giving in grace

Diocese of Liverpool

Thinking about Interaction

Why should interaction matter?

Surely if we have preached some sermons and sent some literature that is quite enough to persuade people to give! The reality is different. People give to people and interaction is all about engaging church members as active participants not passive hearers of a message. It is all about personal financial discipleship and identification with the vision and ministry of the church. Interaction creates space for discussion, questions, story telling and reflection. It is important because it underlines two key principles operating in both effective stewardship and the discipline of fundraising.

Giving affects our lifestyles

If we are to really help people move to the practice of Christian giving then it must have some effect upon the lifestyle choices we make. Serious giving means putting God's work first and making giving a priority that is right up there with all the other financial priorities that we have to deal with. For some people giving a tithe may barely touch their lifestyle choices; for others a decision for a modest increase in giving will have a noticeable effect on the weekly budget. For some churches the tithe may be accepted practice for core members, in others the challenge to give proportionately will be new. For congregation and fringe members the challenges are different. Rather than proportional giving the aim is participation in the life of the church, acknowledgement of God as giver of all, and realism in giving by fringe members.

In addition for some people money is a huge problem and not a blessing. One of the small group resources which can be accessed from the Interaction section of the website is *Your Money Counts*, study and advice material from the Christian based debt counselling agency *Credit Action.* All these objectives require engagement: listening as well as explanation. This is why interaction is essential as well as pastoral.

Giving is personal

The point of the Law of the Tithe (in Deut 14:22*ff*) was not that the worshipper gave a tithe but that the tithe was a reminder that God was the giver of all that Israel had. There was an intimate connection between giving, caring for the poor, acknowledging God as the giver of all and a community celebrating together. **Giving was personal but never a private affair**. We need to honour that tradition and give the opportunity to discuss how and why we worship with our money as well as our time! There needs to be a personal ask and a personal response from members of the congregation. We are all familiar with the direct mailing from charities landing on the doormat asking for money. Technology has made professional mass mailings by charities possible but has also tended to depersonalise the process.

Simple, attractive literature and careful management of a database are important within Giving in Grace but, as someone once said, no matter how hi-tech we might be we must always remain hi-touch. Small group meetings and parish visiting retain the personal element and create opportunities for personal conversation and story telling. Paul wrote a very strong letter to the Corinthian church about the financial collection for Jerusalem. But we know from 2 Cor 9 that he also tells them that he is sending his colleague Titus to visit and with him two brothers who have his confidence and the trust of the local churches. As well as the letter Paul knew he needed the personal touch. The brothers could tell the story of the poverty of the Jerusalem church, the willing support of other churches in the area, why they themselves supported the collection and why it was so important.

Serious giving is an active choice

Committed giving to the local church is essentially an active choice to make a difference not a passive response to a request for money. Historically much giving to the church has been passive giving. There has been an assumption that the church as a trusted institution is intrinsically worthy of support, at a modest level but from a fairly broad base. But the context in which charities and churches receive their donations is changing rapidly. As trust in traditional institutions declines simply being a church or charity is not enough now to inspire automatic trust and willingness to give.

Small group meetings and parish visiting create opportunities for people to engage with the issues, to ask questions around the use of resources and discover the significance of their own response (or lack of it) to the ministry of the church. Interaction is an invitation for people to do more than make a minimal passive response to a request for more money but to make active choices to make a difference through the ministry of the church. It is an ideal opportunity to run a short course to help fringe members on their journey...and perhaps with their own issues about money, lifestyle and debt.

Putting theology into practice

Interaction also plays a key part in changing the giving culture of a church. When we preach about money a church puts into words a theology of giving as a response to the grace of God. This is, of course, very important to do. The preaching resources within Giving in Grace enable churches to do precisely that: to speak about money as an aspect of discipleship with conviction and passion. But recent research in America[i] suggests that we need to consider another aspect of a theology of giving which is crucial to the way in which money is thought about and discussed in a church context.

This research suggests that the critical factor is the extent to which a theology of giving is reflected in the practices or "institutions" of the church. In short the culture of the church, the way things are actually done is the single biggest factor in shaping the way individuals think about and respond to the financial challenge of discipleship. One example given is that churches that practice an annual review of giving give more than those which do no. Churches that practice an annual review of giving give more than those which do not and, not surprisingly, churches which teach tithing do best of all.

In other words, what we do institutionalises our theology of giving. When we preach about giving, when we visit people in their homes, discuss giving in our Bible studies, present an annual budget all as a natural part of Christian formation we are putting theology into practice. It is this, the research suggests, that more than anything else that influences and affects the decisions people make about their own giving.

Interaction whether through visiting or home groups challenges and encourages people to make their individual response. Interaction gives permission to speak not only to the individual disciple but also to the church as a body of people.

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[i] The research is summarised in *Financing American Religion edited by Mark Chaves and Sharon L. Miller (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999).The final summary chapter can be found online at the excellent* www.resourcingchristianity.org. On the home page click the Economics header in the *What's Been Learned* section and root through the stewardship listings.