

Improving Stewardship Outcomes in UU Congregations

Paper #2: Messaging and Communication

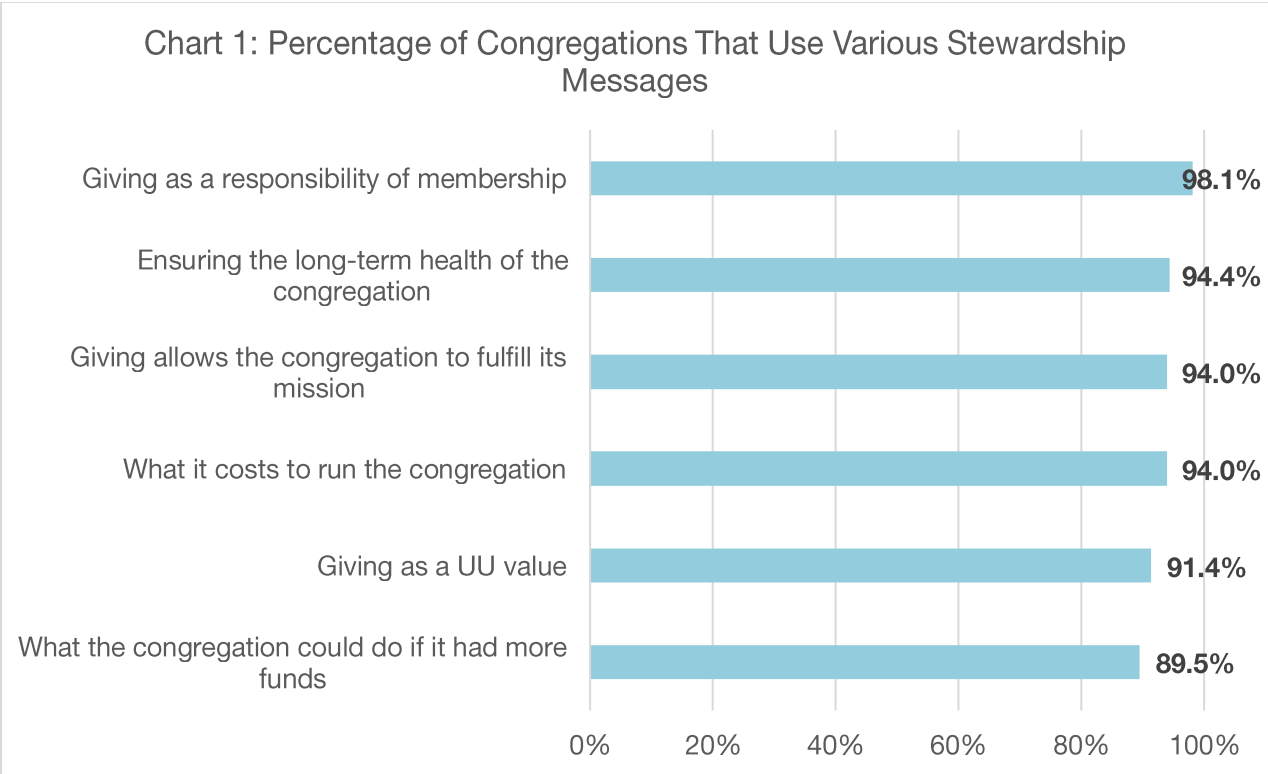
March 2021

Overview of Stewardship Communications

Paper #1 in this series found that survey respondents who rated their most recent annual stewardship campaign as “Successful” or “Very Successful” identified a number of effective practices that contributed to their success. One of the most frequently mentioned of these practices was compelling messaging, and this paper digs more deeply into this practice by looking at survey response on stewardship messaging and communications channels.

A. What messages do congregations use in their stewardship campaigns?

Survey respondents were asked which messages they use during their annual stewardship campaigns, and of the messages they use, which are most effective. Chart 1 shows the messages most commonly used by congregations.



