

# Annual Giving Campaign of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church Richmond, Virginia

Sarah Bartenstein

Director of Communications

---

**From Plan to Pews:  
Real Church Campaigns that Work**

April 16, 2026

Episcopal Communicators Conference

San Diego, California

# Recent St. Stephen's campaigns

- Three most recent campaigns coincided with the tenure of a new rector with a well-articulated vision.
- He's encouraged ambitious goals.
- We have met or surpassed the financial goals each year, and come very close to the participation goals. For 2026, we exceeded the financial goal, and got to 97 percent of the participation goal.
- Two of the campaigns took place following situations with the potential to depress giving; transparency and trust served us.
- Good data management is crucial. We have been challenged by a switch to a new CMS.

# Getting started

Be clear on who is leading the campaign. Is it:

- The rector?
- A committee?
- Committee chair or co-chairs?
- Other staff?
- Other parishioners?
- Someone else?
- A combination?

# Start with theme and message

Who determines the theme; who crafts the message?

- Who will write the initial draft?
- Will the message work in varied media for different audiences?  
Thread the needle between breadth (to appeal to varied audiences and interests) and specificity (to make your program plans clear and compelling).
- Having our rector craft the message provides a consistent approach and style.

# Setting goals

Our stated goals always include:

- Broad participation (number of pledging households);
- Deep participation (dollar total);
- Plans for the coming year (how we will use the pledges if the goals are reached)—a vision is important.

# You may have other goals

- Explaining why it's important to make a pledge, not just give money (individual commitment, parish budget planning, etc.);
- Teaching that giving to your faith community is not the same as giving to a charity or non-profit—biblical teaching and testimonials are helpful here;
- Explaining the meaning and importance of proportional giving (tithe, working toward a tithe).
- Others?

# Audiences

*We tailor messages to specific groups, such as:*

- Those who pledged last year (the largest group; this letter can be the starting point);
- Parish leaders (current and past vestry, committee chairs, etc.);
- Those who have pledged in the past but lapsed last year;
- Those who pledged last year and have children 18 and under
- Those who haven't pledged and have children 18 and under

# Target audiences, continued

- Those who primarily attend a certain worship service (we have six each Sunday) or are deeply engaged in a particular ministry;
- Those who participate but have not joined;
- Those you believe might be persuaded to increase their pledge;
- Those who make gifts but never submit a pledge (to encourage them to begin doing so).
- Later in the campaign, we also reach out to LYBNYTs.

# Target audiences, continued

- Edits to the basic letter are usually contained in one paragraph, and are automated based on database information.
- Brochures and overall messages are the same for everyone, but cover letters are tailored for these groups.
- Later in the campaign, we do email follow-ups or reminders with messages that will resonate with each group.

# Conveying the message

## What tools are available to you?

- Database with financial/giving information
- Personalized cover letters, signed by the rector and the campaign co-chairs
- Campaign brochures (simple is good)
- Signage—digital, print, banners
- Website
- Videography

# Assets, continued

- Still photography (a well-organized photo archive will save you a lot of time when you're ready to design the brochure and other materials);
- Social media channels;
- Email newsletters/lists;
- Personal stories/testimonials.
- Do not be afraid to re-use content on various platforms. The brochure copy and cover letter text can be repurposed. Not only will it save you time and effort, it will reinforce the message.

# Terminology can teach

If you've ever been involved in a special campaign like a capital campaign, a planned giving campaign, or a special appeal, you may have experienced confusion among parishioners about what you're asking them to give to.

We try to be very clear about what a campaign is for. We refer to the fall campaign as the "annual giving campaign." We avoid:

- Canvass/every-member canvass
- Stewardship campaign
- Pledge campaign

# Timeline and steps

Beginning in the summer (late June, early July):

- The clergy recruit three campaign co-chairs.
- The rector suggests a theme. He may have more than one idea. If so, he asks staff and parish leaders to weigh in. The theme and messages will typically resonate with what's happening in our faith community or in the larger community.

