No Budgets Allowed

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Summer is a time to tell stories—whether it is around a campfire or gathered on the front porch. How does your congregation tell its sacred story? Read on and learn how.

I often tell congregations that no budgets are allowed in the development of an annual giving campaign—at least in the traditional sense. For those who have been charged with raising funds to pay annual operating expenses, the urge to share the budget with complicated charts and graphs can be extraordinary. After all, if people simply knew how much money it costs to run the parish, surely they would be compelled to give more—right? WRONG!

The parish’s need to receive funds has little to do with how much people are willing to give. Your members are much more interested in what you have been able to accomplish than they are with your rising utility costs. What ministry objectives have you achieved? What programs have you launched or expanded? What difference has been made in the world because your parishioners gave generously?

Connecting the members’ gifts to the ministry accomplished is key to a successful annual funds program. One way to achieve this is to create a ministry-focused budget. The ministry-focused budget (AKA narrative budget) takes your line item budget and translates it into ministry categories. Most congregations use these five categories (never more than six): Worship, Pastoral Care, Communications, Christian Formation, and Outreach. You may choose other names for your categories, but they should never include Buildings and Grounds or Salaries. In some parishes, one of the most important elements of ministry support (and often the largest portion of the budget) is clergy and staff. Your staff provides support to some or all of the five ministry categories and their costs should be distributed according to the time devoted to each.

Imagine a parish where the staff includes a rector and associate rector. Much of the rector’s time is devoted to preparing for worship and writing sermons. She is also responsible for new member assimilation (communications) and writes a weekly blog (communication). In addition, she teaches an ongoing adult Bible study class (Christian formation) and makes some of the hospital visits (pastoral care). The rector’s allocation may be 40 percent worship, 25 percent communications, 10 percent pastoral care, 5 percent outreach, and 20 percent Christian formation. The associate rector holds the majority of responsibilities for pastoral care, children and youth education, and organizes the annual mission trip. His allocation may be 10 percent worship, 30 percent pastoral care, 30 percent Christian formation, 10 percent communications, and 20 percent outreach. In terms of allocating overhead and building expenses, you may
want to consider what percent of the week is devoted to worship, meetings held by parish-affiliated groups, and meetings held by outside organizations (for example, 12-step groups and others). Remember, this is more of an art than a science—no sharpened pencils needed. Once you have divided your line-item budget among the five ministry categories, you will create a pie chart. The pieces of the pie will represent the percent of your budget that is used to fund each of the five ministry categories.

Next you will create a page for each of the ministry categories. Each page should include plenty of white space, not too much verbiage, and lots of great photos. Tell your story succinctly and graphically. For example, on the Worship page, mention all the worship opportunities available during the week including healing services and others. Show pictures of people in worship—this is especially important if your 8:00am folks have never attended your 9:00am service with praise music! This is your opportunity to tell your story and celebrate your ministry. Use photos, quotations, and stories to help people see what great work you are accomplishing.

Last, you will need to consider the question, Now what? People want to know you have a plan for the future. If you are continuing to do what you have always done, why would people be compelled to give more? When people increase their giving to your parish, what will be the result? What projects will you tackle? What new ministry initiatives will be launched?

A ministry-focused budget does not replace the line item budget for tracking revenues and expenses, but it should be your primary vehicle for communicating the budget to your parish. People give in order to make a difference in the life of another. Your ministry-focused budget should tell the story of how your parish is accomplishing its God-given vision. Help members see how gifts to your parish are enabling you to be the hands and feet of Christ in your community. They are likely to be inspired to give more.

For an example of a ministry-focused budget, visit and click on the “news and resources tab.”

-- Kristine previously served as the Director of Stewardship and Planned Giving for The Episcopal Diocese of Michigan. Believing that stewardship is “Grounded in Gratitude, Revealed in Prayer, Lived in Faith,” she is passionate about helping people return to God by emulating His loving and generous nature. She has recently co-authored C.L.I.M.B. Higher: Reaching New Heights in Giving and Discipleship, a book outlining the process and theology for churches that wish to reach the summit of transformational stewardship. Currently, Kristine is a Ministry Strategist with Horizons Stewardship Company in Little Rock, Arkansas, a national stewardship consulting firm.