

INSIGHT

SPRING 2017



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17 Ways to **Boost** Church Stewardship in 2017

by Ben Stroup

THE NEW YEAR HAS BEGUN AND WE ARE INTO THE SECOND SEASON OF THE YEAR. WHATEVER CHALLENGES YOU LAMENTED OR VICTORIES YOU CELEBRATED IN 2016, YOU HAVE BEGUN AGAIN. AND THAT IS EXCITING!

A new year also ushers in a new ministry budget that must be funded. Depending

on where you landed in 2016, you may feel exhausted from having to start all over again. The good news is, more than \$100 billion flows through religious organizations every year. That means there is plenty of money available to fund your ministry vision. The opportunity then is to harness those available dollars for Kingdom things, particularly local church ministry.

If you want fully to engage and activate your membership, as well as fully fund and resource your ministry plan in 2017, you need to do things differently than you ever have before. And that includes having a firm grasp on how the changing philanthropic landscape is affecting the funding of your ministry vision.

THE NEW REALITIES OF CHURCH GIVING

- **New donor acquisition must be a priority.** Most faith-based organizations and churches are experiencing a decline in overall donor file size or the total number of active donors. The contributing factors vary, but this is a widespread reality that must be confronted head on.
- **Retention of key multi-year donors is more critical than ever.** This is the “silent middle” in churches. They give consistently and increase their annual giving incrementally over time. The average annual contribution from a key multi-year giver is often four to seven times the annual contribution of a new giver. For a long time, this group has been the bread and butter of church funding, but that is changing, and the impact of those changes have only begun to be felt.
- **A financial leader strategy is essential.** I do not mean securing major donor funds during a capital campaign. You must engage this group relationally and with an intentional discipleship strategy that incorporates money into the mix outside a capital campaign environment, too. As fewer donors are contributing to funding ministry vision, churches are becoming more dependent on their top givers.
- **Reactivating lapsed and lost donors is a practical, yet often overlooked, priority.** This group is not as exciting as acquiring new donors or major donor development. It is critical that systems

are in place to make sure those who gave to you at one time have the opportunity to re-engage with you before too much time passes.

“A NEW DAY REQUIRES A NEW WAY”

I heard a pastor use this phrase recently to frame the need for change to his leadership team after I completed a deep dive into the past ten years of donor history, along with projections for the next five years. It stood out to me because this pastor had successfully funded ministry budgets of all sizes for nearly three decades, but, given the changing climate of philanthropy and its impact on church giving, his church was stuck.

I could not agree more with this sentiment. It was a turning point in our meeting, and I believe it can be a turning point for you, too. Let me suggest 17 ways you can effectively respond to this new giving climate and boost stewardship in your church in 2017:

1. **Your budget must become a ministry action plan.** People need to see the story and impact behind the numbers. They also need to know you are not simply perpetuating programs.
2. **All staff members must be able clearly to articulate in a compelling way how every dollar impacts the areas of ministry for which they are responsible.** Do not underestimate how personal interactions shape people’s propensity to give. With thoughtful preparation and practice, it is possible for every staff member to do this well.

3. **View the people in the pew as shareholders rather than a sure thing.** Invite the people in your congregation to invest in accomplishing the vision through their gifts. Do not demand a subsidy from them.
4. **Visually represent how every dollar is used online and in print.** Simplifying giving into pennies makes what people are funding very tangible. It also communicates that you are serious enough about making an impact to align what you say with how you choose to use money.
5. **Utilize marketing automation to supplement in-person interactions and engagement through segmentation and journey mapping.** People give to people and organizations with which they have affinity and connection, and technology has made that easier than ever before.
6. **Make giving stories part of your church culture.** When people share how they have grown in their orientation toward money, it helps others visualize what is possible in their lives.
7. **Find ways to teach giving habits at an early age.** If you wait to teach people about giving until they are adults, you will have a much steeper mountain to climb. Start early and make it fun.
8. **Use offering envelopes.** They may not have pizzazz, but they work. Whether you mail them monthly to your membership or simply offer them in the backs of your pews, do not neglect their

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power to invite someone intentionally to say “yes” to the giving experience.

9. **Expand your giving options — and remind your membership of them often.** Just because you have online, text or mobile giving doesn't mean everyone knows about it. Give people a chance to respond during the offertory in a way that is familiar and comfortable to them.
10. **Make stewardship part of your spiritual formation experience.** If you don't teach people what God has to say about money, how will they know? This includes debt, giving, tithing and generosity.
11. **Get visibility into the giving habits of your congregation.** You can't improve what you don't measure.
12. **Utilize quarterly contribution statements as a communications tool.** People are already going to open the mailing to ensure the accuracy of their giving information. Take the opportunity to recount the progress you've made toward your ministry plan and what you hope to accomplish in the next 90 days, too.
13. **Make stewardship and generosity part of your new membership process.** As you assimilate new members into your culture, be explicit that giving is an important value. This is also a great opportunity to tell them how the church uses money to create measurable ministry impact.
14. **Invest heavily in assimilation.** I will go to my grave believing that the single most under-valued and under-resourced element of creating a culture of generous givers is a lack of

strategic thinking and productive systems development around assimilation. The distance between a person's “yes” to membership and that individual becoming fully engaged in your community is filled with jump-off points. Lose people along the way and it can cripple your ability to grow mission participation, volunteers, and givers.

15. **Do not fear financial leaders.** They need to be disciplined, too. Despite popular thinking, money does not eliminate problems; it magnifies them. This is often the most overlooked group in any congregation.
16. **Stop apologizing for your operational budget!** Make sure it is in alignment with your ministry goals and action plan, but you must have buildings, staff, materials, etc., to be able to accomplish ministry and missions both locally and around the world. Your ability to build your ministry is only as strong as your foundation.
17. **Deal with the demons in your life related to money.** The greatest hindrance to creating a generous culture is a church led by someone who is not generous himself or herself. You are not fooling anyone.

NEW THINKING, NEW HABITS, NEW OUTCOMES

God has called you to accomplish something timely, relevant and specific in 2017. If God is provident, then God has also equipped you with the people, dollars and opportunity necessary to deliver on your mission. The new realities present in a changing ministry funding landscape are not excuses to sit and sulk about the good old days. Rather, they are

a call to act and adapt to ensure the Kingdom continues to advance until Christ's return.

The weeks and months ahead will be pivotal. When you have a clear ministry plan, you know where you are headed and what it is going to take to get there. Eliminating the guess-work of funding ministry vision has never been more accessible and in reach than it is right now. Perhaps the biggest obstacle you must overcome is you. Until you open your mind to the possibilities and opportunities in front of you, your ministry potential will be limited.

The call to follow Jesus is one grounded in reckless abandonment. God calls us to do the same when it comes to advancing the Kingdom through ministry funding and impact. Do not let fear sideline you another year; rather, let fear focus your efforts and energy toward new ways of thinking, new strategies and ideas, new habits and, ultimately, new outcomes.

CHALLENGE:

How will your stewardship strategies adapt to a new giving climate in 2017 to ensure you can act on the vision God has already placed in your heart? How will you need to change to be the generous leader your people need you to be? What must be true for you and your church to accomplish the ministry you have been called to complete this year?



Author

Ben Stroup is the director of Strategic Development at The Christian Broadcasting Network and can be reached at ben.stroup@cbn.org.

