To the Point Series

Should Pastors Know What Members Give?

Every time I teach on stewardship, this question invariably comes up: "Should pastors have access to contribution records?" In some congregations, pastors are prohibited from knowing what people contribute. In others, pastors choose to shield themselves from this information.

The stated reason often is that a pastor might show favoritism to those who contribute more generously or fail to minister adequately to the less generous. But really? What pastor is so obsessed with money that he or she is incapable of ministering fairly to all? Anyone that crass would probably play favorites with those who attend worship and Bible study more regularly, too. Yet no one suggests that pastors wear blindfolds in the pulpit to prevent them from seeing who is in the pews.

A good pastor pays attention to all the signs of spiritual development. And someone's giving is one important fruit of spiritual maturity. Growth in giving can signal a deepening faith commitment. And an unexpected drop in giving can be a symptom of other pastoral concerns, such as illness or unemployment.

Pastors who do not know what people give cannot help but make assumptions. And those assumptions are almost invariably wrong. The shut-in who has not attended church in years might not seem like a key player in your church. But if she is the most faithful tither, doesn't she deserve affirmation and thanks? It is easy to assume that an active church leader is also a faithful steward. But what if that leader was never taught the fundamentals of faith and generosity? Isn't it better to know than to guess wrongly?

There are valid pastoral, spiritual, and developmental reasons why pastors, and sometimes other key church leaders, should know what people give. But money can be a touchy subject. And people might be upset if they assume their giving is unknown to the pastor or others and then find out otherwise. If this information has always been tightly guarded, think carefully about the best ways to begin to pierce the veil of secrecy. Here are a couple of options.

Establish a Policy

Some churches find it helpful to formulate a policy on access to giving records. Begin by asking, "Who already knows what people give?" Even in churches where there is a high level of secrecy around giving, *somebody* knows what people give. Then ask who else needs to know and why? Do the clergy need to know for pastoral reasons? Do finance or stewardship leaders need to know to promote better stewardship? Formulate a clear policy and ask your finance committee and governing board to approve it.

Give People an Option

A church in New England had the idea of adding a check box to their pledge card that said, "It is all right to share my pledge amount with my pastor." At the last minute, they decided to make it an opt-out box instead, reading "Please do not share with my pastor my pledge amount." This alerts people to the fact that the pastor knows, but gives them a choice in the matter if it causes discomfort. The pastor reports that very few people check the box.

Model the Way

Ultimately, the best way to foster a culture of greater transparency around giving is to talk about it more. Pastors and other leaders can model the way by openly discussing their giving in thoughtful, appropriate, and humble ways. When we share testimonies about our giving, we teach and inspire others about the importance of faithful giving.

I am not suggesting printing giving amounts in the newsletter. Although strangely, many people who insist on secrecy with church giving don't object to their names and giving levels appearing in the annual reports of other charities. In fact, they would be upset if left off! But the conspiracy of silence around giving in churches is contrary to responsible stewardship. Accountable discipleship requires that we be far more transparent around faith and money. Being a bit more open about our giving and a little less uptight about who knows are good steps in that direction.

Dr. Ann A. Michel is associate director of the Lewis Center and lecturer in church leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary where she teaches stewardship classes.