

Facilitating the Flow of God's Blessings

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A Life-Changing Experience

My first job out of college was working for the American Embassy in Zaire. That was the same job my mother had; her first job after college was working for the American Embassy in Iceland. So I inherited that from my mom, that sense of adventure. She lasted longer than I did, I only lasted 3 months when I discovered that Central Africa was the land of opportunity, and, believe it or not, there was big money in sewing machine needles. So, I started my own little import business.

Has anyone here ever operated a foot-treadle sewing machine? The needles are about 10 times bigger than a regular sewing machine; they're like a toothpick, and they could puncture rawhide, they're so big. Now, regular sewing machine needles are very slender, but these fat ones are big. Now, if you have no electricity, you want a foot-treadle sewing machine. Unfortunately, when I was there, they were selling for five bucks, which was a day's wage for a tailor. I could buy them in South Africa for 10 cents, and then whole sale them for a dollar, then I'd buy art in Central Africa, and sell it back in South Africa. So, with only a few dollars, you could make quite a bit of money, which I did, and spent it as you can imagine a boy in his twenties would do.

Sewing machine needles are kind of what led me to God. One of my adventures was to take a boat trip down the Congo River. As you can imagine, back in 1979 it was pretty primitive (I think it's still pretty primitive right now). So, imagine this, I'm coming down the river, right along the equator, curving south, and we come to the mouth of the river. There were three of us, and when we got there I went for a walk, not realizing I was walking into a war zone.

The province of Cabinda was trying to secede from the main body of Angola; this was an oil rich area, and you knew that the moment you walked along the beach because off-shore there had

these gigantic wells that would blow propane out of the top -- a two-hundred foot tall torch of fire. So, I didn't know I was walking into a war zone. I had on green pants, I was really tan, and, (I want you to suspend your belief for a moment, and imagine me with hair--I know it's a stretch) long curly, brown hair and a beard; and with my green pants that looked remarkably like what the Cuban mercenaries looked like who had been sent in to quell the disturbance.

So, as I was on my hike down to the beach, these two gentlemen came scrambling over a cliff with their guns and they confused me with one of the bad guys; but not quite a normal bad guy, because I didn't have a gun. I must have looked like a bad guy who was a chicken and was going AWOL because I didn't have a gun. And, I looked remarkably like a guy who had been shooting people in their village. So this was a bad experience; it was a train wreck waiting to happen. You know how on National Geographic you read that the animals could sense the humans were coming? This sense that they are talking about is olfactory. Well, I could sense these guys coming about a mile away. It had obviously been a couple of months since they had seen a bar of soap. One guy only had one eye, the other guy's eyes were all bloodshot, and they were both out-of-breath because they were so excited to catch a bad guy. They could speak a little French, I could speak a little French. It was two hours I was with them; I had left everything down at the beach with my buddies; I didn't have my passport, no ID, etc.

Finally the younger guy says to the older guy, as he lifts his weapon up to my head, 'We need to get on with our day.' And when a big weapon is right near your ear, and they cock it like that, the click is so loud it sounds like a gun shot. And at that moment, at the clicking, I said the prayer that, I imagine, we will all say as we are dying. (I grew up Catholic, and went to a Baptist college, so I learned two ways to pray.) At the time it didn't seem like it was time for a 'Hail Mary' or a 'Hallelujah!'; right at that moment, when I think, 'I'm dying,' the last words of Christ came into my mind: "Dear God, into your hands I commend my soul; take me, I am yours." I literally had this experience, thinking, I'm about to leap, I'm almost there, 'cause I was just so doggone scared. And at the moment that that prayer left me, I could no longer hear the pounding of the surf, or

smell the salt water, or feel the sun on my back, or smell those guys, or any of that, it was real silent and quiet, and I had my momentary, as I thought it, connection with God. And it was very depressing, because it caused me to reflect back on my entirely worthless life, completely devoid of anything virtuous. Here I was in my twenties, and all I had done my entire life was “have fun”, and I now became aware of how vacuous that was.