# Brochure and packet

- Once the message is finalized, we gather photos and basic financial data and send it to our freelance designer, usually in August. We've stayed with the same brochure printing format for a few years which streamlines the process.
- Simple is good. No one wants to read a book. You cannot touch on every single ministry you offer in the brochure. We used to do multi-page brochures, but it's not worth the time or expense.

## ABOUND in HOPE

In the fifteenth chapter of his letter to the church in Rome, Paul writes, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

Paul was speaking to a fledgling, underground church facing an uncertain future. The hope of the gospel – and the community they found with each other – is all they had. Centuries later, though our context is different, we too live in uncertain and anxious times.

Still today, that same hope sustains us and compels us to embrace more deeply our mission to live as a community of hospitality, healing, and hope, sharing the love of Christ.

Your pledges and gifts toward our annual budget sustain our collective spirit and mission, helping us bring hope to each other and to a world in need. Here are some of the ways we seek to abound in hope in the year ahead.

### PRIORITIES FOR THE YEAR AHEAD

- **Investments in Christian formation for all ages**  
Seasonal altar hangings and liturgical furnishings for Palmer Hall, building on the excitement from last year's physical expansion.  
Returbish and refresh upstairs classrooms for improved small group meeting space, semi-dedicated youth space, and an enhanced wellness studio.
- **Reaching in and reaching out in love**  
More funding for hands-on outreach opportunities, mission trips, and more as we continue to deepen our commitments in the community.  
Increased coordination of pastoral care ministries, including implementing spirituality of aging programs and a peer resource network.
- **Expanding the reach of our music ministry as we welcome a new director**  
Improved audio equipment and focused marketing to spread the word about our King Canyons service and our amazing a cappella choir, Sanctuary.  
Continue to grow and nurture the charister program and the handbell choir.
- **Extending hospitality and welcome**  
With our new signage project underway, further extend our physical welcome by repainting the parking lot and tending to the hospitality and accessibility of our buildings and grounds.

All of this will be possible only with your generous financial support. As we look toward 2026, we ask your help to continue to abound in hope and further God's dream for our church and for the world.



### WHAT IT TAKES

Did you know that the work we do as a parish is funded primarily by your pledges and gifts? Fully 67 percent of our budget comes from pledges and other annual gifts from individuals and families, with six percent from facility rentals and other income streams and seven percent from our endowment. Your generous annual commitment is crucial.

**IT COSTS:**

\$11,216  
PER DAY

\$78,744  
PER WEEK

\$341,227  
PER MONTH

\$4,094,726  
PER YEAR

to provide the worship and music, spiritual formation, hospitality, pastoral care, and outreach that give life and hope to so many.

The dollars pledged are important; broad participation in this annual support is important, as well. Last year, we received pledges from 522 households. Those commitments totaled \$2.86 million, a significant portion of the funds needed to carry out our mission of hospitality, healing, and hope.

Our goal this year is to receive pledges from 850 households for a total of \$3 million. Every gift of any size will help us reach that goal!

\*Costs are for 2025 budget!

### ABOUNDING in HOPE TOGETHER

Please use the attached commitment card and return it in the envelope provided by November 23. If you prefer to make your pledge online, visit [ststephensRVA.org/pledge](http://ststephensRVA.org/pledge) or scan the QR code on the back of the card. Thank you for your commitment to our shared mission!

## ABOUND in HOPE

Please complete this card and mail or bring it to St. Stephen's in the return envelope in your packet by November 23, 2025.

FIRST AND LAST NAME (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE (with area code) \_\_\_\_\_ EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_

I commit to supporting the vital work of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in my parish, my community, and the world in 2026 with an annual pledge of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to be fulfilled by December 31, 2026.

