



PHOTO: LEE DICKEY, WATERLOO

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— GRACE FLESHER

THE UU CULTURE OF MONEY

Churches test out new approaches to fundraising

As he introduced the weekly offering at Toronto First Unitarian’s service earlier this spring, Mike Durall did a surprising thing. He announced: “This week’s offering will not be used for church expenses. It will be donated to Second Harvest, a program that collects surplus food from stores and hotels, and distributes it to people in crisis.”

The result? The offering plates garnered \$2,700 – twice the usual amount donated in cash on a typical Sunday in the large congregation.

Durall was visiting Toronto First as a consultant from the UUA, helping the congregation re-think its approach to money, membership, and stewardship. The offering illustrated one of his basic points: that charitable giving works best when people feel good about it, and when it connects to their yearnings about the good things the church can do. Budgets and bills don’t inspire giving; hopes and dreams do.

“Those involved in stewardship have to believe in their hearts and souls that charitable giving is fun,” says Durall, “that giving is one of life’s great privileges, that it helps make people whole.”

The Toronto congregation isn’t the only one searching for a new approach to money and canvassing. Some other examples:

- **Waterloo First Unitarian**, a medium-size congregation, made two important changes to its annual canvass last fall. It formulated a specific amount to ask for in each canvass visit, rather than leaving the contribution to chance. And it compressed its campaign into three weeks instead of the usual six. Their result? A 19 per cent increase in pledges.

- **First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa**, the largest UU congregation in the country, felt it had grown substantially in recent years but that its programs hadn’t kept up; they needed money to hire more staff, including a second minister. Their “Challenge Campaign” last fall revolved around these aspirations for the future, and it worked. They increased the average pledge amount (to \$880), and the number of pledges (up 14 per cent), for a total increase of 24 per cent.

- In early May, representatives from every Atlantic congregation met in Fredericton for a **Dreams and Dollars** workshop sponsored by the cuc. The focus

was on a new approach to money – one that places higher expectations on church members, and isn’t afraid to ask for their money as well. The workshop also advocated a more open approach to the culture of money, with ethical investing courses for adults and RE money lessons for kids.

GENEROSITY AND STEWARDSHIP

Grace Flesher, a newcomer to the London Unitarian Fellowship, is a former banker who is now volunteering as a service consultant to congregations in the cuc’s Central and Eastern Regions. She shares this new approach to giving. “In a canvass, it’s more effective to talk about generosity, stewardship and sharing than it is to say, ‘the heating bill is going up eight per cent.’”

She believes it’s wrong to make the church budget the centrepiece of the annual canvass. “If you do that, you’ll probably fall just shy of your goal, which was the most pared-down budget to start with.” Instead, she advocates a canvass strategy that links giving to something loftier and more long-term – like they did in Ottawa.

From experience she’s had with UU

churches in the U.S., Flesher knows that our denomination is one of the lowest-giving of them all – an average of about 1.5 per cent of gross income, continent-wide. “This compares to the Protestant religions, where the figure is 6–8 per cent, and what I call the ‘high expectation’ religions – Mormons, Jews, and fundamentalist Christians – where 10 per cent of income is the starting point.”

The bottom line, according to Flesher, is that, “we won’t flourish as a denomination if we’re token givers.”

WATERLOO’S TARGETED CANVASS

Flesher visited the Waterloo congregation early last fall. She felt the canvass leaders in the tightly-knit church should be more direct in their requests, and could probably estimate very well what each member might be able to afford. She also advised them to link giving to the most highly valued programs in the church – its burgeoning music and RE programs.

“We’d heard this before,” says Waterloo president Lee Dickey, “but now someone was saying it directly to our face. We decided to trust Grace’s advice.”

Here’s what they found as they began canvassing. “Nobody was offended by the direct approach. We generally got one of three responses. Sometimes people just said ‘no,’ and named a lower figure. Sometimes they said, ‘I can do better than that.’ And sometimes they said,

‘I don’t want to hear a specific amount,’ then pledged the amount we had anticipated all along!”

It probably wasn’t any single change that turned things around for Waterloo, but rather a combination of big and small things – the “dreams” argument rather than a budget-based approach, the targeted asking, and a simple administrative change. Instead of letting the canvass drag on over almost two months, Flesher advised them to shorten the canvass period. “When it’s fast and furious, you get better results,” says Waterloo canvass chair Mag Horman. “There’s a law of diminishing returns as you pursue it over a longer period of time.”

OTTAWA’S AMBITIOUS GOAL

Ottawa’s experience was different, but with a similar result. An internal review and an outside consultant’s report had come to similar conclusions, says canvass co-chair Chuck Shields – “that the congregation was capable of doing more, and needed to set higher goals for itself.”

The canvass committee, which met weekly beginning in July, decided on several new goals and approaches:

- a 25 per cent increase in pledges, linked to the long-term plan of hiring more staff and broadening church programs
- having board members pledge first, who led by example with a 27 per cent increase in pledges
- reporting the campaign results weekly in church, including a dramatic thermometer style “pledge-o-meter”
- canvassing new members and “friends,” who had not been canvassed in recent campaigns
- having pledge tables set up before and after the weekly services
- sending immediate thank-you notes to pledgers (instead of just a thank-you letter 16 months later with their tax receipt)

Ottawa’s campaign lasted six weeks,



Waterloo’s canvass talked about funding ‘dreams’, like their RE program

and reached more people than ever before, for a record increase in pledged amount – 24 per cent. Unlike in previous years, where the ad hoc canvass committee disbanded by Christmas, the “development committee” is now year-round. It is investigating “planned giving,” where members are offered a way to will money to the church endowment, and it’s also involved in two smaller campaigns, to raise money for a new church roof and for a grand piano.

Art Brewer of Toronto First Unitarian says his congregation is ripe for a new approach to membership and finances. After his spring visit, consultant Mike Durall put several provocative new ideas on the table for Toronto’s consideration. The most radical one might be that the church give away 10 per cent of its funds every year to charities and outreach. His theory is that a generous church will attract congregational support.

A COMMITMENT TO THE FUTURE

His advice – still under discussion in Toronto First – connects to what Grace Flesher has been telling congregations as she does the rounds as a CUC service consultant, and to what the CUC team was teaching at the Dreams and Dollars workshop in Fredericton.

“What our congregations really need is their members’ commitment to the future,” says Director of Regional Services Linda Thomson, “not just to paying the bills.” □



In Ottawa, canvass committee members like Mary Jo Jones gave weekly updates in church