The only message listed on the survey that was not used by a substantial majority of congregations was the availability of matching gifts, with only 46% of congregations indicating that they use this message. However, this response varied significantly by congregation size, with 51% of very large congregations, 44% of large congregations, and 35% of medium congregations indicating that they use the message.¹

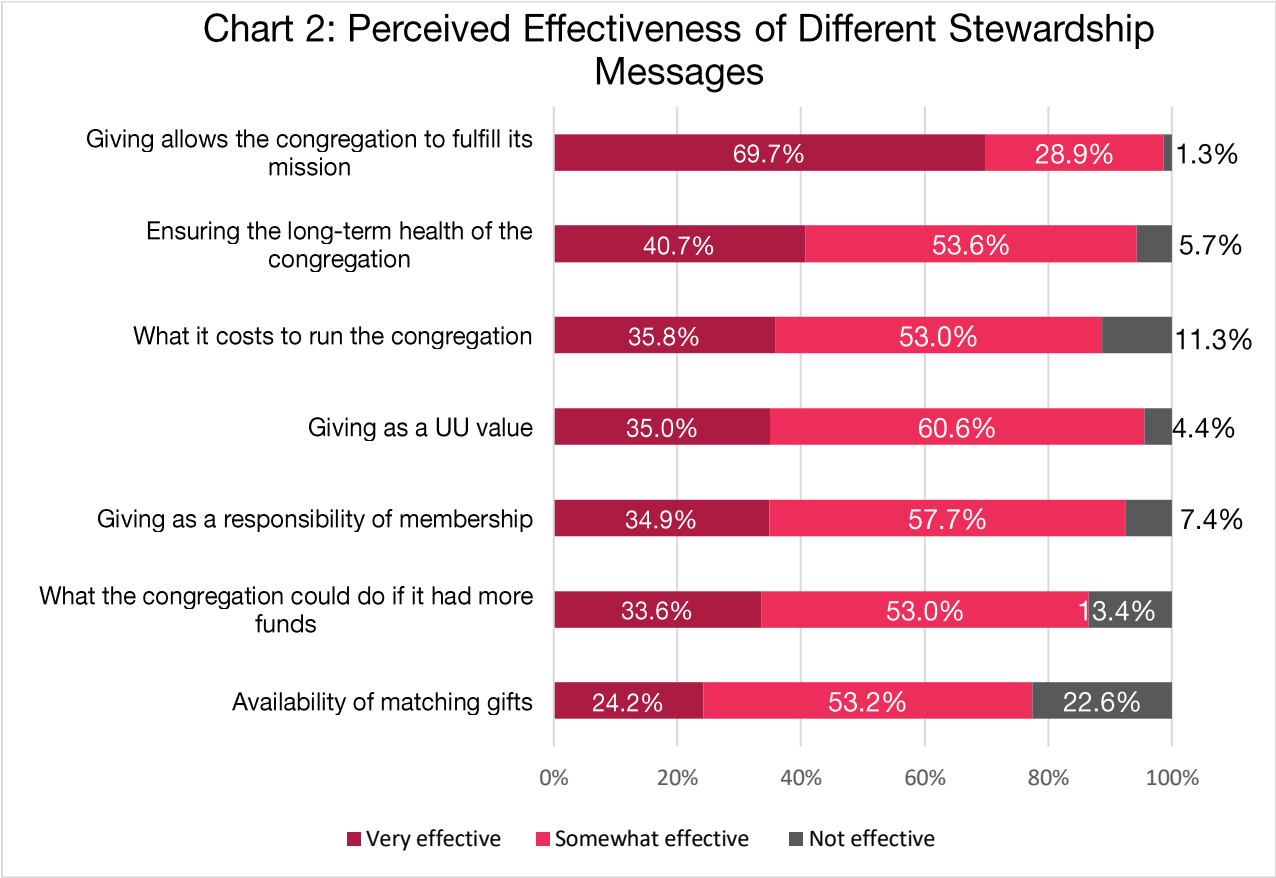
In addition, a number of respondents noted in the “other” response to this question, as well as in responses to a question about what made their recent stewardship campaign a success, that they believe an important stewardship message is that we each give what we can and no gift is too small or unimportant. The quotes below give various examples of this message.

