

Advent Alternative Gift Giving that blesses all!

In approaching Stewardship year round, we need to take advantage of formation opportunities that are availed by both the liturgical calendar and the secular calendar. Advent/Christmas/Epiphany and the secular materialism of Christmas is a wonderful example of how we can both offer giving opportunities and make a statement against the secular materialism that is so pervasive in our culture. This can be done through preaching, food drives, and other outreach and teaching ministries. I would like to offer one such concrete (and fairly easy) mechanism which can achieve both of these goals while helping to fund the kingdom work in your church.

A ministry of Advent Alternative Gift Giving creates a way for people to give gifts to friends and family without stuffing their closet or shelves with yet another piece of clothing or objects that they don't really need. It is a way to honor someone while funding a ministry in your church or even outreach ministries outside the church. My editable sample will focus on funding ministries inside the church but can easily be changed for external ministries, such as ERD, Habitat, and Heifer Project. Churches have used this in different forms with suggested gift amounts and with open gift amounts. I will provide examples of each of these. The basic idea will be somewhat self explanatory through the samples so I want to provide some particular mechanics that help facilitate the execution of the giving opportunity.

First there is the brochure creation (samples provided) that starts with the decision of which ministries to include in the listing. Some churches have chosen to include a line for "Other _____" which works well, but remember these gifts are designated gifts and you want to make sure the record keeping is not too daunting for the administrative team. The brochures can be distributed in the December parish newsletter, along with Sunday service bulletins and by posting online for download. Having them available each week of Advent makes a big difference, and unused ones can be recycled for distribution the next week.

Two acknowledgements are required with these gifts. One in letter form goes to the giver. The other goes to the honoree as a Christmas card with an insert (see sample.) Some churches will do a separate card for each gift given to one honoree, and others use one card for each honoree with several acknowledgement inserts included. Either way can work, just use what best fits your congregation. The cards can be purchase from a local store and printed in-house with a parish greeting or ordered from an organization like ERD for even greater mission impact.

An important aspect of this opportunity in addition to more funding for your ministries is the counter message to the cultural materialism that bombards our people this time of year. An accompanying article in the newsletter and announcements can help to shape the theology of Christian stewardship in your church members. Most churches find this giving opportunity grows with each year it is employed and is part of a comprehensive formation strategy in the discipleship of the baptized and it clearly connects a person's giving to the mission of the church. This is designated giving that can have a greater impact on the soul than meets the eye. May God bless you as you prepare to Prepare the Way for the Christ child!

The Rev. Canon Lance Ousley
Canon for Stewardship and Development
The Episcopal Diocese of Olympia