The 7 Myths of Church Fundraising

One of the problems today in church life is that most churches struggle in the area of financial support. Given the affluence of our society, this is one of the paradoxes we face and we face it because of the assumptions that are made about the process of stewardship in the church. I have, in my work in stewardship over the last forty years, encountered numerous 'myths' and related assumptions people hold when dealing with finances in the church. These myths unfortunately form the 'modus operandi' of what we do but more importantly, what we don't do. They are generally not articulated or written down in a set of by-laws, the reason being that church leaders that hold these myths assume everybody else believes in them as well. They of course don't, and that is the problem. If correct operational assumptions are not held consistently by church leaders, it is difficult to formulate a coherent proactive stewardship plan. Let me therefore indicate the '7 myths' I have encountered and the result of these when they are believed.

Myth #1 - "We can't really expect too much from our members."

This first myth has to do with expectations we have of our members. Let me ask a number of questions.

– "What does membership in your church mean?"
– "What do you expect your members to do?"
– "Do your members know what the expectations are?"

How would you respond to these questions? What assumption do you make about the expectations you have of church members? Is it true that we can't expect too much from our members?

We could illustrate the range of expectations on a linear model grid. On the right side of the grid we could put the words 'High Demand' or 'High Expectation'. On the left side we could put the words, 'Low Expectation' or 'Voluntary Association'.

Figure I (a) – Degree of Expectation

Degree of Expectation	
Low Expectation Voluntary Association	High Expectation High Demand

HIGH DEMAND CHURCHES

Churches that are in the 'High Demand' category normally have some expectations in four levels.

Signing a doctrinal statement or creed
Many churches, particularly the more conservative ones, ask prospective new members to sign 'on the dotted line', indicating agreement to a stated theological position. Sometimes this is a separate theological statement. Sometimes it is a statement that is part of a broader 'covenant' which may also incorporate mission and core values. One common element however is agreement to a common set of beliefs.

Regular attendance
Regular attendance cannot be mandated but it can certainly be encouraged. 'High Demand' churches simply expect members and regular adherents to be present. And most are… every Sunday! Some churches in fact take attendance every week through a system of 'Registration', assuming that if you are part of the group you'll occupy a seat every Sunday.

Active involvement
Involvement is expected and encouraged. Often this is tied to teaching on the 'spiritual gifts' which need to be exercised. Involvement and attendance are seen as essential ingredients to spiritual growth.

Financial support
Financial support is usually the 'rub'. 'High Demand' churches are very proactive in this area. Many teach tithing. Most would regularly encourage overall giving. Some even assess! The reason of course that attendance and involvement are encouraged is because of the overall impact on giving! If people don't attend… and aren't involved… they probably won't give.

These overall levels of overt expectations are usually dealt with in a new member assimilation process. Membership however is an increasingly difficult process because it is seen as an 'institutional' thing. Younger 'boomers' and 'GEN X' people are consumers and are not into 'joining' as much as they are into simply 'belonging' as adherents. As a result many churches have simply given up on promoting membership and have the same expectation of adherents as of the members.

VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION CHURCHES

On the left side of the model are churches that Lyle Schaller and others refer to as 'Voluntary Association' churches. Members of "Voluntary Association" churches are sometimes described as follows; if the body is marginally warm, moves even very occasionally, attends very irregularly, and gives little or nothing, these churches are quite prepared to carry them as members. The reason is that these members, initially new and then regular, have not been exposed to any needed expectations in any type of member assimilation. These churches assume that people will automatically attend, involve and give…but that is not the case.

Who are these 'soft side' people?

Denominational personnel chronically refer to them as 'lapsed' or 'inactive' members.

Most often they are members who have simply drifted inadvertently to the fringe, probably because they were not challenged or motivated to do more.

Maybe they were struggling with commitment and simply wanted to move to a more ‘comfortable’ space.

Some of them undoubtedly are older members who actively fought the church wars for years and have simply ‘retired’. To cite a Scottish soldier, “I lay me down to bleed awhile and then I’ll rise to fight again.” The corrected version of this saying for these members is “…and then I may rise to fight again.” (My apologies to the author!)

Maybe it is some who have had some ‘special event’ contact, a baptism, confirmation or wedding, and have simply been retained in the system.

…And they are retained because the hope remains that they can be coaxed back into the mainstream of church life, not only for the church’s benefit but their own. Sometimes this outward drift is tied to an ecclesiological model where people are viewed as part of a larger “parish” concept. Most often however it becomes a problem related to expectations.

Where are you on the grid? Are you on the ‘High Demand’ side or are you on the “Voluntary Association” side?

Let me make a few comments about the grid.