- “Every gift matters.”
- “Give more if you can, less if you can't (our covid message).”
- “Proportional giving - we each give what we are able”
- “People responded very favorably to ‘if everyone gives as they are able, we will have what we need.’
- “We emphasized the importance of participation, the value of EVERY gift, no matter the size.”

¹ Very large congregations are defined as those with 300 or more members. Large congregations have 200-299 members, and medium congregations have 100-199 members. Small congregations with fewer than 100 members were not included in the survey population.

B. Which stewardship messages do congregations see as most effective?

In terms of effectiveness, survey respondents clearly indicated that they see the most effective message, among those listed on the survey, to be that giving allows the congregation to fulfill its mission, with 70% of respondents whose congregations use this message calling it very effective. As Chart 2 shows, 34-41% of respondents see the other messages listed as very effective, with the exception of the availability of matching gifts, which is seen as effective by only 24% of congregations that use that message.



As noted in paper #1, compelling messaging was one of the practices cited as important by survey respondents who rated their most recent annual stewardship campaign as “Successful” or “Very Successful.” A number of the comments respondents made on this topic reflect the idea, noted above, that talking about how giving allows the congregation to fulfill its mission is the most effective stewardship message.

The quotes below help to illustrate this finding:

- “We emphasized all the positive things going on at our church instead of emphasizing our financial stresses.”

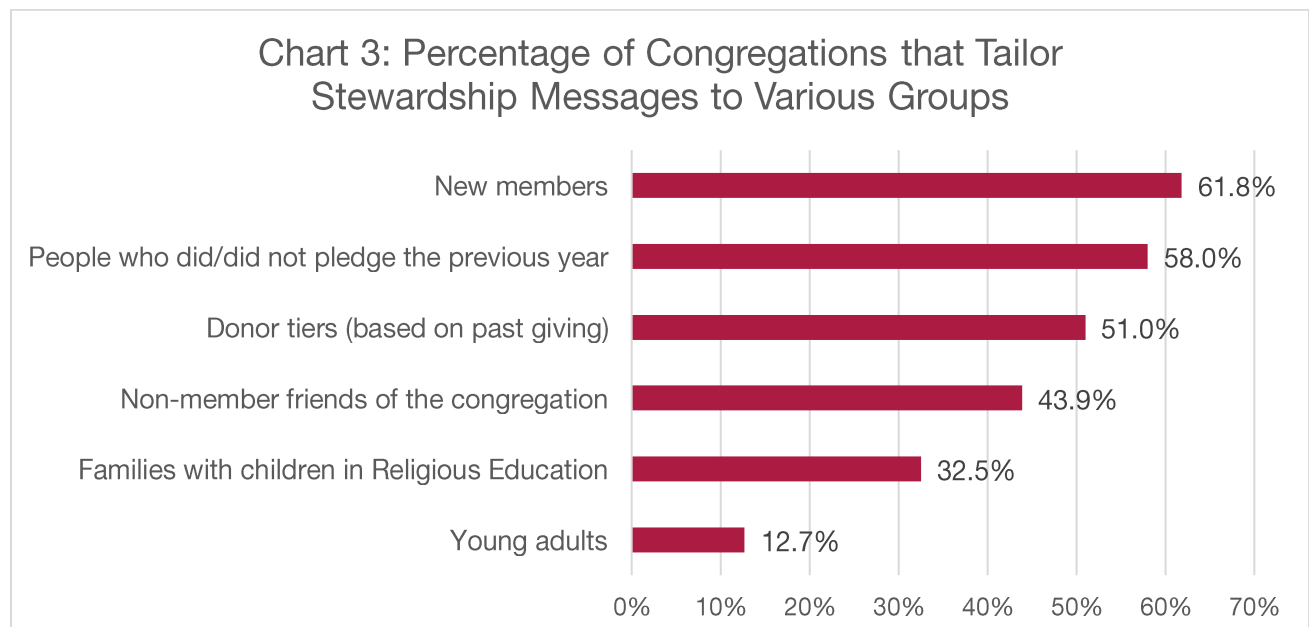
- “Emphasize the positive things your church does for its members and the community rather than emphasize the financial difficulty the church might be in.”
- “Stress the wonderful things we can accomplish with sufficient funds and how we can better live into our mission and vision. Do not stress how much it costs to keep the building and staff operational although mention those. “
- “It’s about the mission, vision, and what can be done as a result of fundraising. Making it about the money and the bills doesn’t motivate people.”

