

## Story telling: the value of testimony

Don't make an argument, tell a story. The offering of personal testimony by lay people can make a significant contribution to how a congregation hears the challenge of stewardship. This paper outlines the value of personal testimony and some guidelines for making it effective.



At the trustees' meeting of a national welfare charity, one trustee supported the presentation of a new legacy strategy with the story of his personal legacy gift. Within 6 months, other pledges from trustees were received and the strategy was successfully rolled out.<sup>i</sup>

Meanwhile, a congregation in the US has discovered the power of personal testimony to revitalise its worship. Pastor Lillian Daniel commented:

*For the third year in a row, people were telling me that they looked forward to our stewardship season, because they hoped to hear the members of the church offer 'giving moments' ...What happened with the giving moments was that people told stories about their walk with God through the life of our church. Sometimes they were funny. Sometimes people cried. As one member put it, 'I love stewardship season because I get so excited about what people will say.'<sup>ii</sup>*

### The power of personal advocacy

Nehemiah told the elders of Jerusalem, 'of the hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king's words that he had spoken to me' (Neh. 2:18). Paul told the reluctant givers in Corinth the story of the church in Macedonia to rekindle their own giving (2 Cor. 8:1-5). There is power in personal storytelling. People can challenge or ignore facts. It is harder to dismiss experience shared with passion and authenticity. Storytelling puts a human face to money, mission, and financial need. The passion of one person encourages others to make their own gift. Storytelling gives permission to other people to act decisively, to follow an example. Crucially, testimony is one of the ways in which lay leaders in the church or on the planning group can demonstrate the exercise of leadership.

### The power of three

In 2 Corinthians 9, we read that Paul sent three brothers to Corinth in advance of his own arrival. The purpose was, 'to arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as extortion' (2 Cor. 9:5).

Now Paul wanted everyone to know that the money collected for Jerusalem was being well managed before God and in the eyes of men and women (2 Cor. 8:20-21). But the way Paul talks about these brothers suggests something else is going on. They are as partners, co-workers, men appointed (by the laying on of hands) by the churches and even 'the glory of Christ' (2 Cor. 8:23).

This emphasis on the character and qualities of these brothers says much about the spiritual significance of this financial gift. Sending such men must have been about more than practical arrangements for a financial offering. Surely they went ahead of Paul not only to prepare a gift but also to tell the story of why this gift matters. They could speak in Corinth of their personal commitment, and that of Paul himself, to this generous



gift for Jerusalem. They could give testimony to the integrity and apostolic importance of the offering and to the real needs in Jerusalem.

### Testimony in the local church

It has been noted several times that congregations prefer either lay people or a combination of clergy and lay people to handle money matters in the church.<sup>iii</sup>

The opportunity for lay people to give testimony allows for a fresh aspect of visible lay involvement in church finances, beyond the technicalities of budgets and treasury functions. It allows clergy and others leaders to preach, teach, build vision and lay leaders and lay people to identify themselves with the stewardship thrust of the church in a way that builds confidence in congregations.

In one urban parish, an older lady was persuaded to talk for two minutes to the church during a budget presentation. She spoke simply and personally about how being a (reluctant!) member of the finance committee had opened her eyes to the realities of church finances. She had reviewed her own giving and hoped that the budget presentation would encourage others to do the same. In another church, a lady spoke of her own journey to tithe her income. The stories were powerful, complemented the preaching and showed ownership beyond the clergy and lay leadership of the church. Income increased in both churches.

### Making our words count

Brief is beautiful. Less is more. Churchill is reputed to have said, 'If you want me to speak for 2 minutes, it will take me three weeks of preparation. If you want me to speak for 30 minutes, it will take me a week to prepare. If you want me to speak for an hour, I am ready now.' The shorter the storytelling, the more powerful it becomes, so preparation is everything and there are no shortcuts. It may be helpful to think about two broad approaches.

### A specific story to tell?

There may be a specific story to tell – an incident or conversation that led to a change of heart and action. The story should be told briefly; don't overshadow the core message of the story. Jesus' parables mostly made one powerful point that made the audience sit up and take notice.

### The way I see it now

The storyteller may wish to give testimony to a changed way of looking at money as a Christian. It may be helpful to use a simple threefold structure:

*'Back then:* when I first came to this church, I thought it was rich and so I put my £1 on the plate. No one has ever asked me to do anything else.'



*'What changed my thinking:* was a friend who gave using the Parish Giving Scheme or a bible study conversation about giving. I began to think more deeply.'

*'The difference now:* I am more aware of church finances and review my giving as I review all my bills and personal finance. Or I now see that God has given me everything and it is all his, so my giving is giving back to God what is already his.'

*'So can I now:* encourage you - challenge you - commend this giving programme to you. We all need to make our own response to our church's need and to God's goodness...'

### Conclusion

Testimony is powerful and planning groups should consider whether well-prepared lay testimony has a complementary role alongside the preaching in Giving in Grace.

### Notes and Resources

- <sup>i</sup> Legacy Fundraising (ed. Sebastian Wilberforce 2001).
- <sup>ii</sup> Lillian Daniel is author of Tell it like it is: reclaiming the practice of testimony (Alban 2005).
- <sup>iii</sup> Money Matters (Hoge, Zech et al.) pp. 35; 84