This is not primarily a theological issue
The assumption is often made that evangelical churches are all on the ‘high demand’ side and that liberal churches are on the ‘voluntary association’ side. That is true to some point but there are liberal and evangelical churches on both sides of the grid. Where they are on the grid is directly related to their expectations that are built into the system of church management. Another common ingredient is that expectations are related to a clear sense of purpose. When there is a strategic plan to accomplish the church’s purpose, there need to be clear involvement expectations so that the plan can be accomplished.

What is it that you expect? This is not primarily theological. It is process and management.

Normal slide is right to left
The other issue on this grid is that the normal slide is from right to left, from the ‘High Demand’ side to the ‘Voluntary Association’ side. The hymn writer said, “Prone to wander Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.” This is most certainly true with expectations. When there is not a proactive management process to move the system right, there is a natural settling back into the lowest common denominator of performance on the left. This settling back is automatic. No effort is required. The end result of this slide to the left is what in church circles is called the ‘20/80 factor’; 20% do 80% of the work and 20% provide 80% of the funding. When the system settles on the left side churches tend to become plateaued churches, mired in the maintenance mode of ministry.

Expectations attract
Also, we need to understand that expectations attract, they do not repel. Church leaders are often fearful that undue expectations stated overtly to new members or for that matter existing members, will drive people away. Expectations that are too high or that are proposed too much ‘in your face’ may of course do that, but this is not true simply by the fact that expectations exist.

The exact opposite in fact is true. Expectations attract! The most often asked questions in stewardship programs is, “What do you expect me to give?” or “What do you want me to do?” People expect and need a level of expectation or standard, particularly in the area of finances.

This I think is amply illustrated by some religious groups, most notably the cults. In some for instance you can’t be a member unless you tithe. In others a high premium is placed on attendance and involvement. And you know what? They’re giving… and attending… and involved! That may also be due to other factors of course but what is “expected” is an essential component of their dynamic.

Be careful what you seed because what you seed comes back to you
My final comment on the grid is related to the ‘seed’ concept. Old clichés are true. Seeding apples begets apples! Seeding oranges begets oranges! You never get oranges when you seed apples! What we seed comes back to us! Whether we talk of attendance, involvement or financial support, we get back the expectations we seed.

I learned this basic principle of the ‘ask’ the hard way. I served for some years in the development department of a Christian college. I had just been ‘designated’ the new V.P. of Development by the President (Presidents sometimes do that!), and I faced the challenge of my first fundraising letter. At that point I knew nothing about fundraising… and I made a fatal error! I divided the need, just over $300,000, by the number of names on the mailing list, some 12,000, and finished my letter with what I thought was a great appeal. My concluding sentence was, “If everyone receiving this letter were to send $25.31 our need would be met.”

You of course know what happened! Only about two-percent responded, the direct mail average, and almost all of those sent in $25.31! My President was not terribly impressed with the result! The response didn’t even pay the postage! But I had learned in that one letter perhaps the two most foundational principles in fundraising. The first… be careful what you ask for you because you will get it. The second… you rarely get more than what you ask for.

What do you want me to give? If we don’t answer it we just have. We’ve basically said, “Anything is fine!” Performance at the level of ‘anything is fine’ is never going to build or grow churches or make them financially healthy.

What expectations will be seeded? What is ‘seeded’ and then responded to is directly related to overall church health.

Myth #2 - “It’s not really right to talk about money in the church.”

The second myth has to do with the question, “Is it right to talk about money in the church?” Have you ever heard the comment, “All the church ever talks about or asks for, is money!” In some instances that may be true of course but most often it is not. It is usually an excuse to hide or mask some other problem. But if in fact that perception is true it is probably because churches are dealing with finances in the wrong context. Normally money is dealt with overtly in the church only in times of crisis, driven by budget deficits. When we deal with stewardship only in that context it raises a number of serious problems.

Forced into doing it

The first problem of course is the perception that it's not really right to talk about it but we have to do it, so here goes! The trigger to this usually is a perceived budget shortfall. Churches arrive in late October or early November with the treasurer informing the Board that there is a looming deficit. At that point the Minister is asked to 'lay on the annual stewardship' sermon and when that happens, the end result is that at year-end the budget is usually balanced. What really reinforces this myth however is the Minister introducing the demanded sermon by saying, "The Board has asked me …I normally don't!" Such a perceived 'obligation' militates against seeing stewardship 'talk' as a natural part of church life.

Stewardship is only a financial problem

The second problem is that stewardship is often reduced to nothing more than a financial problem that occasionally needs to be addressed. When stewardship is relegated to such a lowly state and is not dealt with proactively as a part of the biblical mandate, it is little wonder that our coffers are empty.

My operative definition for stewardship is this,

> Stewardship is learned behavior. We learn it through teaching, we learn it through leadership modeling and we learn it through some process and form.