C. Do congregations tailor their messaging to different groups?

A substantial majority of survey respondents (83%) indicated that their congregations do tailor the stewardship messages they use when reaching out to different groups within the congregation. This practice was more common in larger congregations, with 93% of very large congregations, 83% of large congregations, and 77% of medium congregations making some effort to tailor stewardship messages.

In addition, 95% of congregations that had participated in a UUA regional stewardship training in the last two years use tailored messaging, compared with 77% of those that had not attended such a training, suggesting that the training offered by UUA regions may be encouraging congregations to expand their repertoire of stewardship communications practices.

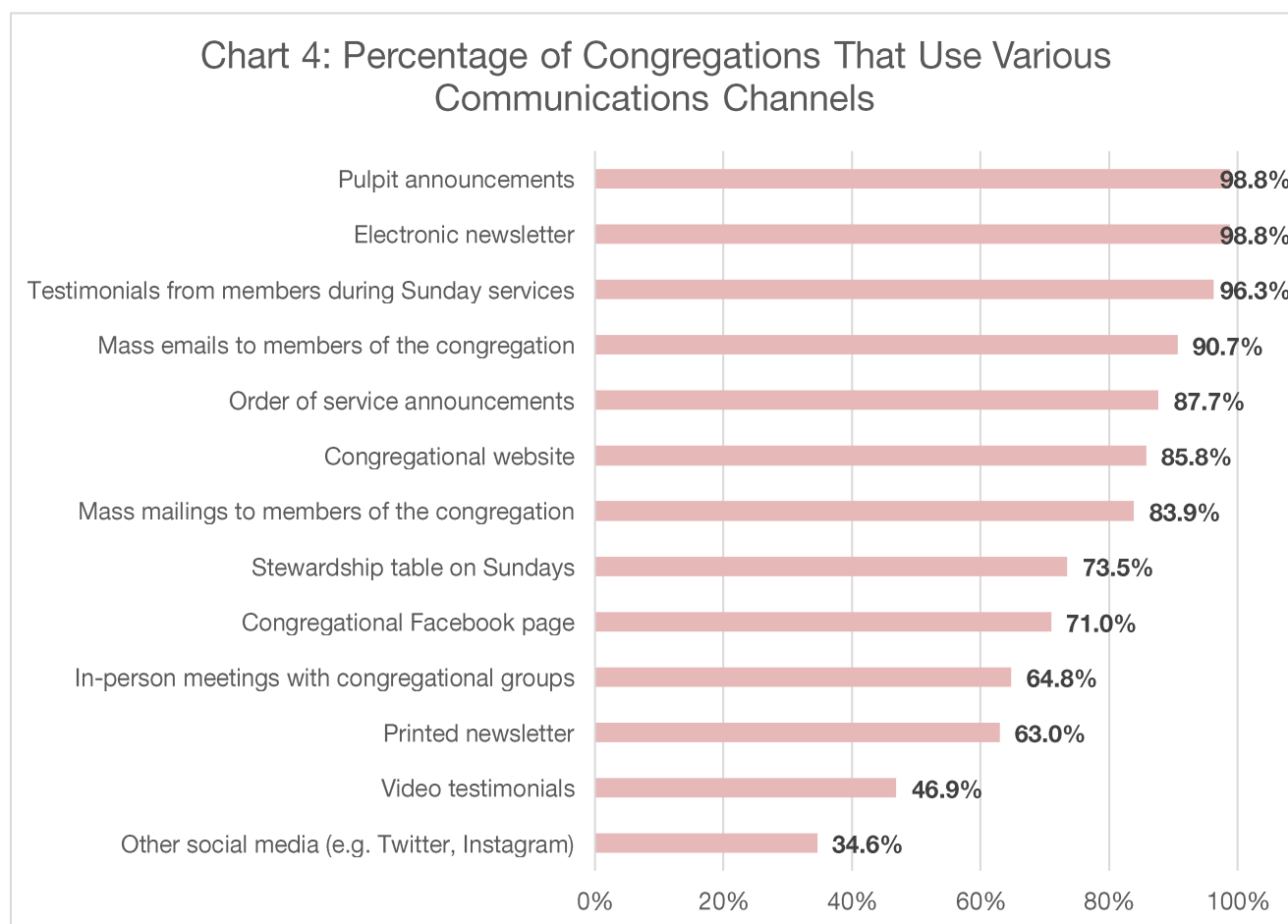
Among congregations that do tailor their messaging, the most common groups targeted for tailored outreach are new members and individuals who did or did not pledge the previous year (see Chart 3). Of the possible groups listed on the survey, young adults were the group least often targeted with tailored messaging.



