

# The Episcopal Diocese of Vermont

## Developing An Annual Commitment Program

### 1. Introduction

While stewardship is about more than money, it does include money. Jesus spoke about money more than any other topic, because money has always been a barrier to discipleship. In a country where we live with unprecedented abundance, we cannot be faithful disciples without talking about our relationship with money and the barriers it poses to our spiritual growth. Anyone who asks, “Why is the Church always talking about money,” needs to read the Gospels more carefully!

Why and how we talk about money in the Church is based on the following:

- a. Money, wealth, possessions, and treasure as a barrier to living in the kingdom was the subject of many teachings by Jesus.
- b. The desire for money, wealth, and material possessions can be a barrier to our spiritual health especially in a consumer-oriented culture that values the accumulation of personal possessions.
- c. God has blessed each of us with an abundance of blessings, including material wealth. In fact, here in North America, we live in such abundance we are not aware of the abundance in our lives and fail to give thanks for these blessings.
- d. The material wealth that we enjoy is a result of God’s grace and gifts and not our hard work alone—despite our protestations of “I worked hard, I earned it, I deserve.....”
- e. The Gospel calls us to share our wealth with those in need and for the sake of the Gospel.
- f. We are made in the image of God. God gives generously. To live in the image of God is to learn to give with a generosity of spirit and joy.
- g. Generosity is a gift of the spirit.

We talk about money so that we can change our thinking and our relationship to money. Learning to give, to share, to live in a spirit of abundance rather than scarcity does not come easily. Acquiring the spiritual discipline of giving is a difficult process which requires prayer, commitment, and practice. Giving is a spiritual discipline just like prayer and study of Scripture. It is a holy habit that allows us to grow closer to God to live more joyfully in the image of God.

The annual commitment program is an opportunity to study and reflect on where we are spiritually in relationship to money, how the spirit of generosity is or is not thriving within us, and how we can deepen our commitment to God’s ongoing work in the world through our financial support. Using the phrase “annual commitment program” instead of “pledge drive” suggests a particular content process that may be different from the traditional “pledge drive.”

Take a moment and please note what is NOT on this list: The annual commitment campaign is neither about funding the parish budget nor about informing the congregation of what the church needs. The Annual Commitment Program provides an opportunity for parishioners to reflect on their commitment to God’s work in the world and, in thanksgiving for their blessings, to give cheerfully and generously. God’s blessings flow to us, through us and the Church, and into the world.

## 2. The Annual Commitment Program needs a theme, focus, or direction.

The theme allows a preacher, lay witnesses, letter writers, and a liturgical celebration of the in-gathering of the commitment/pledge cards to be organized around a central theme. The theme can be generated in a number of ways.

**Option 1.** Ideally, the theme is set by the vestry. A theme flows from the focus of the work of the parish. In the absence of a specific theme that is articulated by the vestry, ponder the following questions: Where is the leadership focusing its efforts, i.e. expansion of service/outreach, pastoral care, building expansion, newcomers, children and youth? Develop a theme that reflects what the Church is doing and where it is headed in terms of mission and ministry.

**Option 2.** There are a number of commercial sources for obtaining theme material, the primary one being The Ecumenical Stewardship Center ([www.stewardshipresources.org](http://www.stewardshipresources.org)). This year's theme is COMMON HOPE COMMON TRUST, "O Lord, light my lamp. My God turns my darkness into light" Psalm 18:28.

**Option 3.** A theme may be selected by the stewardship committee that arises out of some study and reflection of Scripture about money and/or discipleship.

A theme is not simply pulled out of the hat. The theme, and the Scripture passage that supports it, is the theological basis from which the congregation prays about its commitment to the mission and ministry of the Church and where God is calling them to be in their spiritual discipline of giving.

## 3. The Commitment Program needs a time line and task list.

When do you want the program to be finished, including all follow-up and celebrations? Set that date first. Work backwards from that date and determine what is reasonable to do this year. Here are the key "steps" in the process (working backwards)

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|---|---------------------|
| • The celebration of work well done       | November            |
| • The follow-up and thank-you             | November            |
| • The in-gathering/liturgical celebration | October – November  |
| • Pledge card distribution                | October             |
| • Personal Witness /Reflection Phase      | September – October |
| • The Training/Study Event                | September           |
| • The Recruiting Period                   | July – August       |
| • The Planning Period                     | May – June          |
| • Selecting the Team                      | May                 |

Decide what you can reasonably do this year. Put the key dates on the calendar as soon as possible. Key dates include training sessions for stewardship leaders, study and reflection events, preaching dates, parish wide education events, drop dates for letters, witness talks, and/or a liturgical celebration of the gathering of pledge cards, and the final thank you party for stewardship volunteers. Be intentional in calculating the time period between each event on the timeline.

