

Stewardship & Fundraising: An Intentional Balance

By David S. Bell

Annual financial campaigns are conducted in many churches during the final quarter of a calendar year. Historically, annual financial campaigns were linked to the Fall harvest. However, this historic reason has been forgotten in the past several decades. Church leaders now often equate the annual financial campaign with the need to secure funding for the operating budget. Since the fiscal year often coincides with the calendar year, annual financial campaigns continue to be held predominantly during this same period.

By shifting to a budget-driven campaign, the emphasis has deviated radically from offering God “first fruits” to funding the operating budget. The end result is usually a group of well-intentioned church leaders planning a fundraising effort to meet annual expenses. Church leaders are drawn from a Christian stewardship focus to a fundraising drive. This shift changes the primary focus away from the interest of the donor and to the primary needs of the church.

While fundraising and Christian stewardship are interrelated, distinct differences do exist. All Christian stewardship practices do not involve fundraising. All fundraising efforts are not grounded in Christian stewardship. Christian stewardship is primarily a theological concept that influences lifestyle, personal choices, and communal behavior. It asks the questions, “Whose is it anyways?” “To whom does it belong?” The answer is consistent. “It belongs to God. All is a gift from God.”

Fundraising, in part, is a learned skill and intentional strategy to drive donor generosity and to match donor intent with organizational purpose. Fundraising is necessary for the success of most charities. Fundraisers cultivate donors. Fundraisers educate potential and current donors about various planned gifts. Fundraisers invite donors to consider major gifts, life income gifts, and bequests. Fundraisers present compelling stories about transformation, hope, and possibility through the work of the charity.

Secular charities are not dependent on any understanding of Christian stewardship. Their fundraisers do not contemplate Christian stewardship in their donor activity. The Church is different. The Church is uniquely positioned to embrace both Christian stewardship and fundraising. In fact, the most successful ministries recognize the necessity of both. Moreover, these churches have achieved a well-developed interplay between Christian stewardship and fundraising. They provide holistic, ongoing stewardship education. This education serves as a springboard to launch a myriad of outcomes, including effective fundraising.

Church fundraising increases the bottom line of the church’s income. It invites donors to contribute from both earned income and appreciated assets. It enables church leaders to meet operating expenses, build endowments, complete capital campaigns, and, most importantly, impact people through its ministry. However, these fundraising efforts will be enhanced greatly if Christian stewardship is the core foundation upon which giving is built. When placed in the context of a faith-based organization, fundraising is a toolbox full of techniques and resources to help faithful people live generous lives.

Christian stewardship is Spirit-raising! It focuses on theocentric matters. It requires people’s spiritual commitment. It connects faith and money in our daily living. It challenges potential donors to ponder questions like, “How much money am I able to give faithfully as a spiritual response to God and to God’s great works?”

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John Wesley underscored these principles when he preached The Good Steward. He stated, “We are indebted to Him for all we have. But although a debtor is obliged to return what he has received, yet until the time of payment comes, he is at liberty to use it as he pleases. It is not so with a steward; he is not at liberty to use what is lodged in his hands as he pleases, but as his Master pleases.” Stewardship raises expectations of selflessness in our obedience to God through Jesus Christ. It requires life-long spiritual growth. Stewards are called to do good for all people.

The interrelation between Christian stewardship and fundraising techniques is well-connected in thriving churches. These churches provide effective, year-round stewardship education that builds a climate of generosity. Within this climate, fundraisers may solicit gifts based on the intent, passion, and capacity of donors. These churches are ready to receive the harvest with full anticipation that the first fruits will provide spiritual abundance, both for the giver and for the receiver.