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

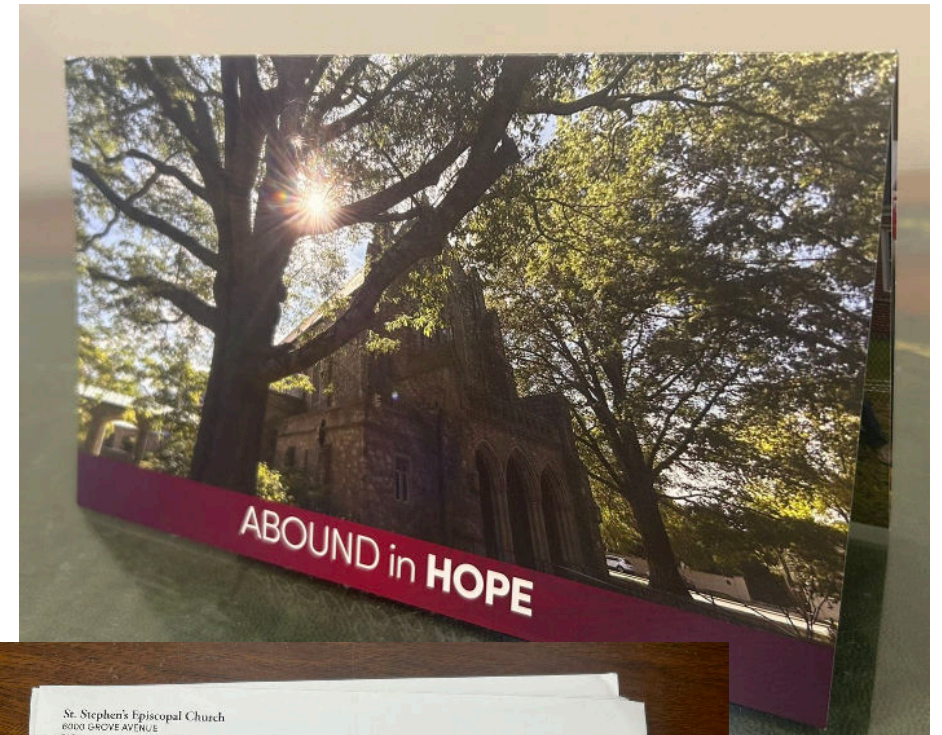
This commitment, made in faith, may be increased or decreased if your circumstances change.

What Sunday worship service(s) do you **usually** attend in person? (You may select more than one.)  
 8 a.m.  9 a.m. main church  9 a.m. Palmer Hall  11:15 a.m.  6:30 p.m. Celtic service  8 p.m. Compline  
Do you **primarily** attend any of the above services virtually? If so, please tell us which one(s).

