



FORTH: Operational Support for Effective Stewardship

Authors:

Sean Hale: First UU Church of Austin, TX Executive Director

Bob Hood: UU Fellowship of Chico, CA Lay Leader

Mark Ewert: UUA Congregational Stewardship Services Consultant

The Congregational Database – Keep it Simple

Russia ended up winning the space race with its Soyuz rocket, first used in 1966, and still in use today. Simple, straightforward, and about a thousand times better than the space shuttle that is getting scrapped.

Keeping it simple means creating a database that anyone can operate with minimal training. Avoid homegrown databases. They are penny-wise and pound-foolish. It should be easy and intuitive to add data and extract the reports you need. It should be simple enough that when you have staff or volunteer turnover the new person can get comfortable within hours rather than weeks, and never need to depend on the in house guru. (It is nice to have a guru that has formal training for troubleshooting, but if you have to depend on her for normal functions, then you have the wrong database.) Finally, your database should have good tech support at a reasonable rate.

Identify your core needs and then find a database that will allow you to cover them easily. If you can get one that you can grow into by adding modules, that's great, but don't let that make or break the deal. The right one for right now will have the features you need and have the capacity to grow during the next five years.

For some congregations a membership directory and giving records are enough. Congregations ready to move beyond these basics find it helpful to track data such as congregants' children, their names, and ages. Strong religious education programs find this sort of data invaluable.

Many congregations also use their database to track date of membership, stewardship-related notes (e.g., "don't call after 8pm"), marital status, and notes on important life details (congregational president 1975-1978, for example). Larger congregations often need a built-in calendar, built-in religious education functions, built-in accounting, and so forth.

Carefully evaluate wants versus needs and be sure that your staff has the time and skills to use them consistently. For example, let's say you track congregants' birthdates to understand your



age demographics. Perhaps you don't get everyone's birth date or perhaps you stop collecting that data for a few years. Then all of that work will have been for naught. Better to have fewer data categories that are complete and accurate than lots of data that is inconsistent.

End products? At a minimum, they should be easy to produce thorough pledge statements, a membership directory, and a thorough spreadsheet to do a nice mail merge.

If you want to know what databases other congregations are using, how they are using them and how satisfied they are with the software, you can search the archives by going to <http://lists.uua.org/> and then clicking on the UUA Church-admin-uu list. Please search and read the archives carefully before posting any questions. This sort of question comes up several times per year and you're more likely to get helpful answers if your question is focused and specific. Keep in mind that software vendors frequently provide some of the best information. They generally have strong incentive to demonstrate their product to you, often for hours on end if you want!

The Data in the Database – Keep it Simple and Accurate

Without accuracy, you lose credibility. Enough said.

Simplicity: Carefully discern what data you need now and what you might need in the future. For example, it is counterproductive to create a database of member skills and talents if that database doesn't get used thoroughly. Not only can you have wasted staff and volunteer hours creating the database, but also you send a message to the people who supplied the information that they are not important.

Data entry. The goal is to as few hands as possible with minimal turn over. In even a large congregation, it is possible to have the financial and member data updated by just one person. Every database has its quirks, and different people will enter data differently. In order to maximize consistency, get a good, detail-oriented person in the seat and then keep them there forever.

Just one database

The fewer databases the better. One is ideal. Many congregations have two: an accounting database, and a membership database. That can work. However, if someone is keeping an excel spreadsheet in their own computer (where they are tracking data) or someone has a stack of slips with people's names and addresses in their desk drawer – discontinue these practices and put the data in the official database. Remember that whenever another database is established, it necessitates the additional ongoing work of maintaining it and makes it is much more likely that you will lose that outside-the-system data.



Can your database generate basic reports on financial commitments and contributions that the annual budget drive team needs in order to do their work? Will it collect member contact information, date of joining, and produce your membership directory? Mail merge? Pledge statements? These are the essential functions of your database. If you answered yes to these questions, you are good to go.

Tracking Volunteer Contributions

Recommendation: Don't go down this rabbit hole! Unless you have a well-organized congregation with plenty of resources (including a staff person in charge of working with volunteers), then this part of your database will likely languish and possibly become a source of frustration (e.g., "What do you mean we don't recognize our volunteers? We have a database that tracks them!").

A healthy, flourishing congregation definitely recognizes volunteers and thanks them frequently and profusely. They represent our lifeblood and when we do not recognize them for their specific contribution (not just a blanket "thanks' y'all for all you do") we see volunteerism drop tremendously. More importantly, service to one another generally forms a core part of any congregation's mission.

So, exercise great caution. As recommended above, better to keep your database simple, complete, and accurate. A search for "volunteer recognition" or similar terms on the UUA website or Google can provide plenty of ways to accomplish this important function with less work and stress.

