



Stewardship Best Practices and Considerations During a Time of Pandemic *Updated August 14, 2020*

Greetings in the name of Christ! As we are God's church together, the Nebraska Synod Stewardship Table has discerned that it might be helpful to offer a new summary of some best practices particularly for this strange time during the COVID-19 pandemic. This does not replace other best practices and related resources related to stewardship offered by the Nebraska Synod

(<https://nebraskasynod.org/ministries/stewardship/>), but it is offered to enhance them. It is not a stagnant document, but one that will be updated regularly, just as the synod's COVID-19 resource page is as well. (For more such resources, please visit: <https://nebraskasynod.org/learn/covid19-updates-and-information.html>.)

Please review these tips, ideas, and resources as a way of thinking about current best practices for stewardship. If you have questions about this or would like to have any conversation about this or related topics, please reach out to me.

God's peace and blessings with deep and abundant gratitude for you, for your ministry, and for being the generous disciples that you are!
Deacon Timothy Siburg, Nebraska Synod Director for Stewardship

Gratitude and Joy

Our stewardship is our response to God's work and promises for us. This response is grounded in gratitude and joy. In that spirit, please know how grateful I am for all of you- for your ministry, for your leadership, for your growth as discipleship, and for your faith, especially during this hard, anxious, and uncertain time. Thank you for your faith and generosity! I recognize that it may be more challenging right now than at other times to be grateful and grounded in joy, but I encourage you to take some time to discern, listen, and see what God might be up to in, around, through, and for you and your faith community. Tell that story. Know too, that I am grateful that your generosity continues which makes so much ministry here in Nebraska and across the globe, possible. As you invite your faith community to give and grow in their stewardship now, please remember to ground that invitation, story, and all related communication in gratitude and joy.

From a pastoral concerns perspective, recognize that this may be a hard-economic time. Unemployment and underemployment are high. Fear and concern about making ends meet is higher than normal, and that anxiety no doubt has been sensed to some degree in your congregation. Name it openly and honestly. Provide space for people to share their concerns with their faith leaders (pastors, deacons, parish ministry associates). Provide the space and presence



that the church is called to be. If you need help with this, please reach out to Deacon Timothy Siburg and/or to your Assistant to the Bishop.

Telling the Story

It seems that every congregation has found a way to have increased online presence and engagement, as well as video presence. This is a gift. It is a way that we are truly *evangelical* as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We are telling the story of the “Good News” of God. As it relates to stewardship, use this new-found awareness to create short videos for your congregation’s Facebook page and website that share a household’s reasons for giving and participating in the ministry of your church. Perhaps invite people to reflect for a minute or two about how they have seen God at work in their life and through their congregation? Perhaps also ask for stories about how people have been impacted by the giving and stewardship of your congregation? These stories are invaluable. They need to be told and celebrated. By telling them, it creates energy, excitement, and a desire for others to celebrate and join in, in God’s work. For more ideas about what kind of stories and ministry is being done right now, check out Bishop Maas’ videos about “Growing Disciples,” “Walking Together,” and “Serving God’s World” posted online in late July through early August on the synod Facebook page. These videos are good reminders of how we do the work of the church together through mission share, which is the undesignated offering your congregation contributes to the Nebraska Synod and the larger ELCA through which your congregation does ministry that spans the globe and changes lives.

Best Practices for Giving

The ministry of the church continues, even if worship feels a little bit different right now. Please continue to ask and invite the faithful to contribute as they are able. Don’t avoid this, but be honest and intentional. Further, say thank you often and always so that any ask or invitation is grounded in gratitude, joy, and appreciation.

1. Online Giving

If your congregation hasn’t set-up an online giving option, please do so immediately. Otherwise, where congregations may be meeting partly (or more) online than in person, you may be unintentionally preventing people in your congregation from giving their offering easily. (Or in a crasser business sense, without one, “you may be leaving money on the table” so to speak.) The ELCA has preferred vendor agreements with both VANCO and Tithe.ly who have created special rates for ELCA congregations.

To learn more, visit: https://elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Communication-Tools/Preferred-Vendors?gclid=EA1aIQobChMIUZ_xjZGZ6wIVDfDCh0UyQfrEAAYASAAEgLR4fD_BwE and/or contact Deacon Timothy Siburg. The online and digital giving options resource on the synod website is helpful for comparing services, but note that those percentages and costs have changed. Many organizations (including Tithe.ly and Vanco) may have lowered their rates and increased their value for your congregation given the challenges of the pandemic. Check with the vendors directly for what options might currently exist.

