

A Conversation about Stewardship and the Future of the Anglican Church

In October the Synod Office announced Jim Newman's retirement from the position of Director of Stewardship and Financial Development in Niagara. Jim had a heart attack in September but is now well on the way to a full recovery. Recently the Niagara Anglican interviewed Jim to chat about his "tour of duty" with the Diocese.

Was retirement for a second time a difficult decision for you?

Yes. I enjoyed working with the staff at the Diocesan Resource Centre; they are an excellent group of dedicated people. I visited many parishes and meet lots of wonderful, generous, and committed Christian people, and I learned so much about stewardship. But retirement was the right decision for me, given the circumstances. I'm taking good care of myself and getting healthy again.

Let's talk about stewardship. There's been a long term problem of inadequate revenue in many parishes in Niagara. What have you discovered about that?

I discovered that the traditional approach to stewardship only goes so far. You may have heard me say that we need to develop a *culture of stewardship* in Niagara. That's been the number one goal of the Stewardship and Financial Development Committee for 2005-2006.

A major breakthrough occurred at Synod last year when delegates were asked to respond in writing to a three-part question. First we asked: *If we had a Culture of Stewardship in Niagara, what would it look like?* Without hesitation the delegates wrote comments that in summary said:

- Our focus would be on ministry and service
- Our churches would be growing
- More programs would be offered
- God would be working in people's hearts
- Parish needs would be seen as opportunities, not challenges
- We would give with thankful hearts; not out of duty
- Normal average giving would be 5%
- We'd be working together as a diocese.

That's an inspired description, don't you think? Second we asked: *Are there barriers to developing it?* Once again they came up with an amazingly insightful list that included:

- The plague of consumerism
- Concern about how money would be used
- Insecurity about unemployment
- A deep sense of scarcity
- Uncertainty about the future of the church
- A lack of sound teaching on stewardship principles
- Need for focus on mission and outreach
- A sense that the church will always exist and God will always provide

And then we asked: *What two things will you do in your parish in the next ten days to bring it about?* Again there were an overwhelming number of responses, which I've condensed down to the 21 shown here. They said they would:

- Preach about abundance
- Discuss year-round stewardship
- Write follow up letters
- Present a clear picture of parish finances to parish council
- Question how others feel about stewardship
- Encourage legacy planning
- Publicize planned giving
- Renew story telling
- Articulate mission
- Highlight accomplishments
- Lead by example
- Give a testimonial
- Emphasize outreach
- Review their financial position
- Create a will
- Increase their financial giving
- Seek God's will for tithes and offerings
- Write cheques
- Develop narrative budgets
- Institute pre-authorized payments and commitment cards
- Encourage more use of the legacy planner.

A culture of stewardship - in a manner of minutes they had described it, named the barriers to it, and identified many constructive steps and actions to bring it about. But the barriers are powerful. When one considers that our Diocese is located in one of the most affluent parts of the world, it seems inconceivable that we would have many more parishes struggling that not. And look at the urban sprawl and changes in demographics – one might expect we'd be planting a church or two.

So how do we get there?

I've read many of the books, pondered the case studies, been to major conferences, courses, and seminars, listened to many of the experts, and belong to the right professional groups. I've also been the Chair of the Ontario Stewardship Network – a group of Anglican and Lutheran stewardship professionals who share their best practices. All of us see similar problems in our parishes and congregations.

I decided to revisit the recommendations of the experts, starting with David Gordon. You'll recall that the Diocese of Niagara adopted his stewardship program nearly a decade ago. It's based on sound biblical teaching about stewardship that includes the following points:

- God created everything, and everything still belongs to God. Our role is to be the caretakers or stewards.
- We're stewards of our environment, our churches, others, and ourselves. The church is the basic channel for our personal stewardship.

- Our offerings of time, talent, and treasure are offerings of ourselves in our role as stewards. Our motivation for giving comes from the realization of what God has done and continues to do for us.
- Stewardship is or should be a way of life. But of course we can choose to accept this role or not.

