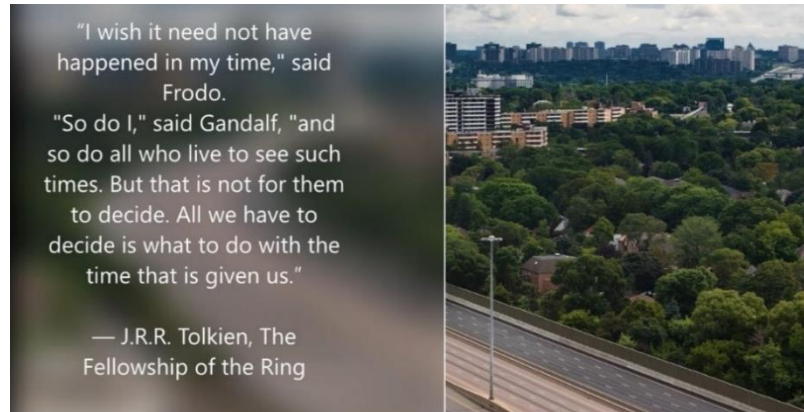


Stewardship and the Bottom Line in the Time of a Pandemic

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As the shutdown of church buildings began, I found myself thinking, “This COVID-19 Pandemic has come at the worst time”. But I cannot imagine that there will be or has ever been a *good time* for a pandemic. So, after my initial feelings of frustration and then wallowing I’m now getting on with the things that need to get done. It’s resigned acceptance or perhaps I’m just going through the stages of grief.



I don't need to tell you that many churches already operate on a shoestring budget. With church buildings closed and the offering plate inaccessible this will not help the bottom line. “Get them giving online,” says every article I have read on church fund development over the last week. While this might work for some, many in our parishes, for a variety of reasons, will not be able to give in this way. So, what else can we do to encourage giving – to encourage stewardship for all – during the time of a pandemic?

The goal of stewardship is not more giving - it's the development of a spirit of gratitude and generosity.

I know talking about stewardship won't solve the bottom line today but as Denis Greene, founder and Principal of Church Development said, [“Good stewardship makes fundraising unnecessary”](#). When parishioners understand that they are a part of God's mission to care for the world using all the gifts God has given them, they will give back to God in ways that are meaningful and significant. They will give in response to the love and gifts God gives – not in response to the church budget. Parishioners will participate in God's call to be stewards of all their resources for the care of creation and to be the hands and feet of Christ Jesus. This means not only stewarding their financial resources but also their time and skills.

What does this practically mean during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

This is a good time to teach parishioners young and old about stewardship – the true meaning of stewardship. This is particularly true when some parishioners find themselves without income, or reduced wages, or an unpredictable future due to the pandemic. It is not the time for panic and anxious thoughts of where resources will come from to not only sustain the ministries of a parish but to simply keep the church building open. Truly, this is all in God's hands. **God's got this.** This is the message needed by parishioners now.

In a crisis such as this, the message matters. The message of hope means keep pressing on in the work you've been called to. It also means **stop telling parishioners to "give now"** of their finances to their church or there will be a deficit. This type of messaging only breeds a scarcity mindset – the limiting belief that there will never be enough. The message of scarcity is the opposite of stewardship and it will do long term damage to a church – affecting the finances, volunteers, and the overall spirit of the parish. Yes, there may be a spike in financial giving at the start of such a campaign, but it will taper off and you will be back asking again.



Instead, **focus on the *why* of giving**. Reflect first on why you give to church or other charities? What motivates you to share your resources with an organization? Take notice of the messages that have been meaningful and motivating for you. Then think on why others give to church. Likely you know parishioners that give because they believe it's the right thing to do or it's what they've always done – like a membership fee. Often, these givers have not changed the amount they give in years. Some parishioners give meaningful and significant financial gifts to their church because they have a mission in life, and they believe their church is helping them to accomplish this mission. They give as a disciple. Then there are those somewhere in between.

So instead of saying, "Please give to St. Bartholomew's Church and stop the deficit from growing" you might instead say, "You're invited to support your home church, St. Bartholomew's, so we can invite others to make our church their church." While both statements are true, the latter is motivating, inspiring and emotive. The decision to make a financial gift, particularly one that is meaningful and significant for the giver, is motivated mostly by emotion and then backed up by reason.

But, how can stewardship be taught *right now* to parishioners?

Invite parishioners into a deeper understanding of the spiritual practice of stewardship through email, individual phone calls, and on-line gatherings. Share scripture that demonstrates God's gifts and care for us, such as the creation story or the story of the loaves and fishes. Talk about how God has been blessing you during this unprecedented time – not in a saccharin way but in an honest and transparent way.

