

Stewardship Needs Assessment

The Results are In!

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In the late spring of this year, rectors/vicars, stewardship committees and senior/bishop's wardens were asked by the Diocese of West Texas to complete an online survey regarding their philosophies and practices in stewardship. Both clergy and laypeople were quite generous in responding to our request for information, as participation was excellent. Of 213 survey requests 111 were completed. Sixty-nine congregations were represented with 67% of clergy (40 out of 60) responding and 46% of laity (71 out of 153). The majority of questions required a ranking of 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neutral, 4=Disagree and 5=Strongly Disagree. From the information received, an interesting portrait of the Diocese emerges.

GENERAL INFORMATION:

First, most congregations are of small or medium size, with 60% having an average Sunday attendance of under 100. Seventy-nine percent report having an active mission statement. However, only 27% have revised it within the last three years. About 21% report the mission statement being older than five years and another 21% don't know when their mission statement was drafted.

ANNUAL PLEDGE CAMPAIGN:

Of the congregations responding, 97% conduct a pledge drive each year. In this drive, 62% report God as the main focus of the drive, with 24% listing mission/ministry as the focus, 13% focusing on spiritual transformation, and budget/bill-paying being the main theme for 24%. In 35%, budget/bill-paying is the secondary focus.



Answer	Number of Responses					
God (giving back to Him, showing thanks to Him, etc.)	62%	9%	7%	7%	14%	111
The mission and ministry of the church	24%	32%	24%	9%	9%	111
Spiritual transformation of members	12%	27%	29%	16%	13%	111
Balancing the budget	9%	18%	20%	22%	27%	111
Paying the bills	13%	17%	16%	21%	31%	111

In terms of participation in the pledge drive, one quarter of congregations report participation at less than 50%, with another third at 51-75%. These numbers are troubling, since stewardship professionals suggest that an efficiently conducted campaign should be able to garner 75% participation.

COMMENTS:

Compared to a similar assessment I conducted for the Diocese of Ohio in 2008, these numbers are fairly typical. While most congregations have a mission statement, it is not unusual for such a statement to languish after completion. It is too often viewed as a task to be completed rather than a tool to be used in an ongoing conversation about God's call to the community. Also typical is the focus on money in the pledge drive. Nearly 60% report it being the primary or secondary focus of their drives. This is supported further by the 63% of congregations who budget after the drive is complete. It is common for the pledge drive to control the budget rather than the converse. Instead, a preliminary budget should be drafted *before* a pledge drive is conducted. Why? Because the parish budget is a tool for expressing God's will for the parish. Presumably, a Vestry/Bishop's Committee meets, discerns the direction God wants the parish to go, and draws up a budget that lives out that call. That budget, reflecting God's call, is used to develop a goal for the pledge drive. After the drive is complete, it may or may not be necessary to reassess how the parish lives into God's call based on the results. The ordering of the budget and pledge drive is a topic broad enough for another complete article!

That congregant participation in the pledge drive is at less than 50% for a quarter of our congregations is concerning, as is the more than half of congregations below the 75% participation benchmark. I feel this argues strongly that there is a lot of room for improvement in stewardship practices at the congregation level.

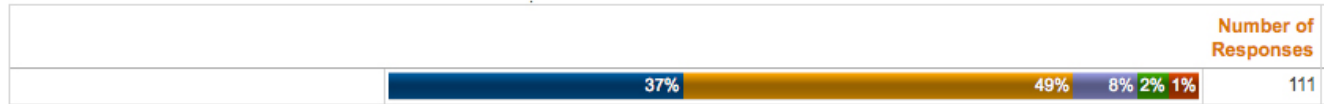
MEMBER DEVELOPMENT:

The focus of the needs assessment then transitioned into respondents' feelings regarding giving, both personally and in their congregations. Two thirds of respondents feel their members have a good understanding of giving theology, and 60% feel that their parishioners are living this out. However, from there a significant disconnect exists, as only 33% feel that their members are giving as much as they can. It is also interesting to note the split between lay and ordained respondents on this question. Forty-three percent of lay respondents feel that their members are giving as much as they can, while only 13.5% of clergy feel that way. There are similar splits in agreeing that members understand giving theology and are putting it into practice.

