

### Who asks, receives: writing the ask letters

The letter sent to each member of the congregation from the clergy has a very specific purpose: to ask church members personally to make their own personal response. This paper offers general and practical guidance on writing the clergy ask letters.



The bible is not coy about the business of asking. God said to King Solomon, 'Ask! What shall I give you?' (1 Kings 3:5). Ruth asked to glean in the field of Boaz and the rest is Israel's history, and ours (Ruth 2:5-7) Jesus tells his disciples, 'ask and it will be given to you... everyone who asks receives' (Matt. 7:7-8). In Luke's Gospel a widow seeking justice in a parable and a woman seeking healing for her daughter persist and are praised for their asking (Luke 18:1-8; Mt 15:21-28; Mt. 5:42). In the Lord's Prayer, of course, we are told to ask for our daily bread.

If we can confidently ask our heavenly Father for what we need, we should not be anxious about asking our brothers and sisters for the financial resources our church family needs. Certainly Paul was happy to ask gentile churches for a gift for Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25-28; 2 Cor. 8 - 9) and that Christian leaders should be financially supported (1 Cor. 9:7-12).

#### Asking for the obvious

The bible seems clear enough. So let's look at asking in a different way. In an *academic experiment* people had \$10 to allocate to a recipient. When there was no communication at all between the two, the gift level was \$1.50. When the recipients alone could ask, the gift rose to \$2.40 and when both giver and recipient were allowed to communicate, the gift rose to \$3. There is power in asking; it seems to generate an empathy that leads to greater giving. Note that the experiment focused on verbal asking.

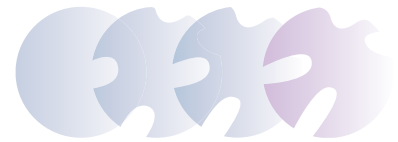
Now it may feel to clergy and lay leaders alike that the financial needs of the church are pretty obvious. Surely people see the need and know to respond. There should be no need to ask. Indeed, clergy may feel it is not part of their ministry to ask. But 'asking for the obvious' makes all the difference. Interestingly, the actual words used in the experiment were less important than the fact of the ask itself. The authors conclude that asking is one of the social cues that stimulates altruism and constrains selfishness.

#### Asking not begging

Clergy and lay leaders should not be frightened of asking around money. We are not begging and never will. We are nurturing discipleship when we invite church members to exercise a twin responsibility before God: to resource mission and to journey into generosity. This is a Gospel invitation and our confidence in the Gospel should be reflected in the letters we write to our congregations. There is no place for embarrassment and no need for an apologetic tone.

#### Making the ask

The *brochure* explains the financial facts of church life and the scope of church ministry. The *preaching* connects money and discipleship. The clergy letter makes a personal ask and seeks a personal response. So it is important to give prayerful time and careful thought to preparing the letters. Guidance on preparing a differentiated mailing list and templates for differentiated clergy ask letters are found at *Preparing the Literature*.



## Keep it personal

The ask letter is a personal letter so it should look, read and feel like a letter from one person to another. As you edit the templates observe some golden rules:

- Handwrite both the greeting and your signature in blue ink so it does not look photocopied;
- Address each recipient by name, never 'Dear friend' or 'Dear sister in Christ';
- The handwritten signature is usually from one person. It shouldn't look like a committee sent it;
- Print each individual letter; never use photocopied master letters;
- Keep the style conversational and the sentences short. Make sure it is brief and to the point;
- Make liberal use of 'you'; in fact aim for using 'you' three times for every 'I';
- Use the letter PS to underline your key point.

In a clergy vacancy or where there is no formal pastor or senior elder give thought as to who should sign the letters. It may be appropriate to have two signatures if leadership is clearly shared. But don't 'sign by committee'. Don't sign off with 'the finance team' or 'the Deacons'. If several people can sign then divide up the letters and use a phrase such as, 'I am writing as one of the church wardens/elders/leadership team at our church'.

Remember, you will write first and early to your leaders but the letter should never be the first they hear of Giving in Grace. If some leaders are not part of the council discussions, they should have been visited and consulted early doors. The clergy ask letter must not be confused with communication to and consultation with the church leadership.

## Keep it focused

The ask letter has a purpose; it makes a specific and personal request of the recipient. It is a different frame of asking from, say, a poster with a QR code or a visible contactless giving station. As you edit the letter templates, or write your own from scratch, ensure the finished letter:

- presents an unambiguous request to the recipient to do something definite in response. Don't leave the recipient unsure of what to do or how to do it;
- explains how the giver's gift will make a difference. People need to feel that their gift will achieve something and is appreciated;
- puts the emphasis on church ministry and changed lives not on church bills and budgets.

The ask letter is requesting a financial response. Consciously or unconsciously, it's tempting to dilute this financial request. A stewardship programme including the discipleship gifts of time and talents may subtly underplay a financial response. Our language may convey our hesitation. Don't soften the ask by inviting folk to *consider* their giving or *reflect* on their giving. We do want prayerful, thoughtful reflection. We also want people to act.

The exception is around gifts in wills. The dynamics of a legacy request and the personal response makes an invitation to consider a legacy entirely appropriate.

## Keep it confidential

Most clergy don't know and don't want to know how much individuals give. Now, the argument that knowing how much is given influences how clergy relate to church members is largely spurious. Clergy are privileged to know, in confidence, many areas of



personal life. So why money alone should affect relationships is a mystery. But the research from John and Sylvia Ronsvalle (cited in *Hoge et al* p137, 176) does indicate that congregations on the whole do not want clergy to know levels of giving. This is the position taken here with regard to regular planned giving. A capital campaign may well be different.

The template of the clergy ask letter includes a line stating that the clergy will know when an individual's response has been returned – but that they will not know the details of that response. To be clear: this is because the ask letter and the thank you letter come from the clergy but the response form returned by church members is usually addressed to someone other than the clergy. It is important to avoid the impression that the confidentiality of responses has been compromised.