

Should a Pastor Know What Church Members Give?



Every time I teach a stewardship workshop or class, this question invariably comes up: “Should a pastor have access to contribution records?” In some congregations, pastors are prohibited from knowing what people contribute. In others, pastors choose to shield themselves from this information.

The stated reason often is the concern that a pastor might show favoritism to those who contribute more generously or fail to minister adequately to the less generous. But really? What pastor is so obsessed with money that he or she is incapable of ministering fairly and compassionately to all? Anyone that crass would probably play favorites with those who attend worship and Bible study more regularly, too. Yet no one suggests that pastors wear blindfolds in the pulpit to prevent them from seeing who is in the pews on Sunday morning.

A good pastor pays attention to all the signs of spiritual development. And someone’s giving is one important fruit of spiritual maturity. Growth in giving can signal a deepening faith commitment. And an unexpected drop in giving can be a symptom of other pastoral concerns, such as illness or unemployment.

Pastors who do not know what people give cannot help but make assumptions. And those assumptions are almost invariably wrong. The quiet shut-in who has not attended church in years might not seem like a key player in the life of your church. But if she is the congregation’s most faithful tither, doesn’t she deserve affirmation and thanks? It is easy to assume that an active church leader is also a faithful steward. But what if that leader was never taught the fundamentals of faith and generosity? Isn’t it better to know than to guess wrongly?

There are valid pastoral, spiritual, and developmental reasons why pastors, and sometimes other key church leaders, should know what people give. But money can be a touchy subject. And people might be upset if they assume their giving is unknown to the pastor or others and then find out otherwise. If this information has always been tightly guarded, think carefully about the best ways to begin to pierce the veil of secrecy. Here are a couple of options.

Establish a Policy

Some churches find it helpful to formulate a clear policy around access to giving records. Begin by asking the question, “Who already knows what people give?” Even in churches where there is a high level of secrecy around contributions, *somebody* knows what people give. Is it the teller, the church treasurer, the office bookkeeper, the church administrator, or all of the above? Then ask who else needs to know and why? Do the clergy need to know for pastoral reasons? Do finance or stewardship leaders need to know to promote better stewardship? Formulate a clear policy and ask your finance committee and your governing board to approve it.

Give People an Option

A church in New England had the idea of adding a check box to their pledge card that said, “It is all right to share my pledge amount with my pastor.” At the last minute, they decided to make it an opt-out box instead, reading “Please do not share with my pastor my pledge amount.” This alerts people to the fact that the pastor knows, but gives them a choice in the matter if it causes discomfort. The pastor reports that very few people check the box.

Leaders Can Model the Way

Ultimately, the best way to foster a culture of greater transparency around giving is to talk about it more. Pastors and other key leaders can model the way by openly discussing how much they give and why. This sharing should be done in thoughtful and appropriate ways, of course. But when we share testimonies about our giving, when we take encouragement rather than offense when someone learns about our generosity, we teach and inspire others about the importance of faithful giving.

I am not suggesting that a church print pledge or giving amounts in the newsletter. Although strangely, many people who insist on secrecy regarding church giving don't object to their names and giving levels appearing in the annual reports of other charities. In fact, they would be upset if their *alma mater*, the local hospital, or even the denominational seminary left them off their contributors' list!

But the conspiracy of silence around money and giving in our churches is contrary to responsible stewardship. Accountable discipleship requires that we be far more honest and transparent around everything having to do with faith and money. And being a bit more open about our giving and a little less uptight about who knows, are good steps in that direction.

By Ann A. Michel, Leading Ideas, Lewis Center for Church Leadership, 2015