Christian giving is not based on 'need'; it's based on 'character'. The flip side of saying that is that even if our churches don't need a dime, we need to give as children of God, because giving is at the heart of our discipleship.

The word 'steward' as used in the teaching Parables is the Greek word 'OIKONOMOS', which means the manager of a household's affairs. The process of management of 'OIKONOMOS' the steward uses is 'OIKONOMIA', a word we translate as stewardship. Implicit in the concept of 'OIKONOMIA' or process of management is three things:

- The steward does not own what is managed
- The steward is charged with the management of someone else's affairs
- The steward manages the Master's household for profit..

Stewardship at its heart therefore is a discipleship concept. As children of God we are responsible as a steward for the resources God has entrusted to us. We will be held accountable for the ability we have developed as a "steward" to use resources that are rightfully God's, to accomplish God's purposes.

When in the church therefore we make programs of stewardship simply need driven, money driven or crisis driven, we almost never maximize our potential because the focus is wrong. The 'need' approach tends to raise minimum dollars in the short term but does not produce holistic stewardship patterns. Stewardship therefore properly focused is at its heart a discipleship issue and as such, is at the heart of the Gospel itself.

The reticence of Ministers to deal comprehensibly with stewardship, a universal phenomenon, was impressed on me recently.

“I will not preach on stewardship!”
A number of years ago I did a capital funds program in a rather large evangelical church where the goal was to raise 2.5 million dollars. I was doing Steering Committee orientation and had come to the Minister’s section in the Manual where the Minister is asked to do a series of four sermons on stewardship themes on four consecutive Sundays in the intensive period. I was talking about these sermons and the need for creative holistic teaching when the Minister suddenly lifted his hand and said, “Ben, I have been the Minister here for 21 years. I have never preached on stewardship and I do not intend to start now!”

This Minister’s response or rather non-response illustrates the problem. I must confess that one of the more difficult groups I have to work with in directed stewardship programs is Ministers, getting them to preach holistically on stewardship themes. Somehow for some reason a proper discipleship focus on stewardship has come off the formal preaching agenda of most of our churches for probably a generation. Little wonder that people therefore struggle with good models of stewardship in their own lives.

Is it right to talk about money in the church? Absolutely! But it is not only right; it is an obligation on the part of leaders. If at its heart stewardship is a discipleship issue then Christians need help understanding the biblical principles that relate to their value systems, because out of those value systems flow whatever ability is developed as disciples to release back to God the resources entrusted to them.

Myth #3 - “If you need money, people will give.”

This myth has to do with the question, “What motivates people to give?” If ‘need’ were the only basis for giving motivation, all churches would be knee deep in shekels! They are not, a fact that illustrates the overall problem of giving motivation.

Why do people give? In non-church settings donors can be grouped into a number of categories (<u>The Seven</u> <u>Faces of Philanthropy</u>, Prince & Files).

– The ‘community-minded’ give because they want to be seen as good corporate citizens
– The ‘investor’ gives because it’s good for business
– The ‘altruist’ gives because it feels good
– The ‘re-payer’ gives because there is a sense of a debt owed
– The ‘dynast’ gives because it runs in the family.

Christians of course may fall into some of these categories but primarily Christians give because they firmly believe it to be God’s will, and they are firmly committed to the cause of Christ. In fact Christians give 93 to 95% of all their donated money to Christian causes. They are <u>very</u> focused.

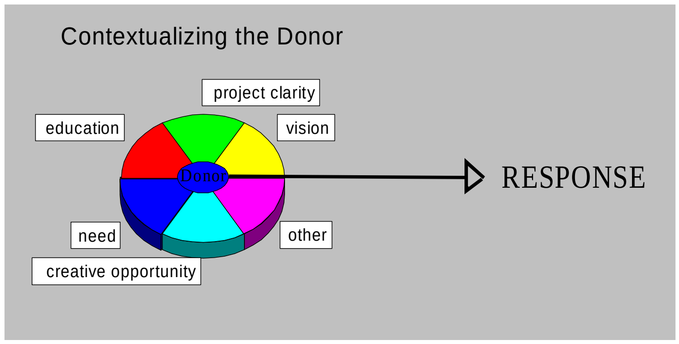
As an initial basis for discussion here however let me suggest the following definition for fundraising:

> Fundraising is not asking for money but preparing the donor to respond.

Imagine a linear graph with the word ‘donor’ on the left, the word ‘response’ on the right, and an arrow running left to right.

As you look at the graph ask the question, “What generates the best response from the donor? What will generate that cheerful, joyful, sacrificial response?”

