

Transforming Normal

Focusing on Possibilities Rather than Problems
A Travel Free Learning Article

By

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I have a confession to make. I don't always like capital campaigns. That's okay except that I sometimes help congregations conduct capital campaigns. Oh don't get me wrong, I love seeing a congregation claim a bold vision for ministry and inspire its members to generously gather the resources needed to make that vision real. I even enjoy the emotional and spiritual intensity of seeing that process happen in a relatively short period of time, which is a typical outcome of even a moderately successful capital campaign in a healthy congregation.

The part about campaigns that tends to leave a bad taste in my mouth is the too frequent tendency for them to be a compartmentalized success fix which has too little impact on the state of *normal* in a church. Claiming a vision for the next project is often easier than proclaiming a bold vision for the future into which God is calling us.

Do I Have to Give to My Church?

I recently got a call from one of my nieces asking a question about tithing. She wanted to know if she had to give all of her tithe to her local church, or if it was all right for her to give a portion of the money she normally gives to her congregation to a friend of hers who is going on a mission trip. My answer to her is not the important part of the story. What really matters is the observation that if her church were casting as clear and compelling a vision of ministry as her friend is and, letting her know how her giving makes a difference in her church's participation in God's mission, she probably would not have even been asking me that question. Instead, they are depending primarily on her routine sense of duty and obedience as a tither.

My niece is in her early twenties and defies most of the stereotypes of her generation. She grew up in traditional church, knows all the hymns, was taught the habit of giving, and is still engaged actively and seriously in searching everyday for how to be a faithful follower of Jesus. She's actually a pretty awesome young woman! However, she also conforms to characteristics described by my colleague, [Ann Updegraff Spleth](#), in her work on Generations and Generosity. She expects to have some significant involvement in the ministries she supports, and *fun* and *impact* are important ministry ideas to her.

I am not suggesting her church is not doing important ministry, having any fun, or making an impact. I am suggesting that the dots between her dollars and her church's participation in God's mission are not being connected in ways that work for my niece. The normal routine of ministry in her church is not inspiring her, and her meager few dollars are being drawn elsewhere by her friend's clear vision of ministry.

The observation is already poignant enough on its own. The real irony though is that her church is currently in a capital campaign. There simply is not always a connection between raising money for the next project and casting a clear, bold vision for the future into which God is calling us.

Transforming Normal

Used well, the need for a capital campaign can be just the catalytic event needed to transform normal into a new reality of increased participation and increased giving. It will not be automatic though, and usually involves adjusting your congregation's lenses to see more clearly a vision for their part of God's mission.

Experiencing Transformation

Almost two years ago I began working with First Baptist Church Elon, NC. They had an albatross of a building note they needed to eliminate. The debt was draining both their budget and their energy. Very few people I heard from in my early conversations with church leaders could see past the debt. However, the current members and leaders were stretched to the limit in every way—financially, emotionally, spiritually. There was no more blood in the turnip. Their pastor and I agreed in about five minutes that the church was no where near ready to succeed in a financial campaign, and would probably not survive a failed campaign. With low feasibility of inspiring greater generosity from existing members, they needed to attract more people in order to increase giving. Their task was to discipline themselves against the distraction of the immediately presenting problem of the debt and, focus on involving others in the life of the church. This was not an easy task in the midst of a mildly gloomy mindset.

Focusing on Possibilities Rather than Problems

They formed a Vision Team and began the hard work of listening to the congregation to hear a vision. The congregation had little trouble reminding itself of its core values from earlier work they had done in a healthy intentional interim process some years before. They were able to move fairly quickly to asking hard questions about all of their existing ministries: what they were investing in those ministries, what they were accomplishing as a result of those investments, and how organically each of those ministries grew out of their values as a congregations; or not. They began to have a confident vision of how to invest their energy and money in ways that lived out the best version of who they understood God calling them to be. Their first invitation to people in the church and beyond was to participate in God's mission through the church. Not to give.

Their pastor, Mark Mofield, says, “When we began to refocus the conversation in our church on our possibilities for living out what we believed was our congregation's part in God's mission, everything changed. We were no longer focused on the debt we had, or the problems we faced with burning out our loyal but overworked membership. When we did come back around to talking about our debt, we weren't focused on how overwhelming it was. We were focused on all the ministry possibilities we were going to be able to accomplish next once we eliminated the debt.”

Once they did engage a plan for paying off their debt, they eliminated 15 percent of the debt in their first month of collecting pledges to pay off their debt. Vision matters. While their pastor is quite reluctant to have me paint a picture that their work is done, or that they have somehow arrived, they have succeeded in transforming the idea of *normal* in their congregation. They are still living into their vision, but it is a clear and bold vision and they are realistic about how to measure their progress as continue the journey!

But, Wait! What if We're Already Doing Pretty Well?

Congratulations, and well done! Keep up the good work! I do encounter a lot of congregations which are doing well. Far more are doing well than you might think given the generally negative tone of stories about the general economic environment, and giving trends in congregations over the last two to three years. However, I am assuming that none of us is yet perfected. Even if your congregation is doing well, we all face the relentless return of the Sabbath and, with it persistent questions about who God is calling and inviting us to be as individuals and congregations. If you want help adjusting your lenses for transforming normal, whether it involves an immediate capital campaign or not, give one of us with the Funding Ministry Team of Columbia Partnership a call.

Note: This article has been written in grateful collaboration with colleagues Ruben Swint, Ann Updegraff Spleth, and Larry Sykora

Important Things to Know

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