Pledge/Giving Statements

Send to congregants quarterly. The database should make this very easy either by directly generating the report or producing the data for a mail merge. The best reports include not just total giving, but every transaction, including amount, date, and check number. (See appendix 1 for an example.)

Be sure to include a nice, personalized cover letter thank you. The database should make it easy to personalize the letter. Every statement you send is an opportunity to communicate with donors. Give them some exciting news, tell a story about a life that was changed because of the church, educate about stewardship (e.g., "Did you know that it costs \$2,000 per week to pay the utility bill?") or otherwise use this opportunity to strengthen congregants' relationship with the church. These cover letters can be authored and signed by any number of people in the congregation but their messages should be consistently coordinated and edited.

Tradition & Expectations



Your congregation may live with ghosts, convoluted rules, or needlessly complicated ways of doing things. These things can break the back of even the best database and the best data-entry person.

For example, your bylaws may have half-dozen different categories of affiliation (member, voting member, youth member, friend, associate member, former member, etc.) This sort of thing can really trip up a database if you use it to track such categories, especially in a larger congregation. If a youth member is under eighteen, is someone going to remember to update their membership status on that member's 18th birthday? The more rules that a data-entry person has to remember, the greater chance that you will have errors creep into the system. Having many categories also indicates that expectations are not clear. What are the expectations of a friend? Or how about the expectations of an associate member? An associate or friend probably does not see themselves as a steward of the congregation.

Bending the database to match such rules may not serve stewardship or the congregation well. Before trying to limber up and assume the reverse flying dragon posture, give careful consideration to the purpose of those rules. How many special things does your data-entry person have to remember to do because of those rules? How do they enhance the mission of the congregation? What purpose do they seek to accomplish and is it still relevant to the congregation today? Do they accomplish that purpose in the best possible way or can you accomplish it in a better way?

Financial Reports

Make your financial reports simple and easy enough for someone with a high school education to understand. Make them complete and accurate. Your governing body has a legal and moral duty to understand the financial status of the church. If they cannot fulfill that role, they are in violation of the law and the congregation's trust. Likewise, any congregant should find it easy to understand the financial status of the church including net worth, assets, and operating fund unrestricted cash balance.

Good financial reports provide a foundation of trust and credibility for your annual budget drive. So – whoever is in charge of your financial reports, this is their responsibility. Meeting that responsibility may require completely rebuilding the financial reports.

Once you have good financial reports, work to hold the line on keeping them simple and easy to use. Over twenty years, a mid or large size congregation can experience considerable turnover in treasurers, bookkeepers, and finance committee chairs. If each of them adds just one little pet



thing to the financial reports (“Oh, this is simple and will only take a minute,”) then you will again have useless financial reports.

Remember: Your financial reports don’t have to answer every possible question on the front page, or the balance sheet. The reports should be simple and easy to read, which means keeping a lot of data below the surface, but easy to access if someone has questions.

Note: For communication purposes during the annual budget drive, develop a program-based budget. This shows how financial resources are allocated in program categories (See this blog post on the UUA Congregational Stewardship Services blog: <http://congregationalstewardship.blogs.uua.org/2009/11/16/program-budgeting-say-yes-to-pie-charts-and-no-to-line-items/>). For many congregants, that information will be enough. For those who want more detailed information it can still be available in budget summaries or line item budgets.

Budgeting

See the financial reports section of this document.

Always connect the budget to mission. Mission explains why the congregation dedicates more resources to one area than another. When you build a compelling budget and the congregation feels ownership and excitement about it, they will dig deep to fund it.

When you do the opposite, then you inevitably create a culture of scarcity.

Mission

Your congregation is always changing. New congregants come in; current congregants eventually leave the congregation. New leaders emerge, new staff is hired, new ministers are called, and circumstances change. For these reasons, renew your mission and vision every so often to ensure it still applies to the current congregation. Without a current mission, vision, plans, and goals, how can you make decisions about allocation of congregational resources? How can you justify your decisions to the congregants, especially in areas that affect them directly? How can you make a compelling case for giving?

As a practical matter, remember that a bunch of words with “mission” written at a top does not necessarily constitute a mission, or at least not one that inspires and informs your congregational life and stewardship. Strong, effective missions are usually short, sweet, and can be easily recognized by all congregants. Missions that require bullet points or that seek to be all things to all people usually do not provide clarity of purpose and direction.

Congregational Communications



Remember, good stewardship differentiates the cake from the icing and sprinkles. The cake is comprised of meaningful congregation-wide dialogue and personal conversations about stewardship. Everything else is either icing (e.g., good newsletter, stewardship brochure) or sprinkles (20 hours of word-smithing the newsletter or brochure). Too many good congregations confuse these things, so they end up with beautiful sprinkles and icing but no cake, then they say that their poor fundraising results must mean that people are not listening.