Figure I (b) – Donor context



A major issue in giving motivation is that people do not respond in a vacuum. The second issue is that churches often overestimate what people understand about the church or the project at hand. I sometimes say to church leaders, “Put ‘yourself’ on one end of the pew Sunday morning and at the other end put the person that comes only to worship, enjoys worship, and then disappears.” Between the two of you there is a ‘great gulf fixed’ between what you as a leader and what the sole worshipper understands about the church. That ‘great gulf’ needs to be bridged.

The secret to addressing these issues is to surround the prospective donor with specific information and an environment that will generate a good response. People do not respond adequately when they have not been given a sufficient reason to give.

What then is the process of contextualizing the prospective donor? Imagine the context as a circle around the donor in the form of an exploded pie. Then ask the question, “What are the pieces or slices of the pie which are important parts of the context?”

Sense of purpose

The key element or slice in this ‘context’ for the donor is a clear sense of purpose. The Old Testament prophet said, “Where there is no vision, people perish!” This statement is probably the finest management principle ever enunciated. Vision, I sometimes say is the fuel that drives the engine. There is nothing as motivational to giving as a clear sense of vision.

Whenever I meet with a client to talk about funding, one of the first questions I ask is, “Do you have a clear vision?” If there is uncertainty at that level I usually counsel the client to spend time deciding that issue because of its enormous impact on the ultimate result. Most of what we have to communicate to the donor is not ‘what’ we are doing (regarding the project) but ‘why’ we are doing it (i.e. where is this taking us).

When congregations struggle with vision three things happen and they’re all bad...

– giving falls off
– involvement falls off
– people disappear out the back door.

And it happens in that order!

Conversely, Consultants that work at congregational renewal begin with ‘rediscovering the dream’ to use Robert Dale’s words, and when they do, three things happen and they’re all good…

– People stay
– People get involved
– People give.

A number of years ago I received a call from a church of some 400 families that was running a $30,000 annual deficit. Present at the meeting we had arranged was the church Board of some forty members. The place was full of professional people where the remuneration for some reached well into seven figures. I was introduced by the Chair who spoke of the enormous challenge the church faced. I began my remarks by saying, “Money’s not your problem. There are probably six to seven people here who could take $30,000 out of petty cash and never miss it.” There was dead silence… and then the ‘wink, wink’ and ‘nod, nod’ of silent agreement. I continued, “Money’s not the issue. What we have to do is give people here a reason to give it to the church as opposed to other places.”

They agreed. We ran a visioning program, and then easily raised some $500,000 to address their concerns.

The need for education
The second key element or pie slice in this contextualization is education. It is my opinion that we have taken stewardship teaching off the agenda of most of our churches for probably a generation and the chickens are finally coming home to roost! No wonder we’re struggling with giving! It used to be that this applied only to mainline churches… and they are struggling! The truth however today is that everyone is.

We have also raised our first generation without a Christian memory. We should probably assume that when ‘GEN X’ young people come into our churches they haven’t a clue what churches are about. They don’t know the Bible from Shakespeare! This presents us with a tremendous challenge. If we think that these individuals without some biblical focus will give a cheerful and sacrificial gift, there will be huge disappointment.

Christians move from giving to the church as just another charity to giving to the church sacrificially when they understand the biblical principles of stewardship, how those principles impact value systems and how those value systems impact the resources God has entrusted to each of them.

At the heart of our discipleship therefore is the need of the giver to give. Preparation of the donor at this level is crucial.

Other 'slices'

There are of course other elements — good planning, a 'worthy cause', a positive environment and creative opportunities to respond. These are all elements of the context and when we take the care and time to 'contextualize' the donor, good response is generated.

This is consistent with new trends in institutional development. The new 'axiom' in development is, "Fundraising is not generating a gift but the development of the donor." The 'new' development officer forges a partnership with the donor, building effective relationships and a 'context' of information. This approach maximizes giving, counters donor attrition and ultimately increases both the frequency and size of the gift.

Preparing the donor to respond therefore needs to be the central focus in any stewardship program. A capital fund program for instance takes from three to five months to run. Sometimes people ask, "How come it takes that long?" I respond by saying that the issue is not asking for money, the issue is preparing the donor to respond.

Congregations are not homogenous wholes that think the same, act the same, respond in the same way for the same reasons. Moving change or acceptance of a new idea through the system takes time because individuals accept change in different time frames. I'm never quite sure therefore that everybody in the congregation understands and owns the vision or can articulate the need adequately until there has been a proactive process of communication for three or four months. At that point however, I'm reasonably convinced that contextualization has happened. And until it has there's no point in asking for money.

If only asking for money is the issue, you can do it very quickly. You can make a decision in the board meeting on Thursday night to build a building and then can take an offering Sunday to pay for it! I would never recommend that nor would you, but if the issue was simply asking for money that's the way it could be done. The issue is not asking for money, the issue is preparing the donor to respond.

