

Best practices during times of uncertainty – Communication & Generosity

No one could deny we are in uncharted waters. However, as synod staff we have been consulting with many leaders who have significant experience in both disaster response and generosity. Below are some of the highlights of the best advice that is out there right now as it pertains to communication, generosity...and the heart of it all, mission.

KEY POINT 1: Decide the WHO, WHAT, WHEN, and WHERE of communication.

It is incredibly important that lines of communication are wide open during times of crisis or uncertainty, but that doesn't mean that communication is scattered or disorganized. In fact, it is incredibly important that your members have a few things they can rely on:

a. WHO is the main spokesperson for the messaging coming from the congregation?

Is it the council president? The pastor? Make sure to have this conversation so leaders of all different types are communicating with each other internally, and then one (or two maximum) people are the main spokespeople the congregation hears from in official communications. This prevents confusion and boosts confidence that members can rely on the congregation. Emotionally, this is important as we all need to know God's presence in our lives right now and our churches are a key part of that. Financially, it is important because confidence and trust formed in relationships are the foundation of generosity. If you are a larger congregation, key program staff can each communicate for their area of ministry, certainly.

b. WHAT do you want to communicate?

This is the most important point: **Communicate ministry impact, not desperate need.**

It has always been true that the vast majority of people are not motivated to generosity by being told about a budget. Most of us are motivated by impact. Tell stories of how God is using your congregation during this time, and connect every invitation to generosity to an example of impact.

An example might be helpful here. One congregation recently posted on Facebook that the three hand sanitizing stations they ordered before this crisis had been delivered, but that they really only needed two for now in the building. This post went on to share how church staff had delivered the third sanitizing station to the local food pantry, because they had been in communication with the leaders of the pantry, and that was a desperate need.

I was so moved by this simple story. If there had been a link to give electronically beneath that story, I would have done it immediately. The messaging could even say, "Join us in making these kinds of investments in our wider community."

Note that it doesn't just have to be impact in the wider community. For example, if you have a member who has commented how much the daily devotion sent out by the congregation helped them feel God's presence, ask if they would be willing to be quoted (even anonymously) in a piece of future communication. The key point remains: People give to impact far more than they give to budgets, so tell stories of impact first, and then invite people to support that impact.

Last, do everything you can to avoid sending out generic appeals that communicate emergency need. This is an uncertain time, for sure, but the problem with "emergency appeals" is that they work once. People will step up to give in an emergency, but if emergency appeals continue for weeks or months, giving doesn't follow at the same rate.

c. WHEN will you be communicating with the congregation?

Part of confidence and reliability is consistency. Identify key, predictable times each week when your congregation will be receiving official communications from the congregation. Also, recognize people are on information overload right now, so be judicious in the number of times each week you are sending out official communications.

d. HOW will you be communicating with the congregation?

This is certainly shifting as Sunday morning announcements are not possible in the short term. Simply make sure your leaders are coordinating with each other the various methods of reaching out to members. Social media, MailChimp, Constant Contact, texts and “old-fashioned” phone calls are all ways to stay connected.

Important caveat: Communication through social media, either of opportunities to connect with each other, or resources for faith in the home, may be more informal, grassroots, and organic. However, some of the considerations above still apply; consider the timing, people, and messages.

KEY POINT 2: Generosity and mission are all rooted in relationship, so start there

Have you called the people who care about you to care about them?

a. Do relational checks

A central question guiding us at all times could be, “what does love look like in this situation?” First, check in relationally with your leaders, allowing them a place “where it is ok to not be ok” (a quote from a pastor in the Greater Milwaukee Synod). When the time is right, talk with your leaders about how to be doing check-ins with every other member of the congregation. Ideas include splitting up the membership directory among a wide circle of leaders. Make sure all leaders have a sense of what you want to ask and communicate. Make these calls/texts/etc. primarily about listening and let what you hear shape your leadership’s approach moving forward.

b. Check in with your top 10 giving families, both relationally and financially

This isn’t suggested because of special treatment, but because we recognize that in most congregations, the top 10 giving families provide anywhere from 30% to 50% of the income. Once you hear how they are doing, let what you hear guide your decisions moving forward. If a strong percentage of them are doing well (both emotionally and financially), consider sharing with the congregation something like, “our key leaders are all committed to maintaining their generosity.” The point here is to communicate that anyone choosing to financially support the congregation is joining others who are doing so.

Our fundraising experts have reminded us of some important good news on the financial front; many of our top givers may have already, as a part of their own financial planning over the last few years, moved their assets out of volatile stocks and into more stable sources. Surprisingly, some of these individuals are relatively unaffected by the global market challenges.

c. Check in with your church council, both relationally and financially

The key point in both items b. and c. here is that the most effective ways to communicate the importance of financial engagement is by creating a “join me” culture, instead of sending out more generic messages that say “everyone should give.” Find ways to communicate that various groups of leaders are committed, and that those leaders are inviting others to join them.