And a moment later, as I regained consciousness, two miracles happened. One, these very angry gentlemen, ready to kill me, lowered their weapons and said, “Allez, gaston”. Well, I was ready to “allez” as fast as I could. At the time I didn’t think it was a miracle, I thought it was a trick, that they were just going to shoot me in the back, and I would fall into the surf and be swept away and never heard from again. But that didn’t happen, obviously. And then the second thing happened, and that is that my life turned 180 degrees at that moment. I realized I had had a momentary connection to God, because I chose at that moment to accept what God offers to all of us all the time, God who is always here, always with us: I had chosen to be with God, and I was no longer interested in importing sewing machine needles, or having wild adventures. At that moment I knew I had to find a way to become a conduit for God’s blessings. God had blessed me enormously, and I had to figure out a way for God’s blessings to flow through me. And that became my life mission. So that was the second miracle, when I was transformed from a reprobate into somebody who wanted to make the world a better place. And that’s how I ended up here today, and that’s the central message of stewardship: that God’s blessings are meant to flow through us. I didn’t know that at the time--I didn’t know anything about stewardship. I had never given money to anyone; I was interested in taking not giving. But that 180 degree turnaround caused a whole lot of self-reflection and research and what I discovered was this fascinating field that everyone needs and everyone is interested in.

The Challenge of Stewardship in the Church

Now, one of the things that you may not know is that the central definition of our problem is that the average Catholic gives

1.2% of their income to their church. Anglicans, a little bit higher. Methodists, a little bit higher; Baptists a little bit higher still. It tops out at Seventh Day Adventists at about 7%. But most of us have a whole long way to go. Gallup recently created a poll and they discovered that the typical congregation have about 15% who “get it”. They attend, they give, they volunteer. There are 50% who are ready to be invited more fully in. There are 35% who, as my wife lovingly calls them, are CEOs — Christmas and Easter onlies. You know who these people are in your church, I know who they are in mine. This is landmark, fantastic research.

Another thing that the Gallup polling discovered is that there is a tiny little slice that cuts across all three groups which they called CAVE — Consistently Against Virtually Everything! I find it fascinating that the CAVE dwellers in the inner core become really vitriolic if you try to thank them. Whenever you try to thank someone who is pure as the driven snow, they get angry with you!

At the tables downstairs at the conference, there are items being given away. Grab some up and give them away. Give away doo-dads like crazy. It makes the 15% angry but it makes the 85% very happy. The 15% will say I don’t want any, but the 85% will say “I want two!”. This is an entry point into a deeper interaction with their church.

This is one of the 7 points of the stewardship system. It’s a highlight of the stewardship system and a highlight of my life; we give it away to churches. Because you are all likely members of the 15%, you don’t want thanks for what you do; it’s not part of your personal paradigm. But you will need to learn to think beyond your own personal paradigm.

Another point in the stewardship system, is that, when you need to raise funds for a new church or a new program, that God is bountiful beyond belief! All you need to do is have a system and understand how a system works.

Our company, Church Development, exists to increase the flow of God’s blessings, and what we have discovered is that the average person will increase their giving by 100% for 3 years if a set of criteria are met.

Let me tell you a story. Tomorrow I’ll be working at a church in Houston, where the number 2 person on the staff quit. They have all

kinds of new programs, they have about 600 people at Mass every Sunday, people are angry about the departure of their beloved staff person, the new programs are confusing and people don't know what's going on, and then they take it out on me as I'm preparing for a campaign with them: "I don't like this, I don't like that, I don't like that you're interviewing me, I don't like the fact that we're preparing to spend a lot of money. I'm very uncomfortable about the whole thing. But, if we go forward, I'm good for \$10,000.00." That happens to me over and over again. It's really fascinating.