Very large congregations were considerably more likely than their smaller counterparts to tailor messaging to people who did or did not give the past year, people in different donor tiers (based on past giving), and families with children in Religious Education, a finding that makes sense given the challenge of making connections with members in congregations with larger memberships.

D. What communications channels do congregations use in their stewardship campaigns?

As with messages, survey respondents were asked about their use of and the perceived effectiveness of various communications channels. As Chart 4 shows, congregations use a wide range of communications channels to reach their members. The most common channels, used by more than 90% of respondents were pulpit announcements, electronic newsletters, testimonials during Sunday services, and mass emails to members of the congregations. The only communications channels listed that were used by fewer than half of the responding congregations were video testimonials and social media other than a congregational Facebook page.



The use of some communications channels varied considerably by congregational size. Both very large and large congregations were more likely than medium ones to use the communications channels shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Use of Certain Communications Channels by Congregational Size

Channel	Very Large/Large Congregations	Medium Congregations
Stewardship tables at Sunday services	91%	49%
Congregational website	91%	77%
In-person meetings with congregational groups	70%	51%

In addition, only very large congregations tend to use video testimonials—65% of very large congregations used such testimonials, compared to only 34% of large and medium congregations.

E. Which communications channels do congregations find most effective?

As can be seen in Chart 5 (on the next page), survey respondents found many communications channels to be somewhat effective, but only testimonials from members during Sunday services and announcements from the pulpit were considered very effective by more than half of the responding congregations. Well over half of respondents felt that using social media other than a congregational Facebook page is not effective (in addition to the many congregations who indicated that they do not use this communications channel). Several respondents commented that it can be hard to judge the effectiveness of different communications channels while other noted that it's important to try to reach members in a variety of ways.

Effective Practices

Some of the communication techniques seen by responding congregations as particularly effective include:

- Using a range of different messages and communications channels to reach members of the congregation, with member testimonials and pulpit announcements seen as the most effective communications channels;
- Focusing on positive messaging, with an emphasis on how contributions help the congregation achieve its mission rather than on the congregation's financial needs or difficulties; and
- Emphasizing the importance of all contributions, no matter how large or small.

Chart 5: Perceived Effectiveness of Different Communications Channels

