

An essay from

St. Paul's' Epistle

An unofficial blog about parish life at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Mt. Lebanon, Pa., in the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh

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Some Stewardship Thoughts

No one likes stewardship campaigns. That is a given. It is also a given that, for most Episcopal churches, stewardship campaign success is a life-or-death matter. St. Paul's, which has no significant endowment and minimal reserves, is no exception. And it is clear from recent parish e-mail messages and the January newsletter that the campaign at St. Paul's for 2011 has not gone well. As we enter the new year for which we seemingly have too little money, it is well to ask why that should be so.

The Campaign Itself

The 2010 stewardship campaign has been low-key. This is not a new phenomenon. It has been years since a stewardship campaign at St. Paul's has been anything but perfunctory. As much as I hate to admit it, effective campaigns for pledges need to make a compelling case for supporting the parish and must confront potential pledgers personally about their role in supporting the parish. I don't think this has been done at St. Paul's since we used the Pony Express material about two decades ago.

The most recent stewardship campaign was occasionally mentioned in church and in e-mail messages, but the centerpiece of the campaign was a packet given to parishioners containing a letter, pledge card, and a stack of new, flashy brochures touting the work of the parish. Most parishioners likely to pledge are reasonably familiar with what St. Paul's does and does not do, and the oversize brochures on flimsy paper with sometimes poorly edited copy had something of a Potemkin village air about them.

From listening to pledge campaigns for public radio, it is clear that deadlines matter. The last few hours of a campaign are usually frantic ones, as people are reminded that their opportunity to contribute is about to end. (However, public radio stations, like churches, never turn away pledges, no matter what the calendar says.) I think there was a Sunday at which we were supposed to turn in pledges, but little was said about it, and there was not much of a buildup to it. No one seemed to be in much of a rush to receive pledge cards.

The pledge cards were rather different this year, but perhaps not all the changes were for the better. Certainly, the cards were more attractive. The options for donating stock and of making electronic payments were welcome additions, as was the ability to indicate payment frequency, in the case of cash or check payments. Two items were lacking. First, there was no place on the card to indicate a commitment of time and energy. Although I have always found the request for such a declaration of commitment a bit hokey, it does get people thinking about the nature of their commitment to Christianity and moderates the emphasis on giving money. Second, the pledge card contains no statement making it clear that the commitment being made is all about intention and does not represent a contractual obligation. In an economy in which many people fear losing their jobs, such reassurance could spell the difference between pledging and not pledging for some people.

Business as Usual?

Perhaps St. Paul's is facing a genuine fiscal crisis, but I have not seen convincing evidence of it. My memory of past years is that we *always* have concerns about inadequate pledging about this time of year. Our parish seems to have two distressing habits: (1) We tend to wait until the last minute, and

(2) we never seem to fund the church up to the desired level.

I am perpetually surprised when, as a choir member, I walk down the side aisle at the beginning of a service thinking that attendance is particularly bad, only to see a more filled church when I reach the chancel and turn around. Parishioners tend to be late arrivers. Likewise, many of us do not buy tickets to parish events much in advance. We buy them at the last possible opportunity, frequently at the door. We seem to take the same attitude toward pledging. If the time of the "last possible opportunity" isn't obvious, perhaps we won't pledge at all.

St. Paul's has had its ups and downs, but, even in its most prosperous periods, it seems to have only muddled through. The lack of a longstanding endowment is a product of the parish's long history of hand-to-mouth existence. I don't know why this is true; it is certainly a handicap under which we constantly labor.

Lack of Growth

Despite messages to the contrary, it is not at all clear that St. Paul's is growing. (See "Is St. Paul's Growing?" [<http://www.stpaulsmtl.org/2010/08/is-st-pauls-growing.html>] and "Update: Is St. Paul's Growing?" [<http://www.stpaulsmtl.org/2010/09/update-is-st-pauls-growing.html>]) Certainly, attendance is rather flat. Yes, there are newcomers, but there are departures, too, which are hardly ever mentioned. Newcomers, particularly young adults with children and people from church traditions without the same emphasis on stewardship as our own, tend to pledge less than departing long-time parishioners.

The Refuge service does not seem to be contributing to the growth of the parish. As best as I can tell, attendance at the service is poor, and the collection from it is designated for the support of the service itself, which undoubtedly is underfunded. Some of the attendees are simply parishioners who would otherwise attend other services. If these people are not pledging, they might be surprised to learn that their offerings are not supporting the overall operation of the church. In any case, don't expect pledge income from Refuge. At best, the effort is a missionary project, a financial liability, rather than an asset.

Lack of Enthusiasm

If, in fact, there is a problem with pledging, one reason might be the lack of enthusiasm for programs of the church. Special events that once drew large crowds all seem to be attracting fewer people. The Wednesday program does not seem especially popular, and people tell me that some folks attend for the food but do not stay for the program. Adult education on Sunday morning has declined under clergy sponsorship over what it had been when it was run by laypeople.