The Stewardship System

Now we in the Church have done one thing and done it rather poorly: we say, "Please give!" and usually we say that once a year. And we say it because things are going horribly, and things are in the red, and we're headed toward the tank, and we're desparate. Well, that gets us about 1.2%. But, I've discovered, you can have this fantastic movement from 1.2% to 2.4% if you teach people what stewardship is, involve them in prayer and discernment, involve them in decision-making, connect them socially, ask them to volunteer in the effort, then ask them, and thank them. Those are the 7 parts of stewardship, and I'm going to spend the rest of my time walking through those 7 parts. You do these things and the amount of giving takes a leap. Now, if any of you are about to storm out of here and leave, let me give you these 2 golden nuggets, after which I'm going to ask you what questions and concerns you have, and then I'll pass out my handouts, so you don't have to take a lot of notes.

We have a Ph.D. on our staff now that we pay to do research, and he is really fantastic, and he's helped us come up with these 2 nuggets. The first insight, which we represent as *VAK*, stands for *visual, auditory, kinesthetic*, and to go even further, is connected with a concept we call the transderivational search.

Pay attention to what goes through the screen of your consciousness when I say the following words: snarling dog. How many of you saw a snarling dog? How many heard the dog, heard the dog's growl? How many felt the fear of the snarling dog, of the imminent danger? The ideal if I wanted to talk about that snarling dog would be to talk about it in visual, auditory and kinesthetic ways,

so that the whole group gets it. Now, that's the way you ask for a donation.

I worked with St. Gabriel's in north Kansas City, we needed a new piano. We could have said, "Hey everyone, increase your giving." And that's really boring. "We have a piano debt, it's \$10,000". But what we did is we asked, "Can you sponsor a key in our piano? You can sponsor a white one, or a black one; one down at the low end, or one up at the high end. And it will cost you \$100.00 to sponsor a key." Well, that took about 20 minutes; we had our new piano in 20 minutes.

One time I was working at the cathedral in Oklahoma City, and we were restoring the inside of the church, and there was lots of detail work. Now, we could have asked people, "Please give more, because we have to pay those people a lot." But instead, we went with visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and said, "One of the things we're going to restore is the Stations of the Cross. Five thousand dollars will pay for the renovation of one Station." Now that was a ballpark figure, some of the stations might cost less, but it gives people an idea of where their money is going to. Well, that took about a week. In fact, it went so well, I went to the pastor and said, "Why don't you add a couple of stations, maybe get them up to 20."

So you get the idea. If I can say, we're having a start-up, or a new program, we know that the money is there. And we know that we should give. But we need to help unlock those doors of generosity. And this method is one of the keys to open the door. So use that method liberally; whenever you need money, ask for it in the most specific ways.

The second nugget comes from Jim Everett, our Ph.D., and we said to him that we were going to give him all the profits of our company for a year so that he could come up with an answer to why people make the shift from a buck in the basket to deliberate and committed givers. Six months later he comes back after doing all these surveys and lots of fascinating research and he says, "That's the wrong question." And I think, "Great I just wasted all that money." But he said, "A better question is: When do people become committed." All of us, it turns out, become committed stewards for the same reason: when we get it. But under what circumstances

does a person make the shift? So another year goes by, with lots of interviews, lots of surveys. And Jim comes up with the answer that it usually happens when a person is pretty new to church and has an *episodic volunteer experience*. So, it typically happens like this: “Hey, we have this event going on; would you take this clipboard and write down everyone’s name who comes in?” or, “Saturday morning we have to fix the fuse box, could you come down? It will take about an hour;” or “Wednesday evening we’ve got something going on, could you be one of the people who distributes material?” (21:02) or “Sunday morning we need a substitute to watch the kindergarten group, could you help for an hour?” And Jim got this down to a specific definition, and it is called an episodic volunteer opportunity. One and done; here and gone. And the experience they have is: Oh, it’s up to me! I have to do something for this to be a success. When they have the insight, “If I drop the ball, it’s not happening.” It only takes one of those experiences for someone to make the shift, from casual to committed. So what does that mean for those of us who seek to lead and manage? It means we’ve got to design a lot of episodic volunteer opportunities to facilitate the shift from a buck in the basket to getting up to this norm of 1.2%.

