity to give rather than accumulate; if we saw the world as place where we could share the abundance with which God has blessed us; if our experience of being blessed was grounded in our practice of generosity. Just imagine...