Share your gratitude for your church community using specific examples. Encourage parishioners to do the same, asking them to reflect on questions like, "How have you seen God moving in your life these past couple weeks?" or "What is it about our church community that you are grateful for?" This could be done as a Bible Study through a Zoom meeting, Google Hangouts, Skype, or Facebook Live. But remember, written reflections are important and not everything needs to be live online.



Practical ways parishioners can participate in stewarding their resources includes staying home. I know it's hard to imagine being the hands and feet of Christ Jesus by staying home when people are in need. But **staying at home is truly a way to be a good steward at this time**. Staying at home is not only about protecting yourself, it's about protecting others. So, as a popular Facebook quote says, "Keep calm and stay home".

During this time of physical distancing stewardship does look different. But **parishioners are still needed** – and they want to be needed. Share ways that parishioners can **participate from home**. Do not ask parishioners to leave their homes – even if it's to drop off non-perishables into a bin for foodbanks or a cheque through the church's mail slot. There will still be need when we no longer must practice such rigorous physical distancing.

Stewardship now can be giving time to pray for our family and friends, the homeless, first responders, government leaders, and the list goes on. It may mean meditating on God's word or digging into other meditative books that draw us closer to God. Giving of time may mean joining in online with others for evening prayer or a Bible Study. It might mean organizing volunteers to give of their time to call certain people using the old fashion phone tree. Now more than ever picking up the phone just to say "hi" may make all the difference in another person's life, including your own.



Giving of time and talent now may mean knitting blankets to give to a hospice, when it is safe to do so. It may mean learning to cook a new meal so that it can be made again for a church potluck, when we can all gather again. It may mean making cards or crafts too give to healthcare workers when it's safe to do so. It may mean sitting in a comfy chair reading a "How to" book so these improved skills can be shared when it is safe to do so.

It's important to continue to send out messages of care to parishioners.

Parishioners need to know that they are cared for and that their wellbeing matters during this uncertain time. They also want to know that their church community and the people in their diocese are doing okay too. Do share some of the updates of your parish (not gossip of course) and pass on some of the updates being received from the diocese. Let parishioners know that the leaders of the diocese, in particular our bishop, are in constant contact with the archdeacons, the House of Bishops, our metropolitan, and our primate. Let parishioners know that we are working together, sharing resources, and praying together. Assure parishioners that while this is an unprecedented time, we continue to navigate this together as the Anglican communion locally, provincially, nationally, and globally.

Through all this remember to thank parishioners. **Thankfulness plays a big role in stewardship**. Maybe it's time to go through the parish roll and phone or email each person to say thank you for something specific that the individual or family did. Don't force it but do try. Even if it's simply an email that says,



“Dear Bea and John,

Your presence is appreciated and I’m sorry that we are not able to gather as a church family during this time. Thank you for being a part of the St. Margaret’s community. I’m glad that it is your home church. Know that you are being thought of and prayed for. Please know I am here for you. Do let me know how I may pray more specifically for you. I ask that you please keep our church community in your prayers as well. (Then give a short update about the diocese as a whole – maybe a quote from the Bishop’s most recent update.) Thank you, Bea and John.”

Keep it simple and focused. Please consider adding a P.S. to a link for the Bishop’s Sunday prayer service asking them to join with other Anglicans from across the Diocese. **Do not include an ask for finances** or provide a way to give financially. Save that for another communication for another day, otherwise the thank you is cheapened.

It’s okay to still give by cheques.

Finally, there is a way to give financially that does not include online. It’s giving by cheque – but saving these written cheques for when we’re together in the church building. Some parishioners do experience the writing of their Sunday offering cheque as a form of spiritual discipline. That’s beautiful and welcomed. So, for those who do prefer to give by cheque, it’s okay. Perhaps these parishioners can be encouraged to **make a pledge** to give their cheques or a certain amount when church services resume in person. Maybe encourage the amount they would have given and an extra offering if they can. Ask them to then let a warden, envelope secretary, or priest know of their commitment to give. This verbal or written commitment will encourage the giver to fulfill their commitment.

And yes, it’s also okay to encourage pre-authorized giving or giving online through the diocesan website or CanadaHelps. But do this as a reminder and in tandem with the message on the spiritual practice of Stewardship – on what it means to be a disciple of Christ and a part of a church community. Be inviting and inspiring – do not talk about the church bills or making budget. Instead, **remind parishioners of the mission and vision of their parish**, best demonstrated through firsthand stories.

Finally, be kind.

Remember to be kind to yourself. Please, take heart that we are all in this experience together and we will get through it as a community. Please connect with me any time. I would be delighted to brainstorm, bounce ideas, and listen as well as provide feedback and advice on your stewardship and fund development questions.