Announce and publicize the liturgical celebration well in advance. Tell people to mark their calendars. Say it often. Plan it well. Make it a big deal. Include children.

Generally, an effective commitment program will take four to six months to plan and will run over a period of six to eight weeks. Do what you can in the time you have and keep track of what you do and how well you did it. You can always do better next year. Your program will improve next year if you keep track of what you do this year.

A great resource for planning commitment programs is *A Manual for Stewardship Development Programs in the Congregation*, available from TENS, The Episcopal Network for Stewardship ([www.TENS.org](http://www.TENS.org)).

#### **4. When people gather to study Scripture, reflect on God's call, and prayerfully consider where God is calling them to be, change happens!**

The increase in giving in your parish will increase in direct proportion to the amount of time and effort you put in this part of the program.

People grow in the spiritual discipline of giving when they have an opportunity to reflect on their relationship with money, share their stories, and pray about where God is calling them to be in relationship to their wealth. Giving increases as people become more aware of their blessings, experience their genuine love and devotion to God and experience God in the midst of their relationship to money.

**Step 1:** There are numerous passages in Scripture that deal with our relationship to money. Below is a list of Scripture verses which lend themselves to reflection. Choose one for each meeting. Some reflection time is well spent on the Scripture that supports your theme.

**Step 2:** The stewardship committee, the vestry and all clergy will do well to regularly engage in study and reflection of one or more passages of Scripture and where they are in their giving to God's work in the world over the course of the stewardship campaign. The vestry and stewardship committee (together or separately) can move more deeply into the spiritual issues around money and giving if the study continues over a period of months. This commitment of time and effort allows these leaders to develop themselves as spiritual leaders in this process of study, prayer, reflection and practice of the spiritual discipline of giving.

**Step 3:** At some point, members of the congregation will be invited to attend some kind of event in which there is reflection on Scripture, a personal story shared, and an invitation is issued to reflect on each individual's relationship to money.

Decide the form of the parish wide study event to which the parish is invited. Successful kinds of events include large group gatherings such as festive meals, small groups gathered in homes or even at the church, mailings, or home visitations and deliveries. The most complex is the home visitation and the simplest is a letter writing or personal note campaign. Booklets outlining the organization of different events can be obtained from The Episcopal Network for Stewardship [www.TENS.org](http://www.TENS.org). The cost is approximately \$10 plus mailing. The booklets are very comprehensive. Helpful hints on how to make these campaigns successful are on the Diocese of Western Massachusetts web site [www.diocesewma.org](http://www.diocesewma.org).

Announce the date, publicize it, and invite everyone in the parish to participate.

**Step 4:** Design the parish wide event carefully. The event should include some reflection on a Scripture passage, some reflection on the role of money in our lives, and an invitation to reflect on where each person is in their giving to God's work in the world. Examples of each appear

below. This can take the form of small or large group discussion or a written or oral presentation. Be creative. Make it fun, relaxed, and safe for people to engage.

**Step 5:** Determine the number of “leaders” you need to carry out the event. The number will vary widely depending on the kind of event you are having. A personal note campaign or letter writing campaign can have one leader. A festive meal needs 1-2 leaders at each table. Each small group needs 1-2 leaders.

**Step. 6:** The greatest growth—spiritually and financially—will come from the people who attend the training sessions for leaders. Identify and Recruit the people who are most receptive to your message. Invite them in person if possible and provide them with written job descriptions. Have the leaders experience everything they are expected to do at or for the parish wide event. This will generally be newcomers and people who are already supporting the work of the parish. Recruit, Recruit, Recruit! Do not rely on volunteers.

**Step 7:** Organize and execute the event well. Practice hospitality. Honor the time that people are giving. Make it fun!

## **5. Mail the pledge cards 1-2 days after the parish wide event.**

Have the pledge cards ready to be mailed before the parish wide event. Allow roughly two weeks from the time you mail them until the in-gathering.

