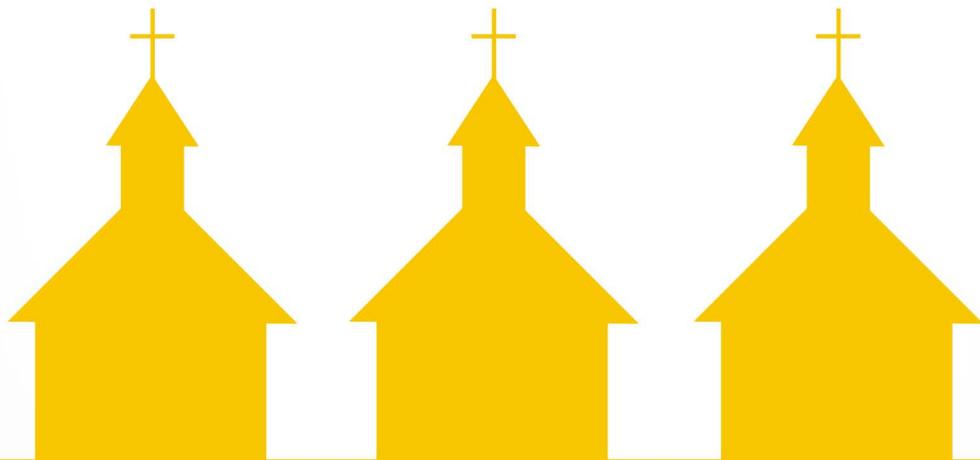


THREE CHURCHES

CONNECT GROWTH IN
BUDGET GIVING TO
RECENT **CAPITAL CAMPAIGNS**



A CASE STUDY BY
BEN STROUP

THREE CHURCHES CONNECT GROWTH IN BUDGET GIVING TO RECENT CAPITAL CAMPAIGNS

SUMMARY

Three church leaders attribute recent capital campaigns to a sustained budget giving increase along with spiritual growth and transformation among respective givers in the area of stewardship and generosity.

PARTICIPATING CHURCHES

1. Canterbury United Methodist Church (Birmingham, AL)

Normal Weekend Attendance: 1,400

2. Community Reformed Church (Clinton, IA)

Normal Weekend Attendance: 100

3. Holy Trinity Church (Auburn, AL)

Normal Weekend Attendance: 280

OVERVIEW

Capital projects often result in the largest, most complex, and fully integrated fundraising effort most churches ever conduct. The need to raise money for on-campus improvements, facility expansion, local and international mission efforts, debt retirement, and a variety of other reasons is something no growing congregation can avoid. Given that many church leaders find the conversation around money and ministry to be awkward at best, the energy with which they approach an intensive giving effort is almost always met with thoughtful concern and often with great hesitation.

At the top of the list of concerns is understanding what impact a capital campaign might have on budget giving. If the leader's perspective is that there are a limited number of giving dollars available from the people in the pew, then the idea of asking for more money becomes terrifying when faced with any special giving opportunity. If one's perspective is that an unlimited number of giving dollars are available, then some legitimate concerns will be considered, but with much less anxiety. It should be noted the former perspective described is much more likely to be shared among church leaders than the latter.

Nevertheless, the recent economic meltdown and lingering realities of a stinging recession will give most church leaders reason to question whether or not a capital project will negatively impact ongoing budget giving. RSI Church Stewardship went in search of the answer to this question. What they discovered is exactly the opposite of what a church leader might intuitively conclude. RSI Church Stewardship discovered that a special giving emphasis actually had a positive impact on budget giving.

THE PROJECT

Father John Fritschner leads a faithful congregation in the very popular college town of Auburn, Alabama. While many people come and go every four years, there is a group of people who call this community home. He remembers the most recent capital project being met with some concern from the congregation.

Father Fritschner says, “We desperately needed to rethink our parking capacity, and we also needed to expand the Parish Hall. While everyone agreed we needed these things, concerns loomed about whether this was the right time and if people would give to a special project at the expense of their regular giving.” He noted they had conducted two previous campaigns during his ministry at Holy Trinity and had experienced 7 percent increases in annual budget giving on average since his arrival in 1995.

Father Fritschner says, “Even though there was a lot of energy surrounding the ministry and annual giving was already strong, some of the lay leadership questioned if the church could handle a special giving emphasis that was 1.5 times our total budget, which would be the largest in the church’s history.” Nevertheless, his church decided to move forward. He believes trust from the congregation and past success was able to overcome any resistance.

Pastor Bob Hoffman leads the Community Reformed Church in Clinton, Iowa. This church is settled in a community that has experienced significant challenges as the result of a poor economy. Pastor Hoffman says, “The community in which our church exists is well-established and not growing.” He admits that many people see little hope for things getting better in their lives, so they don’t bring a great deal of optimism for growth and expansion to church.