2. In-Person Giving

If your congregation has discerned a safe way to gather in-person, one of the questions that may have arisen is how to best receive offering in-person. It is recommended based on CDC and state health guidelines, that nothing be passed or shared between people in worship gatherings. To this end, passing an offering plate at the current time is ill-advised. In place of this, consider providing a stationary offering plate or giving station both near the entrance to the worship space and near the exit, so that disciples may give on their way in or out of worship. For security reasons, it is recommended that an usher or leader of the congregation keep an eye on these giving stations, and then as is general best practice, receive the gifts that have been given and count the giving with at least two people- though at this time, do so in a safe physically distanced environment.

3. “But What About the Offering Time in Worship?”

During the traditional offering time in the liturgy, still celebrate the gifts, acknowledge the offering, and pray for it in gratitude and joy. This would be a great time too, to briefly share a story of the impact one’s giving has in doing God’s work in the world of growing disciples and changing lives. (This is particularly important both for in-person and online worship. For the online worshipping communities, make sure to provide a link for online giving, an invitation to contribute, and appreciative and sincere words of thanks for their partnership and giving.)

4. Other Ways to Give During this Time

If people are uncomfortable giving online or in-person, provide clear communication for how one might contribute via the mail or by providing a cash or check gift outside of worship hours for the congregation. This could entail as well, promoting an ACH opportunity for one to give directly and regularly from their bank account to your congregation.

Your Congregation’s 2020-2021 Stewardship Emphasis

Stewardship is more than just money. That’s a message that we try and communicate often. It’s grounded in a biblical understanding of Psalm 24, which begins, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it.” Put another way, all that we have, and all that we are, is God’s. This was true pre-pandemic. It’s true now during the pandemic, and it will be true after this strange and hard time. To this end, please put into practice your congregation’s stewardship emphasis now.

If you haven’t had the chance to think of a theme or focus for this year, I would encourage you to use one like this, “**God is still at work-** in, around, through, and for God’s people.” It plays on an articulation of Hebrews 13:8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Even and especially amid a challenging time like this, God’s work is being done. We must not assume that everyone recognizes this, and use this as an opportunity to not only tell the story of what God has done and is doing, but invite people to participate in and respond to it. The average congregation has seen an increase in reach since the pandemic began by at least 10% because of going online. This is a great moment for evangelism. It could also be a great moment for giving, generosity, and stewardship. Related to this theme, consider what it might look like for your congregation to:

- Share brief (no more than 3-5 minute) stories from particular households about why one gives to your congregation and how they see their giving is doing God's work
- Provide regular posts on your church's social media accounts with a picture and a few sentences of some of the ways that the ministry is happening in your community of meeting your neighbor's needs, even now.
- Provide a brief video tutorial for how members of your faith community can navigate your congregation's online giving options. The more people see how to use technology, the more likely they are to engage it.
- Lead a Bible Study or adult forum with some regularly week day evenings online as a way for people to grow in their understanding of stewardship or discipleship. One book I highly encourage you to consider now is: *Reflections on Faith and Finances* by Charles R. Lane, which includes 8-9 discussion and reflection questions after each chapter which could make for rich discussion. By offering this online in the evenings, you might be able to provide a faith formation opportunity that all ages could participate in (including young parents after their children have gone to bed).

Looking for More Ideas?

1. The Nebraska Synod is launching a Cross-Generational Ministry and Generosity Project network. If you would like to be a part of this, please let Deacon Timothy or Lisa Kramme, Nebraska Synod Director for Faith Formation, know.
2. The Nebraska Synod Generosity Project team will be providing weekly video reflections, resources, and devotions for use by congregations and in the home for households and families to think about faith, generosity, discipleship, and vocation. These will begin in September, so stay tuned to synod communications and social media. Also, to see these resources in real time, **please "like"** the brand new, "Growing Grateful & Generous Disciples" Facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/NebraskaSynodDiscipleshipandStewardship/>.
3. For your congregation's stewardship leaders, consider upcoming resources and opportunities such as:
 - a. The Stewardship Kaleidoscope 2020: <https://stewardshipkaleidoscope.org/conference/>
 - b. The Giving Magazine and other resources from the Ecumenical Stewardship Center: <https://stewardshipresources.org/>
 - c. The Stewardship of Life Institute: <https://www.stewardshipoflife.org/>
 - d. Stewardship Resources from Luther Seminary: <https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/blog/stewardship-posts/>
 - e. The Giving Project by LEAD: <https://waytolead.org/generosity-project/>
 - f. Weekly stewardship preaching commentary by Deacon Timothy Siburg at: <https://timothysiburg.com/>

Have Questions, or would you like more conversation?

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