## **6. Personal witness phase**

People are deeply touched when they hear and see how God is moving and working in the lives of others. This is true for issues of money as well as any other aspect of Christian witness. During this time, the Clergy should preach on both the theology of stewardship and personal experience of transformation and/or struggle around issues with money and wealth. None of us escapes the pressure to be consumers and to use our resources for our personal wants and desires. How each of us responds to those pressures, how we work out the pushes and pulls of Christian living in a consumption-oriented society is what witness talks are about. These are personal stories of God’s presence—not a request to fund what the Church needs! Be creative in how these might be delivered—bulletin inserts, newsletter articles, Grace and Giving moments at the offertory, a modern Epistle written and read by the writer during the lessons, a lay sermon, etc.

## **7. The in-gathering**

Invite your parish leadership (vestry and stewardship committee at a minimum) to offer their pledges closer to the beginning date. Plan it, make it impossible to miss, couple it with a message from at least one leader about the Christians NEED to give for the God’s work in the world and how God is experienced through that process of giving. Gather them at the altar and pray over their offerings.

Build on this practice at the in-gathering. Publicize the in-gathering date early and often. Make it a festive day with special music, special prayers of the people. Incorporate your theme into the liturgy. Make it a special day!

## **8. Thank you**

Have the Rector’s letter of thanks ready when you send out the pledge cards. The letter should thank people for their commitment and support to the mission and ministry of the Church. A personal handwritten note should be added acknowledging and thanking the person for the

“renewal/continuation,” “increase” or “new commitment.” A thank you call from the stewardship committee or vestry will go a long way towards making people feel appreciated.

Have a party for all the “leaders” of your stewardship campaign. Celebrate the offering of time and commitment to God’s work.

**For information on stewardship resources in the Diocese of Vermont, contact:**

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**Minister for Stewardship Development**  
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**Scripture Passages:**

<b>Hebrew Scripture</b>	<b>Gospels</b>	<b>Epistles</b>
Exodus 23: 14-19	Matthew 6:19-24	II Corinthians 8:1-15
Leviticus 27: 26-34	Matthew 13:31-45	II Corinthians 9:1-15
Deuteronomy 14:22-29	Mark 8:34-38	I Timothy 6:11-19
Deuteronomy 26:1-15	Luke 6:36-38	II Timothy 1:6-10
Proverbs 3:9-10	Luke 12:16-34	
Malachi 3:7-12	Luke 19:1-10	
Ezekiel 36:34 FF	John 5:1-10	

**For more scripture references visit:**

- <http://tens.org/teaching-links.htm>
- <http://www.generousgiving.org/page.asp?sec=9&page=282>

**Money Reflection Questions:**

- What is your earliest memory of money?
- What is your earliest memory of an instruction about giving money?
- Was money ever a source of anxiety in your family of origin? Subject of an argument within the family? Something that was plentiful or scarce? Something was saved? Spent? Or given away?
- Is money a source of anxiety in your family now? Subject of an argument within the family? Something that was plentiful or scarce? Something was saved? Spent? Or given away?
- What do you think you are teaching your children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, other children in your life about a Christian's relationship to money?

**Tom Carson's Famous 7 Questions:**

- Do you ever worry about having enough? About keeping what you have?
- Do you sometimes envy what others earn, have inherited, or have been able to do because of money they have and you don't?
- Do you ever get anxious about what inflation has done to depreciate your savings and your preparation for retirement?
- Do you ever equate your value as a person with what you earn?
- Is bill - paying stressful for you?
- Has money ever been the source of an argument or misunderstanding with a loved one?
- Do you ever spend more time thinking about money in any one day than you do in prayer?

**Reflections on Giving: (a particularly useless Scripture is the gift of the Magi)**

Think of a time you spent money on yourself and later thought "what a waste of money". It might be clothes, exercise equipment, a movie, etc...

Think of a time that you received a gift that you now consider priceless (it may actually be worthless to anyone else but you cherish it. The gift was a "warm fuzzy")

Think of a time that you gave a gift that was of very little monetary value but the act of picking it out or giving it was a warm fuzzy.

Now think of your giving to the work of God in the world. Where are you on the spectrum of worthless to warm fuzzy? What makes the difference.