Your electronic and print publications help remind everyone how the congregation lives its mission and changes lives. This communication includes newsletters, bulletins, email blasts, brochures, and so forth. Each of these should only ask for money or volunteer recruitment as general notices and reminders – effective financial requests and volunteer recruitment should always happen face-to-face.

Key Players for Stewardship – Responsibility and Authority

Each congregation has different structures dependant on tradition, size, congregational polity, and maybe even location. However, every successful annual budget drive needs crystal-clarity about authority and responsibility, and the two should almost always reside in the same person.

The responsibility and authority of all stewardship leaders should be carefully and clearly described in documents created by your lay and professional leaders. Each setting has its own policies and governance that determines who writes and maintains these documents, but clarity is essential to the recruitment of good leaders.

What is the responsibility and authority of the stewardship team chair? The annual budget drive chair? Committee members? Minister? Governing body? The data entry person? Please see *Beyond Fundraising: A Complete Guide to Congregational Stewardship* for stewardship ministry team description documents.

Key Players, Beyond the Annual Budget Drive Committee

If you've done good work on mission and budget, everyone in the congregation should fully believe and feel invested in the annual budget drive. Congregants should also feel some responsibility for its success and not just a passive thumbs up.

For example, governing body members must understand, *before they are elected*, that part of their responsibility is to take an active role in the annual budget drive. In many congregations that means governing body members are expected to become visiting stewards during the drive. That also means that these folks must be fully oriented to fulfill their role.

Leaders and consultants who were involved in the FORTH Demonstration project* were asked about the preferred relationship between a stewardship team and other elements of congregational life. They listed the following relational priorities:



- The minister
- The governing body
- The annual budget drive team
- The endowment committee
- The planned giving committee
- The communication committee
- The membership committee
- The finance committee
- Adult education
- Social justice
- The investment committee
- Building & grounds
- The hospitality committee
- The religious education committee

*See the FORTH Demonstration Report posted on UUA.org:
<http://www.uua.org/leaders/stewardship/forth/171528.shtml>

Stewardship and New Members

Healthy congregations have a clear and intentional path to membership. Before someone can become a member, they must learn about the church's history, customs, mission, vision, operations, and budget.

As part of the new member process, a lay or professional leader conducts a one-on-one conversation about stewardship. No arm-twisting. No guilt trip. No shame or threats of violence. Instead, there is a mature, respectful conversation about what it costs to live the congregation's mission. There is also a conversation about the expectation of giving generously according to one's means. The new member's financial commitment is always solicited toward the end of the conversation.

On the other hand, the absence of a clear and intentional path to membership often results in a high level of turnover, creating a kind of membership revolving door. In these situations, new members frequently give little or nothing in terms of their time, treasure, or talent.

Peer Groups

As momma said, pick your friends wisely.

In district meetings, regional conferences, email discussions, webinars, and Facebook postings you will find plenty of people willing to brainstorm or share their experiences and advice. Before taking their advice, though, carefully consider whether or not it is relevant and helpful for



your congregation. The way a 500-member congregation handles something might not be effective at a 50-member fellowship. Even if 100 other congregations do something a certain way, are they flourishing or do they just do things they way they've always done it? When someone tells you they tried something and it failed, ask yourself why? Did they actually do it right or did they, perhaps, fudge some of the methodology because it made them uncomfortable (e.g., asking for financial support in one-on-one stewardship conversations)?

Bottom line, find some peers who are getting good results. You might have to do some careful detective work to find them, but their advice will help you get on the right path and save you hours of wasted time heading in the wrong direction.

Appendix 1: Sample Financial Commitment Forms

Excerpted from ©*Beyond Fundraising: A Complete Guide to Congregational Stewardship*

By Wayne B. Clark

wclark@uua.org

207.829.4550

Example 1: Form to be used in an **annual budget drive** (based on a form developed by David Rickard, a Unitarian Universalist stewardship consultant).

<div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> Full name of church
<div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> Church street/mailling address
<div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> Church city/state/zip code
<div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> Church telephone/e-mail address
<div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> Church website
<div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> Fiscal year
<div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> Name of the Annual Budget Drive
Donor name _____ Second donor name _____ Mailing address _____ City/state/zip code _____ Telephone/e-mail _____ I/we commit \$_____ to support the operating budget for the _____ fiscal year. My/our financial commitment will be fulfilled using the following schedule: \$_____ Weekly \$_____ Monthly \$_____ Quarterly \$_____ Annually by (what date) _____ I am interested in automatic deductions from my checking account. Please contact me. _____ The amount is a suggested fair-share financial commitment. Yes _____ No _____ You may list me as a suggested fair-share donor. Yes _____ No _____ <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; margin-top: 10px;"> <div style="width: 60%;"> _____ (signature) </div> <div style="width: 35%;"> _____ (date) </div> </div> <div style="margin-top: 10px;"> _____ (signature) </div>
It is understood that financial situations sometimes change. If you need to revise your financial commitment, please contact [name of contact person].