**WE ARE A COMMUNITY OF HOSPITALITY, HEALING, AND HOPE, SHARING THE LOVE OF CHRIST.** (item continued)

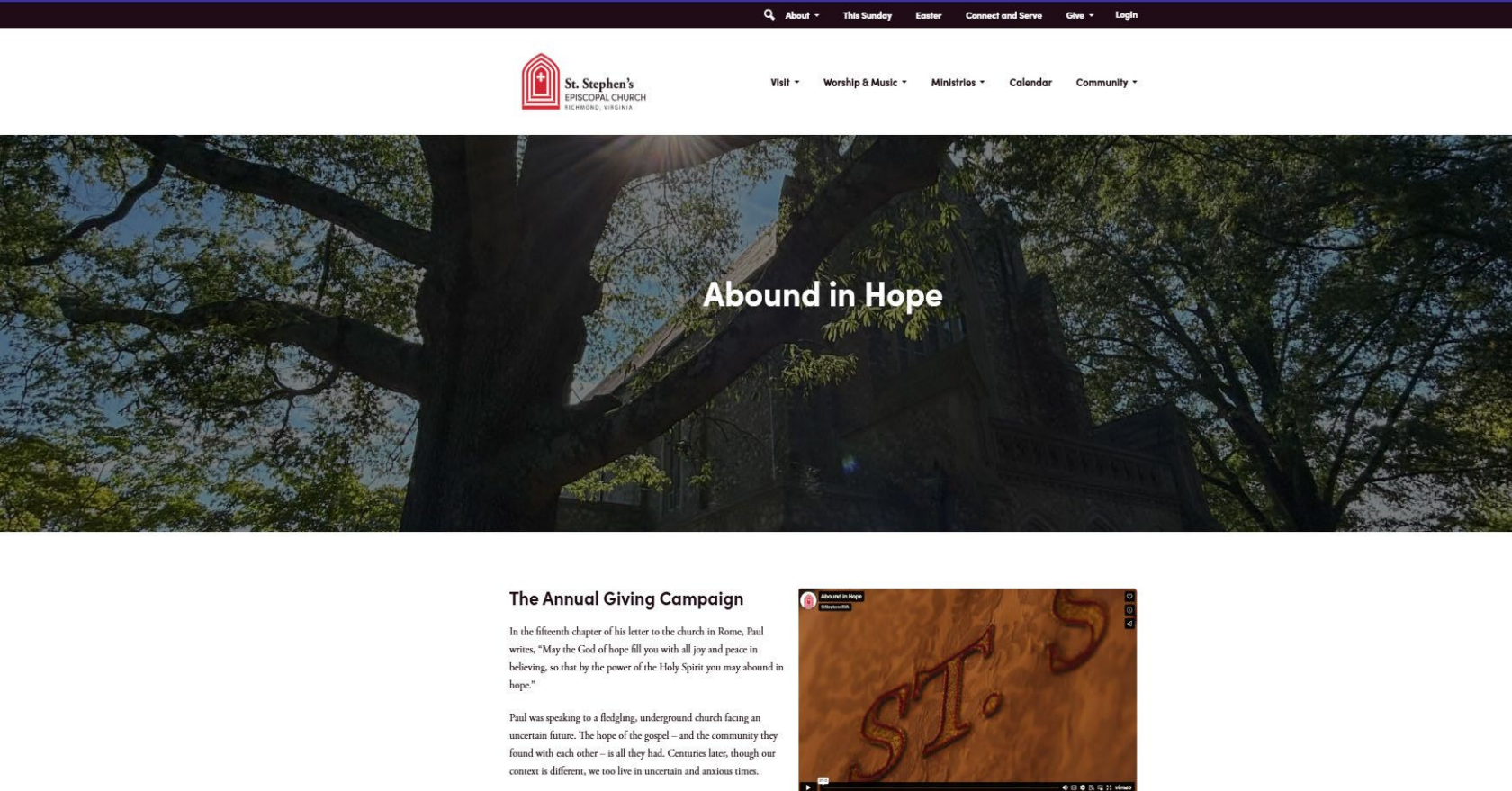
# Brochure and packet

- Using the same size brochure each time means we can order outer envelopes in bulk for a two- or three-year supply.
- Packet contents are simple: letter, brochure, reply envelope.
- The pledge card is a perforated panel in the brochure, which cuts down on the number of times we hear, "I never received a pledge card."
- Using the 6.5 x 9-inch outer envelope saves postage, and a window envelope means we do not have to label packets or match a letter to an envelope.



# Prepare your website

- Get your website ready before you distribute packets.
- Content should mirror what is in your brochure and other materials.
- Make sure information you request on the pledge card matches the online pledge form.
- If you have a campaign video, display it prominently on the site.



The screenshot displays the website for St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia. The navigation bar includes links for 'About', 'This Sunday', 'Easter', 'Connect and Serve', 'Give', and 'Login'. Below the navigation bar is the church's logo and a secondary menu with links for 'Visit', 'Worship & Music', 'Ministries', 'Calendar', and 'Community'. The main content area features a large video player with the title 'Abound in Hope' overlaid on a background image of a large tree. Below the video player, there is a section titled 'The Annual Giving Campaign' with text describing the campaign and a quote from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. A small video player thumbnail is also visible on the right side of the text.

St. Stephen's  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

Visit · Worship & Music · Ministries · Calendar · Community

## Abound in Hope

### The Annual Giving Campaign

In the fifteenth chapter of his letter to the church in Rome, Paul writes, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

Paul was speaking to a fledgling, underground church facing an uncertain future. The hope of the gospel – and the community they found with each other – is all they had. Centuries later, though our context is different, we too live in uncertain and anxious times.