Will people respond therefore simply because the church needs money? Probably not. They will give and give generously when churches take time to prepare them to give, articulating vision and communicating a worthy cause.

Myth #4 - "We have limited financial potential."

Most churches make their assumption about limited financial potential because of their struggle on the budget side. This is particularly true when, in addition to the budget need, churches need to renovate, expand ministry, add staff to generate growth or make a major expansion to accommodate congregational growth. The statement most often made is, "How in the world can we do anything additional when we can't balance our budget?"

The incremental problem

The major problem in this assumption made is tied to incremental budgeting. In incremental budgeting the starting point in answering the question, "What can we do next year?" is in relation to the revenue received the previous year. When churches struggled with 'last year's revenue', the assumption made is that revenue is flat, that last year the church 'maxed out' in giving and the only thing that could reasonably be expected is a small 'incremental' increase.

For churches that do incremental budgeting, this approach becomes a psychological barrier to believing that any additional monies are available for ministry. Incremental budgeting results in perpetuating what has always been done in the 'ministry box' which results in little more than maintenance ministry. In fact if churches that believe this 'myth' continually defer things, or feel they cannot do any new things, incremental budgeting may do little more than help the church survive!

Incremental income projection
The real problem associated with incremental budgeting is its natural corollary that we also assume in incremental income projection per donor. The net result of such incrementalization is that future giving is usually tied to past giving. Let me illustrate it this way.

A number of years ago I was asked by a Presbyterian congregation to design a fall budget campaign. When we met I discovered they had already given considerable thought to how to do it and they recommended we run a campaign where the challenge was to have everyone increase their giving by 10% since budget had in fact increased 10%. The problem I pointed out to them was that 10% of nothing was nothing! Even for people who gave $100, surely we would never suggest that an additional 10% ($10) would be an acceptable response. The benchmark of giving was wrong! If in fact that benchmark becomes the standard from which all future giving is extrapolated, little additional monies are usually available. The percentages look great! The reality of actual dollars is otherwise, to say nothing about what we are teaching regarding a discipleship response.

We maximize potential when we can effectively challenge people to give beyond an inadequate previous year's level and move them to an adequate discipleship response that represents their ability to give.

Pockets of giving
The other thing to remember is what is referred to as 'pockets' of giving. People have perhaps six different pockets from which they give.

Operating
Some members are very happy to support ongoing operations, although heat and light are seen as rather mundane by most.

Maintenance
Some members treat the church almost like their own homes and insist on repairs to avoid greater problems down the road.

Capital
New building is exciting to give to. In fact some members will only give major dollars to a capital project.

Missions
For many members their real giving interest is missions. The comment you hear often from this group is, "I'm not into buildings. I'm into ministry!"

Social concerns
Some members have a real heart for social needs, perhaps also justice issues. For many those issues produce real generosity.

Special projects
For many, special project giving is exciting. Often those who give emotively and impulsively support these projects.

If members therefore are only challenged to give from their 'budget' pocket, the church may be missing substantial dollars. The truth is that most churches do not need more than 1 to 3% of income to meet budget. Rarely therefore do churches receive donations at the level of their member's potential. The result is that Christians therefore give their money elsewhere or they don't give!

The truth is most churches possess very significant, unused, financial potential. It is relatively easy to generate additional 25% to 30% revenue annually from the existing donor base of most churches. Churches that undertake vision-driven capital projects easily increase income 75% to 100% annually each year for three years.

I met with a Methodist Pastor a number of years ago talking about their need to build. They needed to raise three million dollars to solve their facilities problem. In our discussion about their potential he suddenly turned to me and said, "Ben, how can we even consider building when we always have a $30,000 dollar budget deficit?" My response to him was that the two issues were unrelated. Incremental budgeting usually results in budget struggles because of wrong assumptions. In building programs however, new variables are introduced into the giving mix that impact potential. These variables are vision and purpose, creative statements of need, a growth focus, the appeal to a different "pocket," variables that change the focus and tend to unleash potential.

Most churches therefore underestimate their true potential, be that at the level of budgeted ministry and most certainly in support of a worthy capital project. Don't let your worthy cause 'die' because you make the assumption that your resources are limited to what you are currently receiving.

Myth #5 - "We need to keep giving from members strictly confidential."

Most churches guard their giving secrets like the proverbial gold in Fort Knox and are paranoid about giving confidentiality. Most churches insist that absolutely no one should know donor performance, except the proverbial 'envelope secretary'.

Envelope Secretaries are for the most part fine committed people who take their job very seriously. But somewhat of an aura has developed around the position, which is decidedly negative.