So when our company comes in to help, we get paid to help facilitate lots of *episodic volunteer opportunities*. We are aiming at the 85% of people who are not committed; the 15% are already there, so we want the chance to go to the 85% and invite them in. We lovingly call them the “functionally inert.” Let me go to our functionally inert buddies and find a way to get them to do a “one and done” job as part of a prayer activity or a social activity or write a thank-you note, or get a youth committee involved. This is what stewardship means to me, it’s not about money, it’s about being a conduit for God’s blessings to flow to others, and you’re inviting these folks in the 85% to be stewards of God’s blessings. Our goal is simply to facilitate that transformation, to move people from being a spectator to a participant.

For example, how would you begin a new church community so that the DNA, the bones of the community, the whole pattern leads to a culture of giving right from the very beginning? There’s a one-word answer for that, and it is engagement. You may be a completent

professional, and could make all the decisions, and they would probably be good. But if I were in your shoes, I would not make any of the decisions. I would hold a town-hall meeting on where are we going to rent our first space, what color are we going to paint the bathrooms, what kind of donuts are we going to have after church... I would find a million ways to engage people in decision making, so that they own it. If they own it, they will make it happen. It's kind of flipping the hierarchy around; I really like the term "servant-leader", and that's how I see Christ. He could have just commanded, but instead he was a teacher, teaching by means of parable and metaphor that causes me to process things internally and if we copy that here, we'll have a good outcome.

Now, how do you raise funds for a special program, or a new building, without your regular giving taking a hit? I would go back to this *VAK*. If you just ask people to increase their giving, they might do that, but you run the risk of a dip in the regular operating funds you need to pay the bills. If you say, "Sponsor the renovation of a single window in the school" or "Help us put a new door in; the cost for a new door is \$360.00, that's \$10/month for 3 years," you get different results. I don't really understand what's going on in the human mind, some sort of bifurcation of the hemispheres of the brain or something, because as soon as you ask in that way, the response you get is "Yes, I'm going to keep giving my annual pledge *and* pay for my door in addition," and people think of this in an entirely different way than if you simply ask them to increase their overall giving. Recently David Brooks wrote a book called *The Social Animal* and his conclusion in that is the French Enlightenment lost, the British Enlightenment won; we are not left-brain analytical creatures, we are right-brain; everything that sticks with us is within the context of a story. So if I'm trying to raise money for a door, I'm going to tell a story about how that door's going to open and shut, and who's going to use that door, and what does the kid look like who's going to slam it too loud, and what's the name of the carpenter who's going to install it and where's the wood going to come from. It is by means of a story that we make sense of everything. So *VAK* is my quick way of calling it a story.

Now, if you have a group that's been together for a while, and

there's been a decrease in commitment, what do we do; remember, we said above that the transition from casual to committed often happens when someone is new to the group. Imagine your group, your parish has been static for a long time, and the "we've always done it that way" attitude is kicking in. What you need is to go backwards, and call the whole congregation together and begin a strategic planning process where you ask, "What is God calling us to do?" You have a whole bunch of town meetings, a whole bunch of lunches, surveys, interviews, things you fill out and check off at the end of Mass, lots of opportunities for people to give input. And the next part of the cycle is feedback, "Here's what we heard from you," and then the next part of the cycle, "Let's refine this even further," then we feed it back again, then we refine it even more, so people have the sense that "My ideas are being implemented through my church." Now, that takes so much time, so much effort, and it is such a pain...but it's transformative, and people become more committed.

I can get really specific, nauseatingly so, about how things work. If you have coffee after every service, the amount of giving goes up 6%...it's not just your waistline that increases, it's your annual budget. Four pot-lucks per year: 5%. Active welcoming ministry: 10%. All of these things meet unmet human needs, and we need to find ways to meet those unmet needs, and we're going to do them over and over and over again.