Pastor Hoffman observed a great deal of fear and trepidation when the capital project was introduced to the church. He says, “This is a church that has only met budget needs five times in the past fifty-five years.” While there was a collective acknowledgement for facility improvements, including increased handicap accessibility and general building maintenance, a significant number of people questioned whether this effort would be successful.

Warren Nash is the executive pastor at Canterbury United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. “Our church is 140 years old and sits within a wealthy community.” Many of the members see giving to church as a charitable exercise much like giving to other philanthropic efforts rather than biblical stewardship—at least

until this experience according to Nash. He says, “We are a church that has the ability financially to do just about anything we want, but we had yet—at the introduction of the project—to fully actualize our potential.”

Our most recent capital effort came out of a ten-year plan that we divided into three phases. The total estimated cost was \$25 million. Nash says, “I remember some of our most committed and engaged members expressing their concern. They weren’t convinced of their ability to do this.” He remembers that the church’s campaign prior to this ten-year plan totaled \$2.1 million and took the congregation nearly ten years to pay it off.

THE IMPACT ON BUDGET GIVING

Father Fritschner says, “We learned what was possible—even in the midst of a recession.” Their goal was \$1 million, and he reports, “We never experienced any negative impact on our general giving. If anything, it continued to increase as it had every year during my tenure.” Father Fritschner said his congregation experienced a 15 percent increase in annual budget giving in the six months following the special giving emphasis.

Pastor Hoffman reports that total commitments were 2.8 times their annual budget at the time. He says, “Since the campaign began, we’ve experienced a 4.8 percent increase in our general budget. Giving is exceeding our weekly budget needs, and we have received one of the largest cash gifts in the church’s history.” Pastor Hoffman believes this campaign has impacted the culture of the church he leads while also growing his congregation spiritually in the providence and provision of God.

Nash says, “I’m a banker by training. I’ve seen a lot of ventures fail. What happened at Canterbury United Methodist Church was nothing short of the Holy Spirit invading this place.” He noted that during the ten-year project, the operating budget almost doubled, giving toward outreach almost tripled, and the attitude of the church is such that people now believe anything is possible.

In addition to the increase in budget giving, the church was able to pay off all expenses related to the capital project within the ten-year period. Nash says, “Further evidence of God’s blessing can be found in the ever-growing surplus we have in the capital project fund.” The surplus will be returned back to the church’s foundation, where it will be used to care for the facilities.

ADVICE FOR OTHER LEADERS

Father Fritschner says, “Expect to receive more money, experience an increase in the level of excitement among the congregation, and see new leaders emerge.” He believes there is no other period when the energy level of a congregation is higher than during a special giving process. Father Fritschner says, “Through this effort, our faithfulness, and God’s blessing, we are well poised for future ministry growth and engagement.”

When asked what advice he might have for other leaders considering such a move, Pastor Hoffman says, “Pray through it. Make sure God is in it. Do your best to involve your congregation from the very beginning.” He noted that this capital project became a spiritual venture and has had enduring implications on his church.

Nash’s advice for other leaders is threefold: (1) Don’t succumb to conventional wisdom, because God certainly doesn’t; (2) don’t pick a capital project consultant based on price (you’ll always recoup your investment and more); and (3) a special giving emphasis is not a financial event but a spiritual one. He says, “Prepare yourself to be amazed by the generosity and abundance that happens when the Holy Spirit gets involved. This event moved us from a spirit of scarcity to one of abundance.”

CONCLUSION

The experience of these three churches offers evidence to consider the reality that a special giving emphasis may have the ability to increase your budget giving rather than diminish it. These churches are similar in size and nature to many churches across the country. None of them sit in the country’s largest cities or do ministry among the wealthiest communities.

What is consistent among these three churches, though, is they clearly identified what they wanted to accomplish, they each devised a plan and assessed the financial risk, and they each proceeded forward in the midst of varying concerns. The result in every situation was nothing short of a miracle—both financially and spiritually.

These leaders certainly celebrated the financial stability an increase in budget giving can provide a congregation. Sustainability is a prominent topic of conversation among every church leader in uncertain economic conditions. However, the most celebrated elements were not financial at all. Each leader described the net result of their capital projects to be expanded ministry potential, deeper community engagement, and preparation for future growth.

Perhaps a better question is not whether budget giving will suffer in light of a special giving emphasis but what happens to a congregation that refuses to see expansion as part of a healthy ministry strategy.

Ben Stroup is a freelance writer, blogger, and consultant who specializes in topics related to church leadership, giving, communications, and technology. He posts regularly on The Content Matrix (www.thecontentmatrix.com) and can be reached at ben@benstroup.com.

PRODUCED BY

 **BEN** STROUP