

Holy conversations

The finance dashboard presents our numbers in accessible, graphic form. The numbers will challenge us but they cannot change us. The dashboard is intended not simply to present data but to create holy conversations around the numbers, conversations that have the power to transform.



*'The great obstacle to discovering the shape of the earth, the continents, and the ocean was not ignorance but the illusion of knowledge'.*ⁱ When it comes to exploration people thought they knew what was out there and that same illusion of knowledge hampers the stewardship work of many churches.

Too often stewardship advisors hear the same disabling responses to financial problems: everyone is giving all they can; no one has any more to give. Only occasionally are leaders in a position to know this is true. More often it is a conviction wholly untroubled by facts. It rapidly becomes a self-evident, self-justifying narrative that shuts down the chance of things being different.

The finance dashboard is a tool that helps those with stewardship responsibility in the local church to make an honest assessment of their financial position and trends. But the power lies not just with the numbers but the story that each church weaves around those numbers. Each church has its own money story just as each individual does.ⁱⁱ Positively this story can reflect and amplify a culture of generous giving. Negatively, this story or narrative sometimes justifies, sometimes blames, sometimes offers the reasons why things cannot change. The dashboard seeks to create conversations that can help to change or enrich the money culture of our church, to begin to tell a different better story.

Painting by numbers

The finance dashboard presents our financial data visually in graphs rather than the rows and columns of a spreadsheet. Don't underestimate the significance of this. All church leaders have a duty of care for the finances of the church but not all are confident around money. The graphs explore some simple but important financial information: trends of income and expenditure, financial reserves, total levels of giving, average personal giving, other church income streams and our expenditure categories.

Find it and fix it?

These numbers matter but they can exercise a strong gravitational pull, especially on those who enjoy numbers! Our money talk must be richer than making the numbers work better. There are two dangers.

First, if we focus only on the numbers we quickly get into technical problem solving mode: find the problem and fix it. There is, of course, a place for problem solving but while it may buy us time and relieve anxiety it will not always help us effect culture change. For example, we could solve reduced giving by shutting down some expenditure but in doing so we amplify a story of scarcity. Instead, closer inspection may find a slowly increasing congregation in which new members are not encouraged to give well because we are fearful of making a financial challenge. A second danger is that finding and fixing problems takes the pain away too quickly. We don't create what John Kotter calls the sense of urgency which can begin to change the culture of the church.

Here's the thing: for most churches money is not primarily a technical problem to be solved but a culture that needs transformation. For many if not most churches the financial situation is shifting and the necessary change won't come from new technical solutions to problems but by change and adaptation.



Holy conversations

Money talks but our stewardship conversations must be richer and more rounded than budgets and balance sheets. So, alongside the numbers the finance dashboard offers a

series of questions to help kick start discussion and decision making for a new future.

Gil Rendle and Alice Mann suggest that future planning in churches can be understood as a series of 'holy conversations' in small groups. Such a conversation is a real conversation with discussion and disagreement but it is holy because, 'at its best, it is about a people's understandings of their identity as a faith community, their sense of purpose and their relationship with God'. ⁱⁱⁱ

So try to use the dashboard not just to find and fix problems but to start a holy conversation which can make a contribution to changing the money story and the giving culture of the church. The Exodus story in the Bible is not just about Israel's destination but her journey, how she was formed as a nation before God. Our conversation is about who we are as a generous community not just how we attain financial survival. Much will depend on the group's leadership.

Leadership matters

Good stewardship needs good leadership. The group leader is not the chief problem solver but the one who sets the tone for a holy conversation. As we well know, money talk can be lively, angry, depressing or all of the above at once! A good conversation won't just happen.

Start with some prayerful bible reflection on one of the key money passages in the bible. ^{iv} Don't rush into discussion which can quickly become problem solving but root the discussion in our inheritance of faith rather than individual preferences. And dream some dreams: perhaps start by asking how people would

like things to be different around money in the church in the future.

Don't look back in anger

Whatever the financial situation the church is where it is and the facts are what they are. We review the past to understand our present but do resist an archaeological enquiry! The risk is that we look for people, institutions or situations to blame. This can make the group defensive and unwilling to learn or alternatively blaming others deflects attention from our own responsibilities.

Instead, following the insights of appreciative enquiry, explore the good stuff in our church's story. Ask about the times when we have been generous, when we have turned around difficult situations, when we have used our reserves creatively. And talk about what our best might look like in the future.

Third, we make decisions or firm recommendations to the church council. We won't all agree on everything and it may take more than one meeting but at some point decisions or recommendations are needed. Critically, as Rendle and Mann points out, we need to agree to live with the good and the bad of the decisions we make.

Finally, for the group leader the context will matter much. A pressing financial need may need an immediate and workable solution. A well prepared stewardship programme may be too much at this point. Culture change does not happen overnight and a pragmatic solution may be a necessary, evolutionary next step. But it will be recognized as the short term solution which it is. It's like trying to sort out a damp patch without identifying the leak. Tackle the culture that created the problem or the issue will reappear in another way at a different time.

Conclusion

The finance dashboard helps us towards a robust discussion about today's financial situation and can stimulate a holy conversation towards a different culture, a changed narrative and a new future.

Notes and Resources

i Daniel J Boorstin in *The Discoverers*, quoted in *Transitional Ministry* ed. Molly Lane Smith (Church publishing NY 2009) page 146

ii On personal money stories see the Stewardship article, [Written on our Hearts: learning to tell our money stories](#).

iii Holy Conversations (Alban Institute 2003). The quote is from page xiv.

iv Maybe start with the resources at www.givingingrace.org/preaching