A fundraising Consultant a number of years ago described the Envelope Secretaries this way; '…dressed in black with a black satchel chained to their wrist, scurrying around the church halls in the dark of midnight, assiduously guarding the giving secrets of the church'. I jest of course but I have met a few that look just like that!

Most of the problem is that the longer Envelope Secretaries are in that position, the more authority they accrue to themselves. The longer the tenure is, the greater the paranoia becomes. The point is that if the Envelope Secretary is the only person who knows giving patterns, churches have seriously limited their ability to do good management and financial planning.

Happily some of the paranoia is disappearing. With the advent of church accounting and donor-tracking software, this role is increasingly vested in a paid staff person. Accurate donor information is more and more becoming part of the overall accounting process with this information being available to church planners.

Good donor information is badly needed of course. Churches cannot really establish potential, identify trends or do anything remedial in the absence of this information. Good management decisions cannot be made in a vacuum.

It is my opinion therefore that leaders need to know donor performance as a basis for doing solid financial planning. This not related to leaders seeing the 'name with the number' but seeing the pattern and the level of giving. If leaders are attempting to maximize giving, knowing what is currently happening is vital to developing either remedial or proactive stewardship programs.

Leaders need to know donor performance for three reasons:

Leaders need to know what individuals give so they can take remedial action when giving falls off

If the lack of giving is related to the clarity and the level of ownership of vision in congregational life, churches need some ability to take remedial action when giving falls off. If church leaders do not know donor patterns, or what the variances are, it is very difficult to do that. The starting point is to retain present donors, to maximize the potential of people that are already in the donor base and to encourage people who give little or nothing. Donor development is an important component of maximizing that potential.

Leaders need to know what members give so they can choose leadership who model a commitment to giving

A Manual of Procedure for Boards, if the church has one, usually sets out the qualifications and expectations for Board membership. Seldom are there overt expectations related to giving. The assumption in most churches is that Board members are expected to and will give.

Regardless of the level of expectation however, it is part of the integrity leaders bring to their work. If leaders who recommend individuals to positions do not have access to giving information, it becomes very problematic to choose prospective leaders who model a commitment to giving.

Leaders who model a commitment to giving are a vital component in maximizing overall potential. When leaders are not committed to good stewardship modeling in their own life, it becomes impossible for them to encourage others to do what they are not doing themselves. Leaders need to lead! Someone has said, "Leaders tithe… and tithers lead."

Leaders need to know so they can assess giving potential

It is almost impossible to assess potential unless there is some sense of what is actually happening in the donor base. In the absence of accurate data the only recourse is to average for the whole, a process that usually skews what the reality is and often gives leaders a false sense of security. Let me illustrate.

A number of years ago I worked with a church that needed to deal with a 2.5 million dollar debt because it was drawing 36% of their total revenue to debt servicing. There were 612 giving units in the church with a budget of 1.36 million dollars, representing an average per unit in excess of $2200.

The Pastor was concerned about the level of debt and in talking with him about what might be done he said to me, “I would like to deal with the debt but our people are already giving over $2200 per family, and I’m not sure we have any more potential to give.” The average looked great… more than two times the national average of the denomination!

In analyzing their giving however I found a different reality. Over 40% of the 612 giving units gave the church zero dollars the previous year. The bottom half of the congregation, 307 families, gave the church a grand total of $9600 out of a 1.36 million dollar budget! Twenty percent gave over 85% of the income. There was plenty of untapped potential!

> The Pastor said, “I don’t want to know!”
>
> The Board said, “We don’t need to know!”

This church was paranoid about giving confidentiality. Only one person, the Envelope Secretary, knew what was actually happening… and he wasn’t telling! As a result they were making bad management decisions. They had no way of actually assessing true giving potential. They had plenty of potential. We ran a debt retirement campaign and raised over 1.7 million. But the Pastor had said, “I’m not sure we have any more potential to give!”

A number of years ago in a Seminar in Chicago, a Board Chair offered this statement on the topic of confidentiality. “I don’t understand all the paranoia. What is really happening I think is that people want their giving kept secret because they do not want people to know how little they give!”

I must confess that I sometimes think that as giving has decreased paranoia over confidentiality has increased. Perhaps they are related!

Good accurate information is essential to good planning, particularly in the development of proactive stewardship programs that get results.

Myth #6 - “Our donors are all the same.”

Donors are these mysterious people who sit in church pews and place envelopes (albeit infrequently) into the offering plate as their financial contribution to church life. Those white envelopes disappear into the ‘system’, and nothing is said about where they went or what was in them until there is need for more!

I jest of course! But there is a mystery surrounding this process. Who are these people we call donors and what do you assume about them?

In every other area of church life we say it is important to tailor the ministry to the need of the person. We therefore have graded Sunday-School curriculum. We target specific programs to children, or youth, or the young married, or seniors. We tailor the ministry to the need of the person in every area of church life… except in stewardship!

