

Is The Message Getting Through?

By Jim Newman

Recently I was asked what might be the most important stewardship question of the past 20 years. It was at one of the Pre-Synod meetings that are held in every region of the Diocese of Niagara in October and early November. These meetings are excellent opportunities to review the Diocesan budget, and they also offer occasions to provide information about services available from the Diocesan Resource Centre. Such was the case recently when, as the new Director of Stewardship and Financial Development, I presented an overview of goals, objectives and priorities for the coming year. Here's the question:

"You mentioned that Anglicans in Niagara give, on average, about 1.5% of their household income each year to their parishes. You also say that we need to do better. But that percentage has not changed over the last many, many years. Do you think that the message about being substantially more generous givers is not getting through to parishioners, or that it is getting through but they are not responding?"

That question

I don't know the definitive answer. I do know that many Anglicans give above the 1.5% average – they give 3%, 5%, 10% or more of their incomes to parishes and other worthy causes, plus their time and talents. Some are tithing or working their way up to a goal of giving at the biblical tithe level. Are they the ones that "get it"? If so, what is "it" anyway?

Here's what I think "it" is. Kennon Callahan, noted Presbyterian pastor, researcher, professor, church consultant and speaker says: *"The churches that do the best in church finances have a rich, full, abiding passion for mission. They are motivated by a theology of service, not a theology of survival. Their compelling, driving spirit is one of giving, serving, loving mission."*

Anglicans who give generously understand the importance of support for the work of our churches in the community, the diocese, across Canada and around the world. They also understand their role as ministers of the Gospel by virtue of their Christian baptism. They talk about their faith often and comfortably while being respectful of others. They understand the importance of hospitality in the process of evangelism, and they demonstrate it.

Making the right connections

All of this says to me that stewardship programs that ask people to "fund the budget" don't work very well. Instead we must help parishioners connect their motivation for giving to their parish's mission and ministries. We help them make that connection when we ask them to give to help teach children and to fund mission work locally and worldwide. We help them make that connection when we ask people to give generously to support clergy as they visit the sick, provide pastoral counseling, offer Holy Communion to shut-ins, and give spiritual guidance to others.

It's up to parish Corporations and all of us who "get it" to make those strong connections by talking about leadership, evangelism, and stewardship – the three-legged stool is critical to our mission. One of the best vehicles to model this in your parish is a narrative budget, but there are other ways too. For example, if our parish needs funds for Christian Education facilities, we could talk about a family that joined another parish because ours lacked adequate space.

We can be the kind of church we need to be if we give generously to our mission and ministries from a theology of abundance. I think that's our responsibility as Christians.