The first step in your stewardship program is to assess your stewardship failure; people are only giving 1-2%, only 30% make pledges; we know we are not doing well. There are five reasons why. One, a very small percentage of churches have a committee in charge of stewardship. Two, almost no one communicates about what is stewardship. Three, less than half of all churches do an annual campaign that asks people to commit to giving time, talent and treasure. Four, calls to greater generosity never work. And five, no one spends anything on stewardship, which is really depressing.

If we were talking about a business, we would spend \$1 and raise \$6. That's the secular norm and that's pretty good. In the church world, spending \$1 will raise about \$100.00. The International Catholic Stewardship Council recommends that you spend \$2.00 to raise \$100.00. In our business, which centers on capital campaigns,

our ratio is you spend \$1 to raise \$10. And at this point, being old and grey, I guarantee that. I say to people when making a proposal, if you're not a success, there's no fee. This has let me shrink my sales pitch down to one sentence: If you hire us, there's no risk. If you don't raise money, there's no fee.

But I find over and over that no one wants to spend a penny on stewardship. It's as if we were farmers and we said, "I'm not going to spend any money on seeds. That's a waste of money! Forget planting seeds!" That's what I run into every day of my life.

The Seven Components of Stewardship

Teach Stewardship

Another golden nugget is: Teach Stewardship. I have a young son, and in a really fascinating display of the human mind, when it's bedtime he will talk about anything...to avoid going to sleep. He'll ask me about my work, about how my day went, anything to avoid going to sleep. Like most kids, he's got his illustrated Bible, and so one night I was quizzing him, and said "Do you remember the river where Jesus was baptized?" and he responded, "Oh yeah, yeah". "And the lake where Jesus walked on water?". "Sure," he replies. "Well," I said, "there's another lake that doesn't get much mention, that's at the other end of the river, the Dead Sea. And it's very different from the Sea of Galilee. You see, the water flows through the Sea of Galilee and into the river Jordan, but then it goes to the Dead Sea and it just stays there. There's no outlet, it takes in and it keeps. So this is a good illustration of stewardship; in the Sea of Galilee, God's blessings flow through it and it's full of life, and the Dead Sea, God's blessings flow into it and they stop there, and stagnant death occurs. And my son gets it; he's been through a thousand stagnant puddles, and he's been to rivers — like last week when we went camping and we caught a crawdad in a river, which was the coolest thing — and he gets that this movement in the river is life.

So this is the central message, the central story of stewardship: God has blessed us and we need to let those blessings flow through us. You teach that once a month, with lay teachers after Mass, during announcements, and your giving doubles — 1.2% to 2.4%, unless you have a school, in which case it goes from 1.2% to 4%! So, should

you use lay speakers, to talk once a month at the end of Mass for 3 minutes about this message? And never once do we say, "Give me money." We don't say 'we're desperate' or 'we're in the red' or 'we're facing foreclosure' or anything like that. Our speaker just says, here's how God has blessed me and here's how these blessings are flowing through me. Every person in this room is going to have a story like that, and every story is going to be different and every story is going to be full of visual, auditory and kinesthetic elements. It's going to be a neat story, and that works!

Prayer and Discernment

The next element in the stewardship system is prayer, prayer and discernment. Always precede campaigns with prayer. If, for example, you say, "On November 15th we're going to ask you to consider a pledge for renovating the church hall," say that here's a prayer guide to use to prepare for the process. Here are Scripture, prayer and a reflection, one a day for 3 days or a week or ten days, so that you guide your people through the discernment process. The essence of this process is each person asking, "God, what would you do through me?" The prayer is not, "Dear God, send us mo' money."

But does prayer work? Well, there's a medical doctor named Larry Dossey who asked that question about healing. And he found that yes, prayer does work for healing, and that the prayer that worked was not so much "God, please heal that broken bone," but "God, please bless that person's greatest need."