In stewardship we continue to make the assumption that the congregation is a homogenous whole, that all these donors think the same, respond to the same things, give for the same reasons in the same way. That simply is not true. Donors are not all the same. Potential donors consist of a series of sub-groups that are different as to giving motivation, giving interest and giving methodology.

GIVING MOTIVATION

Figure I (d) – Donor Age Characteristics

←	**Age of Donor** →
Little institutional loyalty	Institutional loyalty
Label matters little	Label matters
Consumer mentality, “What’s in it for me?”	Institutional mentality “I’ll do my part.”
Short or no Christian history	Long Christian history
Little or no understanding of Biblical stewardship	Basic understanding of Biblical stewardship
Motivated to give by: - needs being met - emotive causes - give to people - give to ministry - give to vision	Motivated to give by: - loyalty - maintain tradition - maintain institution - sense of biblical responsibility
Couldn’t care less about debt	Will give to debt
Will struggle with financial commitments	Will make financial commitments
Belongers	Joiners

It is important to point out first of all that there is a significant difference in how and why the various donor groups respond. Take the basic age difference for instance between “younger” and “older” donors. The graph above illustrates some age differences in giving motivation.

Older members think institutionally

Older members think institutionally and can be counted on to "do their part." They feel that as "members" they need to carry their share of the financial load. This is the reason that older members tend to gravitate to budget and maintenance issues. They regard buildings as expressions of the institution, are proud of them (particularly old ones) extending almost to reverence… and are determined to keep them in good repair.

This institutional regard for the building is the reason older members can get excited about endowment funds, particularly designated funds that provide for perpetual maintenance of buildings. It is no accident that endowments are built by senior members usually through estates. The building is synonymous with the institution and its preservation takes high priority.

"Once an Anglican, always an Anglican"

To older members the 'label' above the door matters. 'Once an Anglican always an Anglican' is still true for older members.

The loyalty attached to 'Once an Anglican, always an Anglican' ofttimes generates significant financial response to things 'Anglican'. That sentiment, though not the highest level of giving motivation, needs to be tapped.

Further it can be assumed that older members have a basic understanding of stewardship issues, even a biblical understanding that emanates from teaching they may have received in their younger years. They are familiar with concepts of 'time, talent and treasure'. Though they may not do so (although I am always surprised how many do), they understand the concept of the tithe as a standard for giving. In some circles it is often referred to as that 'Methodist thing'.

That older generation however sadly is dying off and today we are facing the situation where even generic stewardship concepts are foreign to many if not most members.

Older members therefore are motivated to give by institutional loyalty, the maintaining of tradition, perhaps a basic sense of biblical responsibility. Older members will give to debt because debt is an institutional problem. Older members are 'joiners' and will make financial commitments to the 'annual fund' because after all it's the responsible thing to do. They are simply doing 'their part'.

The consumer mentality

Younger members however are consumers. The 'label' above the door matters little, just as decisions to shop at Wal-Mart or Canadian Tire are not made out of loyalty to either retail outlet. They shop for price. In the church younger members ask, "What's in it for me?" When that ceases to be the case they move on to another 'label.' It is probably right to assume they have little or no church background and very little if any understanding of stewardship issues.

Younger members if they give, tend to give emotively and impulsively to ministry, to vision, to causes. They struggle with commitments to the church financially (and not oddly enough when buying a home, car, TV, boat). They are 'belongers' not 'joiners.'

In short, giving motivation varies significantly with age.

GIVING INTEREST

Donors are also different as to giving interest. Previously I talked about the various 'pockets' of giving. It is true that the broader the appeal, the greater the potential that is tapped.

What are donors interested in?

A number of years ago I did a campaign in a large urban Presbyterian Church. The campaign focus was the retrofit of a grand old building, one piece of it being the restoration of the "leathers" on a turn of the century Casavant organ. I suggested to the Minister that what was likely to happen was that a single person, or perhaps two or three would step forward and underwrite the entire organ cost.

I was right! Two elderly ladies came up to the Minister and said, "We'd like to underwrite the organ cost." The donation, $250,000!

I asked the Minister, "Do you think that money would have come to budget?" The answer of course is, 'No!'

Have you noticed how money flows to sponsorship particularly if there is a personal contact to the donor …or projects …or particular ministries? Have you ever wondered why more money does not stay "home" but is given rather to relief organizations… or even televangelists?

The answer …different giving interests! The problem in most churches is that the appeal is to just one 'pocket', the budget! That limits potential.

GIVING METHODOLOGY

Donors are also different as to preferred methods of giving.

The envelope system is well entrenched in most churches. When the envelope system was introduced in the 1930's it was for several reasons.

