



Communication Reminder letters and non response

Introduction

This paper explores two related issues. Firstly it gives advice on writing reminder letters to those who do not respond to the initial letter and fail to return their response forms. Secondly it explores ways in which the church leadership can sensitively manage the issue of non response in the short term and in the long term.

The non response letter

The initial clergy letter and the Giving in Grace brochure should indicate a clear date for the return of the response forms, normally highlighted as Thanksgiving Sunday a couple of weeks after the end of the preaching series. In practice slippage always happens so reminder letters are an important part of the follow up strategy. A reminder letter will jog the memories of some, the conscience of others.

- Many will simply forget to return their response because of the natural gap between intention and action. We always mean to get around to doing something but never quite manage it.
- Slippage is significantly reinforced because delivery and return are usually by hand and are Sunday based so the response period is spread over a number of weeks.
- Send follow up letters no later than two weeks after the closing date for returns of response. A sample non response reminder letter is available which can be adapted for local purposes.
- The same principle that governed the initial request for support still stands true: you are inviting people to share in a cause, to be partners in the church's mission. So do not be anxious about writing again.

- Always enclose a handwritten SAE in follow up letters. Make it easy for those who do not attend weekly. Don't forget the disclaimer that an anonymous donation has paid for the mailing.
- Personal visits may be appropriate in some circumstances. Remember, personal visits can only be undertaken by the person who authored the original letter and the person to whom the response form was addressed, if different.

Managing non response

Sadly non response, the frustration and even pain that can often accompany it for clergy and planning groups is a fact of church life. It is often necessary to live with and cope with non response in the short term while addressing the issue in the longer term.

The witness of scripture

The first step is to recognise that non response is as old as Scripture itself. We have Paul's wonderful teaching on giving in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 precisely because the Corinthian church did not respond to the Jerusalem appeal as they could and should have done. There is even the throwaway remark (2 Cor 9:2) that in the model church of Macedonia that that zeal for the collection "*has stirred up most of them*".

In the Old Testament Nehemiah's rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem was opposed by outsiders but perhaps most hurtful was the non response from within. In Nehemiah chapter 5 the issue is the financial gain by the leaders and nobles made from taxation of the people and taking land in return for food during the famine. In Chapter 13 Nehemiah discovers that the Levites have not been paid and have returned to the fields to make a living. This is due to failings of the priest Eliashib who is related to Nehemiah's enemy

Tobiah. Nehemiah's response was to give his anguish and frustration to God in prayer. Where we encounter non response it is a matter for prayer that God's Holy Spirit will move in the whole church, creating a new global warming of the heart.

Understanding non response

The second step is to understand non response properly. Always assess the percentage response rates in each of the groupings of the database: Core, Congregation and Fringe.

- Expect a lower response rate amongst the fringe; more so if letters were to Associational members, such as non attenders on the electoral roll.
- Headline response rates ("only 50% of people have responded") can often hide a very different reality. Does the problem lie with a very large Fringe who are beneficiaries of church activities with little understanding of the true cost of providing them? Or does the problem lie with a congregation that sees no need to give because church reserves are so high as to render the initiative unnecessary in the eyes of many?

The reasons for non response are many and varied. Assessing responses against a differentiated database gives a clue where to begin searching for answers. Understanding will also give a helpful indication of the most helpful tone and approach of the reminder letter.

Non response from the Core

Issues of non response amongst the core leadership of the church are the most painful for clergy and leaders and in some cases the most intractable. How do you tackle leaders who vote for a Giving in Grace initiative, do not respond personally and then exercise their right to vote on financial matters at the next PCC - on money other people have given?

Address non response from within the Core grouping

as the first priority. From within this grouping you should expect a near 100% response rate; anything less is a dereliction of responsibility from the church leadership. An initial follow up letter is entirely appropriate; leaders can forget like anyone else.

If there is still no response a personal visit from the person who wrote the original ask letter is advisable. Non response may be a statement of indifference or an indication of an underlying problem. It might be that there are church, domestic, work related or financial pressures or a sense that there is no vision in the church to excite or stimulate giving. Simply ask if there is a reason behind the non response.

Longer term it is important to underline that expectations of financial commitment are a fundamental part of the role of a PCC or shared ministry team member. Potential PCC members should be very aware that giving is a part of the role of the PCC member. No fundraising consultancy would permit the Trustees of any charity to escape from the essential responsibility of financial leadership at the outset of a capital fundraising project. Potential PCC members should be under no illusions that committed giving as members of the planned giving scheme is a commitment that goes with election to the PCC.

Non response from the Congregation

Non response from the Congregational grouping is the most difficult to handle because this is probably the largest grouping in the database and also probably the most varied in terms of frequency of attendance, commitment, church experience and income. If there is no response to the reminder letter then, where numbers are manageable, consider making personal visits to all non responders. The approach here is simple and direct: is there any problem or did the recipient feel that the original request for financial support was inappropriate in any way? This is a genuine inquiry and



a great deal can be learned about the culture of money matters within the church. Although the immediate presenting issue is a response to a financial request the underlying issue might be quite different and may well be of a significant pastoral nature.

In many, perhaps most churches it may prove impractical to personally visit the congregational non responders. The clergy and planning group need to decide whether it is appropriate to send a second reminder letter or whether it is best to let matters lie. A first reminder letter simply assumes that folk have forgotten to respond. A second reminder letter, if sent, should enquire if there is any particular issue that prevents people from responding. For example, perhaps they are unhappy about some aspect of church life. It should also state that to respect people's decisions they will not be bothered with further letters.

Non response from the Fringe

If there is no response from Fringe members to the reminder letter it is best to let matters lie there. The potential for misunderstanding means that a third letter cannot be justified.

Two out of three is bad!

Non response poses difficult issues for clergy and leaders. Stewardship is what we do with all that we are given. But we cannot and must not accept the idea that some people give of their time and talents as a substitute for their treasure. What we do with our money and possessions is very much a part of who we are before God. This crucial area of our lives is never outside the realm of our personal discipleship. God requires accountability of us in each of the three areas of Time, Talents and Treasure. An appeal to two out of three is not sufficient.

Significant non response can be a pointer to a problem in the culture of money within the church that needs to be addressed at a more fundamental level over a longer period of time. It has implications for pastoral care and practice, the expectations of leadership in the local church and effective communication. An effective strategy to do this would be built around the key principles of Giving in Grace. There is no magic wand or instant solution to a problem that has been nurtured over many years. The key principles are:

- careful and sensitive preaching not just about giving but about wider issues of managing money and its intimate connection to our relationship with God.
- pastoral awareness and practice around the issues of personal debt and money worries that are rife in society and impair generosity
- attention to the tone, quality and quantity of financial communication to the congregation.
- establishing prayer as a priority underlining giving as an issue of discipleship not church finances.
- the articulation of a clear and compelling vision of parish ministry as indispensable to the motivation to give.
- emphasis upon the need of the giver to give not the needs of the institution to receive
- strong and unambiguous leadership from the PCC and other church leaders in all matters of finance.
- openness, accountability and transparency over financial matters.

