

Stewardship and Simple Thinking

by Dan Hotchkiss

Something about stewardship campaigns inspires simplistic thinking even in leaders who, on other subjects, are quite capable of grappling with ambiguity. Stewardship is complicated. It includes everything from dilemmas facing households in a shaky economic time to the pledge-dampening effects of large endowments. One can—and many of us do—reduce these issues to simplistic opposites: abundance versus scarcity, generosity versus selfishness, faith versus the world. But real stewardship requires dealing with more complicated issues.

The annual stewardship campaign touches taproot issues for most congregations.

- What special purpose do we serve? Would we be missed?
- What other good might we accomplish with our dollars?
- Are there expenditures we have continued out of habit?
- What way of life are we inviting people into?
- Whose lives do we mean to change, and in what way?

Such questions can be answered only through fierce, honest conversation, and addressed only through trial and error. Instead of struggling and making others struggle with these issues, we all too often choose an easy out. Either we resort to simple admonitions—"Give, Give, Give"—or we abdicate and say something that can mean anything—like "Give till it feels good," or "Do what you feel called to do." Clergy often punt entirely and say, "Fund raising is a lay responsibility."

We clergy find shortcuts especially tempting because when raising funds we play the dual roles of counselor and beneficiary. Whether we support our congregation's fund drive passionately, bashfully, or passively, congregants are fully conscious of our interest in the outcome and take what we say with a grain of salt.

In the face of such skepticism, it is easier to shout loud platitudes than to risk fuzzing up the issue with ambiguity. On fund-drive weekend, clergy are like the preacher who wrote in the margin of his manuscript: "Weak point—pound pulpit." Whether we pound that weak point home or shy away from it or stand aloof, we miss the opportunity to struggle with the moral challenges of stewardship in their complexity and depth. In the process, we fail to invite congregants to struggle with us.

Another reason we are tempted to duck complexity at stewardship time is that many congregants prefer it that way, and seduce us into leaving them in slumber. Like Israelites in the time of Samuel, most people prefer a king who will "go out before us and fight our battles" to a leader who points out that we need to meet our most important challenges ourselves, together.

There is a difference between occupying a position of authority and being a leader. Authority, **Ron Heifetz** has asserted, is a contract for services: the group puts people in positions of authority and expects them to provide benefits, solve problems, and succeed in its behalf. Real leaders—whether operating from positions of authority or not—do almost the opposite: they hand work back to the group and make it struggle with its own issues. Skillful leaders learn to hand the work back at a manageable pace.

As candidates, politicians give the impression that they know how to solve all kinds of thorny problems from education to transportation to health care. Glad someone is willing to lift these concerns off our shoulders, we elect them. After the election, they disappoint us on every score. In truth, no one has one right answer for these very complex problems. No answers exist, because these are not "problems"; they are, in Heifetz's words, "adaptive challenges." Smart, correct decisions will not solve them because their causes lie too deep in our national identity and character and habits. To address adaptive challenges, we need to adapt; no leader, brilliant or not, can do that for us. Adaptive issues do not get solved when leaders come up with 100 percent "right" solutions.

Clergy and lay leaders duck the complicated aspects of stewardship because congregants reward us for seeming confident and self-assured, and may even punish us for reminding them of ambiguities. We do well to consider how leaders we admire in our religious, national, and global past have chosen to respond to immediate applause. "You can fool some of the people all of the time," said Lincoln, "And all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time." Wise followers know when they are being pandered to and appreciate a leader who will tell the truth about the challenges leaders and followers must face together.

If you are a clergyperson reading this as you prepare a fund-raising sermon, or a lay leader getting ready to make the fall pitch for money, I suggest you go ahead and pander. Tell them God rewards a generous giver (to your congregation) and that all your problems will be solved (with money).

But next time—or this time, if you have a few months' lead time—gather some of those wise heads and ask yourselves what challenges (other than a lack of dollars) face your congregation. Look beyond the need to maintain real estate, meet payroll, or continue customary programs: what changes in the world are gradually rendering your ministry irrelevant? What are the glimmers of a new ministry that need attention? What fresh ideas are your structures of decision-making squelching? What human needs cry out, and how could you respond?

By raising such disturbing questions early, with the right people, and at the right speed, you might find yourself, next time you prepare a fund-drive message, less tempted to take refuge in the simple answers and more willing to call on people to join in addressing the real challenges of stewardship.

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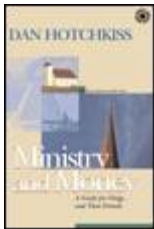


[Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership](#)

by Dan Hotchkiss

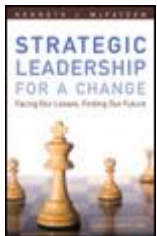
In *Governance and Ministry*, Alban Institute senior consultant Dan Hotchkiss offers congregational leaders a roadmap and tools for changing the way boards and clergy work together to lead congregations. Hotchkiss demonstrates that the right governance model is the one that best enables a congregation to fulfill its mission—to achieve both the outward results and the inward quality of life to which it is called.

[Ministry and Money: A Guide for Clergy and Their Friends](#)



by Dan Hotchkiss

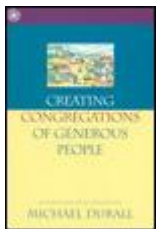
Alban senior consultant Dan Hotchkiss uses frank, straightforward guidance to help clergy develop a sound theology of money, as well as skills for church administration. *Ministry and Money* puts forth a new strategy for self-care, and a confident approach to managing both personal and congregational finances. Hotchkiss wants to help clergy overcome their own anxieties about money matters so they can help others address the personal, social, and congregational aspects of this challenging and often difficult topic.



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by Michael Durall

Asking parishioners for money is very different from creating congregations of generous people. In this provocative book, stewardship consultant Michael Durall argues convincingly that annual pledge drives inadvertently perpetuate low-level and same-level giving in congregations. Written with the voice of experience, this book will help clergy and lay leaders initiate and sustain effective stewardship programs.

[New Podcast](#) (14 minutes) with Alban senior consultant Susan Nienaber (October 18, 2009) as she describes what she will cover in two upcoming webinars. The first webinar will be held Tuesday, October 27 at 1 PM Eastern on [Conflict Basics for New Lay Leaders](#).