– It created efficiency in identifying and recording donations
– It was seen as a way to increase giving …and it did!

The system was built on the premise that everyone attended weekly, everyone therefore would give weekly and thus everyone needed a weekly envelope for giving! The other premise was that everyone was on a weekly salaried job, got a weekly paycheck and should tithe. The envelope system simply accommodated that.

But times have changed! Most giving is now bi-monthly or monthly, not weekly. Much of it in our entrepreneurial age is irregular. And we now have a debit card… and bank card… and credit card… and automatic withdrawal.

The question is, "Should these ways or methods of giving be incorporated in church life?" The answer is 'yes' because that is how the younger crowd does their banking.

Automatic withdrawal or 'PAR' is becoming more common. In fact the United Church of Canada is the first denomination to initiate a national program churches can participate in.

But surely you say, “Churches would not use credit cards!” Ah, but they do.

You may have seen the cartoon of two ushers standing at the back of the church with a credit card validator strapped to their waist with the one saying to the other, “Our Minister had a great idea… but it sure does slow down the offering!”

Whether we like it or not the times ‘they are changing’. Churches will need to become fairly creative in the area of giving methodology to accommodate new ‘electronic minded’ members. Older members ‘weaned’ on envelopes will use them till death. For younger members other options should probably be pursued.

Are donors all the same? Absolutely not! They are different as to motivation, interest and giving methodology. Recognition of that fact holds out the potential for significant increase in financial support.

Myth #7 - “Lack of money is the major obstacle we face.”

Church treasurers as a group are made of sturdy stuff. Anyone who volunteers with no pay to attempt the delicate balancing act between expenses and revenues, (with the latter always in short supply!), deserves our utmost admiration.

I am reminded of the circus strongman who was performing his various feats of strength in a small rural town. After his concluding act, he took an orange and squeezed every drop he could from it. He then challenged anyone in the crowd that if they could squeeze any more juice from the orange, he would give them $10.00.

After a lengthy silence a small bespectacled man came forward, took what was left of the orange and to everyone’s amazement squeezed out an additional two drops! The strongman was amazed and asked, “How did you do that?” “Oh,” said the man, “I was the treasurer of the local Baptist Church for 30 years!”

In the face of seemingly constant shortfalls it is appropriate to ask the question, “Is lack of money the real problem or is it a symptom of a deeper problem?”

Churches of course should not be struggling with financial resources. It is one of the great paradoxes of current church life that at the time of our greatest affluence we are struggling perhaps more than ever before with finances.

There is no lack of money! For some reason however churches are not getting it! And when churches are chronically struggling, it produces a mind set which results in some negative assumptions.

It stifles the enthusiasm of the ministry staff
Most ministers (unfortunately not all!) would like to see their works/churches grow and expand. When therefore there is always a chronic shortfall and those dreams need continually to be put ‘on hold’, ministers finally quit dreaming or leave to find a place where their dreams can become reality.

I received a call from a Minister of a mid-sized church. He had come to two of my seminars and had in the seminar talked of their potential for growth and their plan to relocate and build. He called me to let me know he was leaving and relocating to another church. His comment was, "I found myself at the point where I wasn't dreaming any more. Nothing could be done because there was never any money. I just need a change." Sad …very sad …but too often true.

Lack of money therefore is a symptom of a problem rather than a simple problem. The above myths indicate what those symptoms are and how they can be remedied.

Conclusion

When church leaders therefore believe some or all of these 'myths', the church usually struggles with having sufficient revenue to fund their ministry. Churches however do have significant untapped financial potential. When therefore the belief in these myths is identified and then remedied, churches do have the ability to become financially healthy.

It stifles planning on the part of church leaders
I can still hear the rather emotional comment of the Deacon who said, "What's the point of planning things. We haven't any money anyway!"

Or… the Board Chair who said, "If we didn't have this shortfall we could consider that!"

Or… the Pastor who said, "How can we even consider a 3 million dollar expansion when we're always $30,000 behind in budget!"

And they're right! If the perception is that lack of money is the problem …and only the lack of money, it becomes a psychological trap that consigns the church to little more than maintenance ministry.

It stifles vision
When Ministers quit dreaming… and Board members quit planning… that sounds the death knoll on vision.

We then land up therefore heeding the ubiquitous advice of Yogi Berra who said, "When you come to a fork in the road take it!"

I would like to suggest that the chronic lack of money in most churches is symptomatic of a much deeper problem. Belief in this myth will destroy your very ability to do church-ministry.

CONCLUSION

Myths… vision destroying myths! Countering these deep-seated myths is hard work but identifying them, is the first step to remedial action. If however churches believe these 'myths' it results in the struggle churches experience on the giving side.