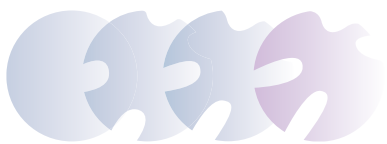


Finish the work: sending reminder letters

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. Our natural forgetfulness is reinforced because we plan to return our response on Sunday but we're not there every Sunday. Or the email is there, noted but unopened, in an inbox stuffed with other emails.

St Paul wrote a reminder letter to Corinth, more than one if, as some think, 2 Corinthians 9 was originally a separate letter. He wrote, 'Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it...' (2 Cor. 8:11). If Paul can do, so can we.

Return to sender

First, check that a return date is included in the initial clergy letter and on the response form. It may be designated 'Thanksgiving Sunday' or similar. When sending reminder letters or emails consider the following:

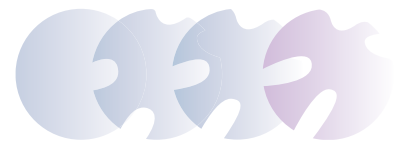
- Forgetting is natural so it's OK to write again.
- The initial invitation was to resource God's mission in your church. That still stands. Be confident, not apologetic, about your gentle reminder.
- Send reminders by letter or email no later than two weeks after the closing date for the return of the response forms.
- There's a non-response letter template at the [Reminder Letters](#) tab.
- Your reminder should include a new date for returning response forms.
- If sending hard copy reminder letters consider enclosing a handwritten stamp addressed envelope. Make a response easy for people.
- Personal visits may be appropriate in some circumstances but, in the vast majority of cases, a reminder letter or email is preferable.
- Remember to record accurately the responses to any reminders.

When people *still* don't respond

Non-response, even after a reminder, is a hard fact of life in every church. Sometimes it is a good while since giving has been tackled and a pattern of asking and responding has not been established. Sometimes there can be a vocal minority in opposition to a stewardship ministry. It can be painful when there is no response from people who are blessed by the church's ministry. 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 (Neh. 5:1-13) or when the priest Eliashib 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

In a *2015 USA experiment* a 'silent', uniformed Salvation Army collector (simply ringing a bell) saw less givers and lower value gifts than a uniformed collector making a verbal appeal: 'please give today'. Mostly, shoppers didn't avoid a 'silent' collector. They could walk by; some gave due to accustomed visual prompt, a few seeking the collector to make a gift.

The verbal appeal increased giver numbers by 55% and total donations by 69%. The study authors argue that asking stimulates empathy which in turn creates a human impulse to be generous. Quite possibly. They also conclude that asking changes everything. Definitely. That's why the *clergy ask letter* matters.

Importantly for us here, the appeal caused between a quarter and a third of shoppers to 'avoid the ask', choosing a different door. Asking ramps up avoidance. Recall the 2020 Anglican Giving Survey finding that a third of members do not give to their church, 40% had never been asked to give regularly and nearly half had never been asked to review their giving.

Asking for a response throws this dynamic into sharp relief. Many respond positively. Other don't respond to avoid the psychological cost of saying 'no'. Non-response is very human, very normal. It is not a moral judgement on the giver or on the church.

Differentiate non-responses

Headline response rates ('only 50% of people have responded') can mislead. More helpful is the percentage of responses in each differentiated grouping: Leader, Planned, Plate (and Friends). Expect a progressively lower response rate from Leaders through Planned and Plate to our Friends. Identifying key areas of non-response can focus stewardship ministry. For example, low plate response may suggest a renewed focus on *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, don't rationalise non-response around giving because people give their time and talents. To be sure, some may not be able to increase their giving. But they can tick this box on a response form and affirm 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.'* (Hoge et al p70)

Non-response from leaders

Non-response to a reminder can be a painful area for clergy and lay leaders and in some cases almost intractable. How do we respond to a leader who votes for a stewardship programme, doesn't respond personally and then assists in financial discussions at the next church council? Leaders should make a near 100% response rate. Anything less is a dereliction of responsibility and a conversation is in order. The issue is not how much a leader gives; it's the failure to respond. Longer term, ensure that a giving commitment is a core expectation of those elected or called to a church council. No fund raising consultancy would absolve charity trustees from a giving commitment in any capital project.



Non-response from planned givers

Where numbers are manageable, consider making personal visits to all non-responders. The question is simple and direct: 'is everything OK?' Don't presume answers, just ask an open, sensitive question.

In other cases, a second reminder by letter or email may be sent. The first letter assumes that folk have forgotten to respond. A second reminder might enquire if there is any particular issue or unease 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 reminders.

Non-response from plate givers

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