The David Gordon model provided a sound process as well including a Stewardship Chair and Committee, a detailed Stewardship Calendar, Parish Planning Days to update the parish budget about future needs, and a Parish Event to celebrate the response. Initially it worked quite well. But after a few years the David Gordon program lost momentum. The problem may have been related to how it was used. Many Parish Planning Days were poorly attended, and others tended to focus on capital improvements.

What else did you do?

I also revisited the work of Terry Parsons, Stewardship Staff Officer for the Episcopal Church. She presented a workshop called “Seven Secrets to Amazing Stewardship” at the Ontario Stewardship Network Conference in May 2005. Unfortunately that conference was not well attended by folks from Niagara.

Essentially the Seven Steps are:

- *Pray* - stewardship must be prayer based
- *Engage the Gospel* – it’s more than reading and listening. Engaging means “Seriously asking yourself what you are you going to do about it”
- *Rebuke scarcity and*
- *Claim abundance*
- *Say thank you* every chance you get (to others and to God)
- *Teach and nurture* “holy habits” (e.g. praying, tithing)
- *Set the example* you want to see

It’s difficult to find fault with this approach, and I think it’s a great way to strengthen the David Gordon program.

So does it work?

There was some interest shown by parishes, but not as much as one would think. Most parishes seem to think they are doing all of this already.

Did you find any other experts with good advice?

Yes, there’s a Presbyterian pastor, researcher, professor, church consultant and speaker named Dr. Kennon Callahan who has a somewhat different approach. He 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.*”

Callahan gives an extensive seminar called *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*. The content is practical and his examples are inspiring. One of the most useful points I picked up is that people respond best to three things: *compassion, community, and hope*.

I was thrilled to see how well this approach tied in with the work we’d been doing with narrative budgets. Narrative Budgets are a fantastic tool - they focus on telling the parish story about its mission work, and it’s true - most people are motivated by that.

So whose advice should one follow?

All of these experts deliver sound advice. It's all scripturally based, it's all compatible, and it all combines to make one completely inclusive stewardship program. But the overall results so far in Niagara are still rather disappointing.

Where did that lead you next?

I considered the approach taken by universities and hospitals. They are exceptionally good at developing funding. For example, McMaster University receives numerous gifts in the range of \$1,000,000. There are more than 1200 President's Circle members who give annual gifts of \$500 or more. And in 2004 McMaster received the largest single cash gift in Canadian history; \$105,000,000! Donor Michael G. DeGroote said "*I am confident of McMaster's ability to maximize the impact of this gift so that its net effect will have far-reaching benefits.*"

It sounds like you are on to something here . . .

Yes! Universities and hospitals are using Callahan's approach. They understand the importance of focussing on their mission, and building on compassion, community and hope. They are wonderful story tellers. They also understand the importance of advocacy, public relations and marketing. It seems to me that our parishes are missing the first of those three things: advocacy!

How would advocacy work in a parish?

Well, there's a large group of parishioners and the un-churched too who form what I call a quiet majority. Probably less than 50% of parishioners are aware of all their parish is doing. The competition for their attention is fierce. And in turn, parishes may not be paying attention to what people love and value.

This is starting to sound pretty commercial. Aren't you concerned this is too secular?

No, absolutely not. Remember, "*We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous . . .*" I believe our model and reference point should be our own Lord and Saviour.

I think parishes need Leader-Advocates to create common agendas, to develop effective messages and dialogues, to deliver the right message to the right people, and to create networks of more advocates. We have some, but not nearly enough. Leader-Advocates would speak out on behalf of parishes and their role in the community, ensure there is a positive public perception of parishes and their value, and provide a forum for people to work in parish stewardship and financial development.

So is the overall goal to save parishes or to advance the Kingdom of God and carry out the Great Commission?

It's both! A closed or declining parish is in no position to evangelize and advance the Kingdom.

You mentioned there's an important role for public relations and marketing in a parish.

