

Improving Stewardship Outcomes in UU Congregations

Paper #3: Stewardship during COVID-19

March 2021

Introduction

For most UU Congregations, fundraising to support the annual budget is a BIG Challenge. We wanted to understand more about how our congregations approach this work, and what they find helpful to their success.

To identify activities to improve fundraising outcomes, the UUA worked with members of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin (Texas) to conduct a survey about congregational stewardship. The survey invitation was sent to all UU congregations with at least 100 members.

166 congregations responded to the survey (a healthy 34% response rate). We are very grateful for the time and insight that respondents shared with us and with our wider faith. Thank you.

In most cases, the survey was completed by the Stewardship Campaign chair or a religious professional, and the results reflect their perceptions of stewardship in their congregation.

Effect of COVID-19 on Stewardship

As noted in our first paper, 70% of survey respondents rated their most recent Stewardship campaign as “Successful” or “Very Successful”. 24.8% considered their most recent campaign to be “Somewhat Successful”, and 5.6% rated their most recent campaign “Not Successful.”

For the 30% of respondents in the last two groups (who indicated their campaigns were less than successful) we asked what factors they believe led to their lack of success. Not surprisingly, COVID-19 was by far the most commonly mentioned factor by far.

COVID-19 was described as impactful for two distinct reasons:

- it affected how the campaign was conducted, and
- it affected how members felt about their financial situation and their ability to pledge.

Of the 50 congregations who considered their most recent stewardship campaign to be less than successful, 29 mentioned the effect of COVID-19 on how the campaign was conducted, and 12 mentioned the effect of COVID-19 on their members’ ability to contribute.

Ideas for Stewardship During COVID-19

We asked congregations for ideas to overcome the COVID-19 barrier to stewardship effectiveness. 92 of the survey respondents provided answers to this question, although in many cases they just indicated that they are still trying to figure it out.

Still, many useful ideas were identified. The most common, in order of frequency of mention, were:

1. **Switch to an entirely virtual campaign** – using video conferencing, testimonials during on-line services, and phone or email for person-to-person connections. Finding ways to make this work, sometimes even better than in-person (e.g. greater opportunity to connect with newer members).
2. **Emphasize connection** – recognizing that COVID has created huge challenges for many members and friends, churches are making a bigger effort to reach out and connect.
3. **Refine messaging** – rethinking the campaign theme, in-service messaging and other communications to reflect the COVID environment.
4. **Use on-line auctions to augment pledge income** - congregations have modified auctions to be low contact or no-contact, and this has helped them fill the funding gap.
5. Verbatim comments from congregations are included in Exhibit I to provide more detail on these tactics.
6. In addition to these frequently mentioned factors, congregations identified several ideas that were mentioned by only one or a few congregations but may be helpful. These are listed in Exhibit II.

Exhibit I – Comments related to the ideas mentioned most often

1. Switch to an entirely virtual campaign

Our fall Celebration Sunday and stewardship drive will be virtual. We are planning to mail pledge cards to all congregants.

We have adjusted our theme to something that we believe will be better suited to a virtual campaign.

We have expanded ways in which people can contribute electronically to make giving easier, more convenient.

We also did testimonials in worship via Zzoom, recorded them, and put them in the eblasts and website (with permission) for those who missed it.

We had to hold 'cottage dinners' as virtual events... We had great participation in the virtual version, and it was a good opportunity to answer questions of newer members and friends of the congregation.

We will be doing all gatherings via Zoom and won't hold a stewardship kickoff dinner. We'll have to do many more one-on-one conversations with members.

We switched from cottage meetings and a bi-annual stewardship dinner to letters primarily with brief pulpit messages and very little direct phone calling.

2. Emphasize connection

Stewardship comprises more than fundraising; it must foster human connection and engagement. In this time of isolation from one another, we have been reaching out by email and telephone to all our members and friends.

Before we began the pledge campaign, the church contacted everyone (member & friend) just to check in and see how they were doing. This was a big task that primarily fell to the Pastoral Care team, but Stewardship and others assisted. This built up a great deal of good will, which I believe really help our campaign.

When we shifted to doing worship on Zoom, our Board members still signed up to give a stewardship moment at each service.

Card writing campaign so that all members get a card at some point in the summer.

We will be doing all gatherings via Zoom and won't hold a stewardship kickoff dinner. We'll have to do many more one-on-one conversations with members.

If we see that someone has not contributed recently, but used to be more regular, we contact them directly and offer support.

3. Refine messaging

we switched from cottage meetings and a bi-annual stewardship dinner to letters primarily with brief pulpit messages and very little direct phone calling.

We encouraged our congregants to do what they could and thought was prudent for them in a difficult decision making time.

We encouraged those that had the flexibility to do more to do so if they were moved to help our mission in this difficult time for all.

If we see that someone has not contributed recently, but used to be more regular, we contact them directly and offer support.

If they are facing a financial hardship, we offer to reduce their pledge. We also have been very diligent explaining that we understand that there have been financial difficulties, but no matter what our main purpose is to continue to offer spiritual growth and support no matter what their donation is.

Spent more effort acknowledging people's challenges

4. Use on-line auctions to augment pledge income

We also instituted an online mini-auction that included gift baskets and other donated items that the donors could easily deliver to purchasers' homes.

We did an online Auction We were overwhelmed by the generosity of our congregants. We doubled our budgeted income which will hopefully relieve the budget pressure of our fall FAIR that will be cancelled. We plan to use the online tool for other fundraisers. It is called Auctria. Fantastic!

Exhibit II – Other Ideas

These ideas were mentioned once or twice.

1. **Saving money on the Stewardship campaign and sharing that information with the congregation.**

Events like kickoff dinners and in-church celebrations had to be canceled, which was unfortunate, but the silver lining was that the Stewardship budget was not spent. Members appreciated that we were saving the money.

By not hosting the traditional kick-off brunch, we actually saved money and Stewardship came in under their annual budget, which made some pledge units very happy (showing we were being mindful of loss of revenue/income, by reigning in excessive spending.)

2. **Surveying the congregation.**

[W]“...we are surveying the congregation through Survey Monkey to find out how the pandemic may have changed some members' connection to the church, including their financial commitment. ... The responses to our survey will give us good information about the financial hardships some of our members might be facing and will give us good information about members' commitment and sense of connection to the church in all ways, including financially. Based on these responses, we will tailor our budget and our pledge-season messaging (as well as other activities) accordingly.”

3. **Thank you notes.**

[S]“send thank you messages to members who are particularly consistent in their giving to let them know how much we appreciate their continuing that steady support of our congregation.”

4. **“Monthly stewardship-themed testimonials”**

5. **Drive-through event:**

“We plan to do a drive-thru event for the culmination of our Stewardship Fall Campaign. After the online service, instead of fellowship time, we will ask members to drive thru the church to see some "leading" faces and have a "goodie" bag for them. We are also using this as another way members can turn in their pledge forms.”