We compared capital campaigns that ran along a secular model, targeting the richest people in the parish, and asking for amounts based on wealth, and found that these would typically raise 150% of annual giving. We then looked at campaigns based on this prayer for discernment, and found that they typically raise 250% of annual giving. So does prayer unleash the power of generosity? It certainly does. It's not pressure...it's prayer.

Involve People in Decision-Making

The third element of stewardship is to involve people in decision-making. The moment you do this, the ownership shifts from you to them. Sometimes a pastor will ask me, "Well, Denis, what if we open this up to the people and they say, 'We're not going to do this?'"

And I reply, “Well then, we’re not going to do this.” Recently I did an assessment for a church about 10 miles south of Kansas City. They had an annual budget of \$4 million, we only needed to raise \$4 million, so that’s 100% of annual giving, not a big stretch. Well, we did the feasibility study, and went back to the pastor and the parish council and said don’t do a capital campaign. They were mad at us, and wondered why we would turn down all this money they were willing to spend for us to do the campaign, but we determined it would fail and people would vote with their wallets. We said that they needed to go back and engage the parish and get their input and make them owners of the project, so that it reflected their concern and values; it would take a long time, but in the end you would know that the campaign would be a success.

We did a study to find out why people leave church, and the number one reason was lack of engagement, lack of being connected, lack of being part of the fabric of the church. So the essence of this third element is to engage people so that they have a sense of ownership in the church and the best way to do that is through decision making. I’d like to conclude this section by citing the book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don’t* by Jim Collins. The great leaders in the companies that were succeeding were not like General Patton, coming in and barking commands, those great leaders came in and listened and asked questions. They spend a lot of time wandering around, visiting, questioning, giving people the chance to put their hands in the clay that helps mold the visioning. That’s how great leaders operate, involving people in decision making. If they’re involved, their giving increases. That’s one of the metrics, but there are lots of other benefits too, like ‘God is now working through me; I’m a participant’.

Help People Relate Socially

The next element is that we discovered that if we have a fundraising effort that there’s a 99% probability that someone will give if they attended a social event where the project was discussed. So what do we have to do? We have to have lots of social events. And guess what doesn’t happen at those events: we don’t ask for money. We just talk about the project; we say “Here’s what we’re thinking; what do you think?” Understanding this has affected architecture. The foyer in

most new church buildings is 33% the size of the sanctuary. I go to Visitation parish. I grew up there, moved away, came back, and the old church became the foyer for the new church!

We raised money for a foyer for St. Thomas More church, and at the beginning people fought it tooth and nail. What a complete and total waste of money many people thought...and I was a horrible person for asking for money for it. Well, by the end of it we did a comparison using a stop watch, and measured how long people stayed around after Mass, from before the project and two years later after the project was complete. Before, about 3 minutes, after, about 30 minutes. Social interaction has an enormous impact on giving. I like the metaphor that we are all threads in the tapestry that is the church, and social events are where we really see this, that I am part of the whole.

The Final Three Components: Include Volunteers, Ask People for Support, Thank Your Supporters

In brief, the other three of the seven components of stewardship are to include volunteers as ministry partners. Our research shows that volunteers give 11 times more than non-volunteers. Ask people for support: 60% of those surveyed say they would give more if they were asked to give more. Part of this is using an envelope system. People using envelopes will go from giving \$1 to giving \$10 just because their using envelopes.

And finally, remember to thank everyone who supports you. A genuine and heart-felt thank you is every bit as important as casting the vision to give, showing the impact of giving, and making the request for support. A thank-you goes a long way and encourages repeat giving.

Mr. Denis Greene, an active member of Visitation parish in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, founded Church Development in 1992 after a near-death experience motivated him to integrate his faith, education and skills in work that served the church and the virtue of stewardship; he is the author of The Stewardship System, Stewardship-Based Capital Campaigns, and How To Ask For Donations as well as numerous articles on stewardship. You can learn more about stewardship at his web site: <http://www.stewardshippystem.org>