HOW I FEEL ABOUT GIVING:

Moving to the tithe, only 37% “strongly agree” that it is the standard of Christian giving, though another 49% simply “agree”.

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Again, there was a significant lay/ordained split, with 51% of clergy “strongly agreeing” with the tithe as the giving standard vs. 31% of the laity. The lay/ordained split on actual tithing practice was much smaller than expected. Of all respondents, 64% report tithing personally. Seventy-three percent of responding clergy tithe while 59% of lay respondents did so. I find these last numbers difficult to interpret. I am surprised that less than three quarters of the clergy participating in the survey report tithing. On the other hand, 59% of lay people tithing is an extremely high number that, quite frankly, I have difficulty with. Perhaps there is not a uniform understanding of what constitutes tithing. But also we can expect our lay respondents, as stewardship committee members and wardens, to be more generous in their giving. When participants were asked about their feelings on proportional giving, the results were quite similar to those for tithing with 37% “strongly agreeing” and 47% simply “agreeing” that they are committed to proportional giving. I again find it concerning, as growing an individual's giving habits is, in my opinion, difficult without this tool.

DISCUSSING STEWARDSHIP:

Of course the first step in growing the giving habits of parishioners is having leadership that is comfortable talking about the subject, and the final section of the needs assessment dealt with just that. Ninety-two percent of clergy feel comfortable talking about giving (“strongly agree” + “agree”), as do 73% of lay respondents. However, when clergy were asked whether their lay leadership is comfortable with the topic, only 10% “strongly agree”, with another 45% “agreeing”. That leaves 45% of clergy with a lay stewardship team in place that they don't feel is comfortable with the subject. Further, only 13% of all respondents “strongly agree” that they have the skills to conduct a pledge drive, while 50% “agree”. Where does that leave the remaining 36%?

STEWARDSHIP EDUCATION:

Finally, we asked clergy how they approach stewardship education practically. Fifty percent report knowing what their members give. Only 8% “strongly agree” that they actively engage the congregation on the subject of giving. For methods, 65% feel they do their most effective teaching from the pulpit, 46% through written articles, 38% through personal conversations, and 32% through

formal teaching. Obviously, many clergy use multiple methods, as the percentages show. However, the most popular techniques, preaching and writing, are also the most impersonal, and, I would argue, the least likely to result in changed behavior.

CONCLUSION:

So, where do the results of this needs assessment leave us?

- The Diocese of West Texas is largely composed of small- and medium-sized congregations.
- Most have a mission statement, but it is often not recent.
- Nearly all congregations do conduct pledge drives, but for most, the church budget is a major campaign theme.
- There is a disconnect between how we feel about the people in the pews with us and what actually happens in terms of giving.
- Two-thirds of respondents feel that members have a good understanding of giving theology and 60% feel people are giving what they can.
- Participation in the pledge drive is often poor, with more than half of the congregations reporting a pledge rate of less than 75%.
- The tithe remains a principle with which many struggle.
- Only about half of clergy respondents “strongly agree” that the tithe is the Christian standard of giving, yet 74% report tithing. I am not sure how one can tithe without being strongly committed to it.
- Clergy seem to lack comfort with their lay stewardship team's ability to discuss giving.
- Furthermore, while 91% of clergy state they are comfortable discussing the topic, most do it via impersonal means such as preaching and written articles.

There is obviously a huge variation in attitudes and practices regarding stewardship in the diocese, and this variation is seen in other dioceses as well. It speaks to the lack of a cohesive approach to the teaching of giving theology and a failure to disseminate the effective, proven techniques that can maximize the success of stewardship efforts. The Stewardship Department of the Diocese of West Texas can do a better job providing this education as well as the resources that congregations need to be successful in their stewardship programming. That process begins in August with the Diocesan Stewardship Conferences held in Corpus Christi and San Antonio.