I cannot speak for others, but I find worship services less energizing than they used to be. Acolytes may or may not show up. Lights are either shining in my eyes or I'm reading my music in the dark. The sound system makes itself known in various unpleasant ways. The bulletin often contains annoying errors. The flow of the liturgy is constantly interrupted by declarations of what "we" will do next. I cannot see the rector when he preaches. And, perhaps most importantly, the quality of preaching has experienced a serious decline, beginning with the departure of Bill Pickering more than a decade ago. No doubt, others find at least some of these factors have dampened their enthusiasm for their church.

Lack of Confidence

Many parishioners have lost confidence in parish leadership. Most obviously, the decidedly cool reaction given the recently proposed "capital campaign" must be seen as something of a vote of no confidence, yet its stunning rejection elicited no indication from parish leaders that the campaign represented a colossal miscalculation. There were, of course, many things wrong with Fulfilling the Vision as an enterprise, but one has to look deeper for the ultimate cause of its failure.

Leadership, at least in voluntary communities in which members cannot be coerced, does not consist of developing a vision, announcing it, and having members of the community immediately adopt that vision as their own. The sort of leadership practiced in the former Soviet Union really does not work in a suburban Episcopal church with an educated congregation. In such an environment, the community must buy into major initiatives, either as the result of a well run educational campaign or because the community was instrumental in developing the initiative, thereby making it their own. The selling of Fulfilling the Vision was inept, and the community involvement in its development was a sham.

This last point requires elaboration. We were told that Fulfilling the Vision grew out of the visioning done beginning in the fall of 2009. Unfortunately, the congregation was not told that what it was doing would result in a "capital campaign." The process began as yet another exercise that organizations perform to prove they are thinking about their true mission. The initial, rather inane session provided an opportunity to pat ourselves on the back and dream about what it would be nice to have. We were prevented from even suggesting that there were problems that the parish had to address. I—and lots of other people, apparently—did not bother to attend follow-on meetings, which I anticipated would be equally pointless. Had people known that the outcome was going to be that every cockamamie idea that anyone had for the parish would become part of a "capital campaign," they might have felt some obligation to stick with the process and dampen people's enthusiasm. (Actually, I suspect that many parts of the campaign were not suggested by parishioners at all.)

Unfortunately, the failure to build support for initiatives is not unique to the case of Fulfilling the Vision. Neither the 8:45 service nor the Refuge service had much parishioner support, and they seem to have had lackluster attendance, as one might have expected.

Lack of Transparency

I am probably in a small minority in my frustration with the lack of financial transparency at St. Paul's, but I know that others are concerned about it as well. When Bill Andrews was treasurer, his goal was to make all financial transactions of the church visible, even in the case of funds not under the direct control of the Vestry. Gradually, however, Bill's work is being undone. More and more parish activities are being funded off the books. Most notable among these activities is the Refuge service, for which not even the Vestry has received any reasonable financial accounting.

There is also some rather creative accounting going on designed, I suspect, to deflect specific criticisms. For example, there has long been a segment of the congregation that consistently argues that we should give more money away as outreach. I have sometimes found the expectations of this group to be unrealistic, but the reality is now that St. Paul's now spends virtually *no* money on outreach, although individual parishioners do spend their own money on outreach projects. (They buy food for Shepherd's Heart, for instance.) *Au contraire*, you say. According to the January 2011 issue of *The Messenger*, in eleven months of 2010, we have spent \$68,189 on outreach. Impressive, no? No. This amount represents (completely or mostly) our diocesan assessment. It is not outreach to support the diocesan office or even to give grants to churches to repair their physical plants. The \$68,189 is simply overhead required to maintain the infrastructure of The Episcopal Church. The poor, the hungry, the naked, and the incarcerated receive no benefit from this money.

Manipulating Emotions

When I first read that St. Paul's was reducing salaries due to the shortfall in pledges, I thought that this was a responsible action to take, though, as I indicated earlier, I was not convinced there was a crisis. The establishment of a "Salary Restoration Fund" at the same time salaries were being "cut," however, made it clear that the emotions of parishioners were simply being manipulated. It was apparently felt that making the somewhat abstract argument that the church needs more money was ineffective; it was necessary to make the need more personal. Hence, the congregation was being asked to come to the aid of "our dedicated and talented team of clergy and lay staff." Of course, the projected budget shortfall of \$33,000 is predicated on a number of assumptions, including that additional pledges will be forthcoming. The existence of the Salary Restoration Fund, however, may divert pledges from the general fund. It is entirely possible that parishioners will completely fund salaries while still leaving the general fund short. The effect will be to make the rector look self-

sacrificing without actually providing the funds needed to run the parish. In other words, the Salary Restoration Fund could well sabotage the purpose for which salary cuts were ostensibly made.

What to Do?

St. Paul's is not a healthy parish. Not pledging will not fix the problems, however. Parishioners should understand that the church is *their* church, not the rector's and not the Vestry's. No one, I think, should contribute to the Salary Restoration Fund. Simply give money to the parish and, if enough people do so, salaries will take care of themselves.

The annual meeting will take place soon. This will be a time to take responsibility for your parish. Questions need to be asked about how the parish is being led, how finances are being represented, and what activities people are willing to support.

Finally, well-intentioned, independent, talented people need to be elected to the Vestry. Would you be willing to be a candidate for election?

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<http://www.stpaulsmtl.org/2011/01/some-stewardship-thoughts.html>