Yes, “public relations” is about getting the parish’s message across. In other words, *this is who we are and what we do, this is when and where we do it, and for whom*. Marketing on the other hand is finding out what parishioners and potential parishioners need, and changing when necessary to meet those needs. *Who are you, and what do you need, how, when and where can we best deliver it to you, and what are you willing to support?* Canon Michael Patterson, the Diocesan Director of Evangelism, is doing extraordinarily good work in evangelism - that’s the church’s word for marketing. He has a whole toolbox of resources, and we are fortunate to have his sound expertise in the Diocese.

How is Advocacy-Leadership different?

I believe there’s a BIG role for Advocacy-Leadership. Traditionally there’s been an expectation that stewardship will be the responsibility of three or four people such as the Stewardship Chair, the Rector and Wardens. But it needs to be much wider and deeper than that. We need parishes FULL of Leader-Advocates who are working on developing *a culture of stewardship*. They need to be:

- Supporting, encouraging and building support and awareness incrementally
- Telling their personal and parish stories
- Creating conditions that allow others to act
- Expanding others’ experiences and creating memories
- Confirming their identity as Christians
- Enhancing awareness and appreciation of our parishes and the Synod Office
- Creating relationships, partnerships, and coalitions
- Being responsible as leaders
- Giving generously; at least at the 5% level or higher

I’m talking about modelling a different kind of stewardship. Parishioners who are Leader-Advocates are willing to show that we have something in our faith that, unlike a commodity, has real value. They can visualize their parish as a strong, viable, and valuable institution. They understand that *people love their parishes, but parishes can’t live on love*.

I’m not sure I have the courage to be a Leader-Advocate.

Remember those “barriers” to developing *a culture of stewardship*? What points can you make that are more compelling than the parish’s tendency to preserve the status quo? Leader-Advocates are people who combine belief, passion, and courage. They are example-setters, and pace-setters. They use their spiritual gifts and their learned skills. They are generous with their time, talent, and treasure. The reality is - they’re ordinary people doing extraordinary things through the Holy Spirit.

What about tools and resources?

We have lots of tools and resources including:

- The Healthy Parish Check List
- The Narrative Budgeting Tool
- Bulletin inserts and Ministry Moments
- The Parish Assessment Tool
- The Proportional giving guide

- The Intention Card and PAG
- The David Gordon program
- Terry Parson's "seven secrets"
- The Kennon Callahan program
- Planned Giving methodologies and materials
- The Diocesan Website
- And lots of assistance is available from the Diocesan Resource Centre, clergy, stewardship chairs, and other parishes.

Think of the competition - there are more than 85,000 registered charities in Canada. The old way of asking people to give "because our parish needs the money" just isn't going to cut it any longer. Leader-Advocates will work in the front lines of public relations, marketing, and parish advocacy. And most of the time there's no significant cost outlay required. The Jamesville Community Centre in Hamilton is a wonderful example. The lack of recreational facilities and community space available to people living in the Jamesville neighbourhood was a concern. A group of people undertook a project spearheaded by Christ's Church Cathedral that created a community centre. None of the partners could have done it alone, but together they were able to put together existing space, skill sets, and resources for use by the whole community. The project was about compassion, community, and hope.

So you're saying we have the tools, but what we really need are strong Leader-Advocates who will keep parishes simmering all year round.

Yes. There should be at least a dozen in every parish, and hundreds across the Diocese!

How would this happen?

I think we have to re-position our parishes effectively and we have to do it soon! A good way forward would be to look in the Diocese for the natural groupings that have a propensity toward leadership - for example, all the people who attended The Leadership Conference on October 28th. I expect they would welcome continued dialogue and be supportive of initiatives about developing *a culture of stewardship*.

It's a simple choice, really. We can continue to do what we've been doing and risk seeing many of our churches decline, or we can change. We can continue to spend an inordinate amount of time worrying about the future and appearing to focus on church politics and scarcity, or we can recast our focus on mission and ministry.

I'm in favour of recasting our focus on mission and ministry. Then we'll give from a theology of abundance. If we do it well, as I believe we can and should, we can be the kind of church that I think God wants us to be – viable, and filled with compassion, community, and hope!