

Finish the work: sending reminder letters

Some people will forget to respond to the clergy ask letter; some never will. This paper offers advice on writing reminder letters and also suggests how the church leadership can understand the sometimes painful issue of non response.



It's the way it is. We forget stuff. The letter sits behind the clock with the response form and forgetfulness is reinforced because we tend to deliver and return letters by hand on Sunday. Miss a Sunday and a week has slipped by. St Paul wrote a reminder letter to the church at Corinth, maybe more than one if, as some scholars think, 2 Corinthians 9 was originally a separate letter. He told them, 'Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means' (2 Cor. 8:11). If an apostle can do it, so can we!

Return to sender

First, check that the return date is included in the clergy letter and response form; it is normally designated Thanksgiving Sunday.¹

When reminding non responders, consider the following:

- Forgetting is natural so be confident about writing again.
- The initial letter was an invitation to resource the mission of God in the local church. That still stands, so be confident, not apologetic, about sending a gentle reminder.
- Send reminder letters **no later than two weeks** after the closing date for the return of the response forms, usually Thanksgiving Sunday.
- An editable template for a non response letter can be found under *Preparing to Follow Up* at the *Reminder Letters* tab.
- Make sure the reminder letter gives a specific date by which to return the form.
- Enclose a handwritten SAE for the response forms in a reminder letter. You need to make it easy for people, especially those who do not attend weekly.
- Personal visits may be appropriate in some circumstances but, in the vast majority of cases, a reminder letter is preferable.
- Remember to record accurately the responses that do come in from reminder letters. See the guidance under *Preparing to Follow Up* at the *Why Follow up?* tab.

When people still don't respond

Non response even after a reminder letter is a hard fact of life in every church. Most churches have members entrenched in a culture of low-level and static giving and resistant to change. We likely know these people; they may well benefit from church activities. And a few may be vocal about the whole business. It can hurt. So how do we cope with non response when the reminder letter is not fruitful?

The witness of Scripture

Non response is as old as Scripture itself. We have Paul's teaching on giving in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 precisely because the Corinthian church did not 'finish the work' (2 Cor. 8:11) and Paul notes in passing (2 Cor. 9:2) that zeal for the collection in the model church in Macedonia 'has stirred up most of them'. Nehemiah had his critics but likely it hurt most when his own nobles grew rich from taxation and land grab in return for food (Neh. 5:1-13) or when the priest Eliashib failed in his duty and forced the



Levites into the fields to earn a living. Nehemiah gave his anguish and frustration to God in prayer and that is our first response to non response.

Understanding non response

Second, understand non response properly. Headline response rates ('only 50% of people have responded') can hide the truth. You differentiated the mailing list so look at the percentage of responses in each differentiated grouping: Leader, Planned, Plate and Friends. You should naturally expect a progressively lower response rate from Leaders through Planned and Plate to our Friends. Identifying the key areas of non response helps to focus some stewardship tasks, such as recruitment of loose givers to planned giving. Significant non response across the board suggests a money problem that must be addressed over time.

Two out of three is bad

Third, the giving of time and talents is not a reason for not giving our treasure; we can't do deals with God. Don't fall for that yourself in your thinking and don't allow others to justify their non response in this way. Sure, some cannot increase their giving but they can return a response form ticking this box and affirming their support in principle. The truth is that those who give time and talents also give their treasure. 'Church attendance and hours spent volunteering for church work are highly predictive of giving. All research studies agree.'ⁱⁱ

Non response from Leaders

This can be the most painful area for clergy and lay leaders and in some cases the most intractable. What do we do with Leaders who vote for a stewardship programme, do not respond personally but expect others to do so and then exercise their right to decide on financial matters at the next church council? From Leaders you should expect a near 100% response rate; anything less is a dereliction of responsibility. A personal visit and conversation is in order. The issue is not how much this person gives but the non response – there is a difference. The underlying cause may be personal, pastoral or practical; you need to know, so ask. Longer term, ensure that a giving commitment is a core expectation of those elected or called to a church council. No fundraising consultancy would absolve charity trustees from financial leadership at the start of a capital project.

Non response from Planned givers

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 enquiry that may well throw light on issues of a pastoral nature.

In other cases, a second reminder letter may be sent. The first letter assumes that folk have forgotten to respond, the second reminder letter might enquire if there is any particular issue or some unhappiness with church life that prevents people from responding. It should also state that, to respect people's decisions, they will not be bothered with further letters.



Non response from Plate givers

If there is no response from Plate givers, just let the matter lie. The potential for misunderstanding means that a third letter cannot be justified.

Notes and Resources

ⁱ Note that there may be an earlier date for the return of Leader response forms so that the corporate Leader increase in giving can be included in the Planned and Plate giver letters.

ⁱⁱ Dean Hoge et al *Money Matters* p70