

Generous Church: Why Giving is Mission  
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It's a privilege to have been asked to share some thoughts on why giving is mission for the Focus on Generosity campaign.

Like many people, I don't like asking for things. That feeling was particularly acute, over my years in parish ministry, when the time came for the giving campaign. Normally, a courageous treasurer or Church Warden would stand up in church and present the numbers, but it was, not unreasonably, up to me as the parish priest to do the theology. I was interested in how difficult I found these sermons, not least because Jesus talks about money a lot in the gospels so I wasn't exactly short of material, but it was always a struggle, and the regular discipline of the giving sermon was as important to my spiritual life as it was to the congregation, as is so often the way with preaching.

Jesus often uses stories to challenge the way his listeners approach money and wealth. In the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) for example, he addresses issues of jealousy and justice by using a story about wages 'why are you envious because I am generous'. Memorably, in the story of the widow's mite, (Mark 12:41-44) he focuses on the significance of financial giving as sacrifice; 'she, out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all that she had to live on'.

Perhaps Jesus' fundamental message on money can be best summed up in Matthew 6:21 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also'. We spend money on what we think and feel is important. When the widow gave to the temple all that she had to live on, she was making a profound statement about her faith.

For many years, I had an unexamined belief, which I think was at the heart of how difficult I found the stewardship sermon. I believed that most people instinctively understood the link between mission and financial generosity. I thought that they somehow knew that for there to be a warm church with structure intact, a vicar, church activities, missional events and outreach to the community, everyone would need to give generously of their money as well as their time and talents.

I remember having a moment of revelation at the school gate when one of the mums who faithfully brought her daughters to Messy Church every month, and put the £2.50 suggested donation in the plate, commented on how great it was that the government still funded churches in little villages like ours. I explained to her that the church was funded by the congregation who came to church on Sunday morning, and she was genuinely amazed. Whilst we had communicated the need for generous giving to the Sunday congregation, we had never once mentioned it at Messy Church, or the coffee morning, or any of the other outreach events we organised. The mum set up a direct debit to the church the following week and (I will never know whether this was a coincidence or not) soon afterwards started coming to church on Sunday.

Last week at Diocesan Synod, we heard from remarkable women and men who spoke about their vocation to the priesthood and licenced lay ministry. Afterwards, we were all asked to discuss what we ourselves could do to encourage vocation. Someone in my group answered simply 'ask'. If we do not ask, if we do not suggest to people that they might be called to offer themselves to ordination or to licenced lay ministry, we are expecting them to make a significant part of the journey on their own.

Something similar can be said about giving in general and giving campaigns in particular. We do not know how people are going to respond until we ask. The Messy Church mum had never been asked to give financially, and so she had never been given the opportunity to become part of the life of the church in that way.

Asking is another thing about which Jesus has a lot to say. 'Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened'. (Matthew 7:7-8) This does not mean that every giving campaign increases giving, it does not mean that everyone who is asked to give is willing or able to do so, but it helps us understand that we are called to invite, to help people see that their money is important to the church in its mission.

I am forever grateful to the Messy Church mum for explaining to me that unless we ask, people will not have the opportunity to participate in this way, and that giving is an important part of who we are as the body of Christ.