Still today, that same hope sustains us and compels us to embrace

## Testimonials

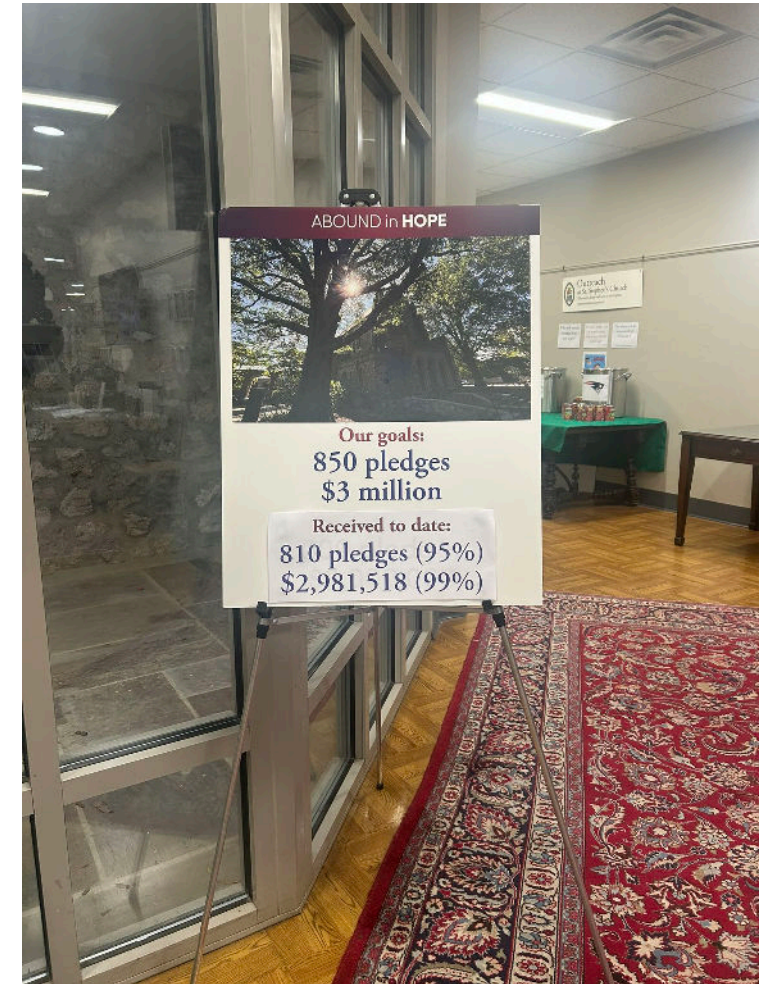
While the designer works on the brochure, the clergy, our videographer and I brainstorm with the campaign co-chairs, members of the stewardship committee, and others, about whom to invite to give testimonials touching on the theme. The co-chairs are included in the line-up.

Some give in-person testimonials in different Sunday services, while others appear in a campaign video where they speak to the theme and how they've experienced it at St. Stephen's.



# Reporting results

- Beginning a couple of weeks after packets are distributed, we report progress weekly on a poster displayed in a prominent spot in our parish house. The graphics (no thermometers, please!) reflect those from the brochure.
- We also report progress in our main weekly communications: a printed newsletter on Sundays, and an e-newsletter on Thursdays. These include reminders (and links) about how to make a pledge and urge folks to pledge before the vestry finalizes a budget.



## Reporting results, continued

- On the pledge cards, we ask people which service they attend most regularly.
- In the past, those attending our child-friendly family service tended not to pledge. With some special efforts over the past few years, that has changed significantly.
- At our evening services we do not pass offering plates, which led to an unfortunate and incorrect assumption that people attending those services did not pledge. Data from the pledge cards helped us put that to rest.
- We receive pledges from some people who tell us on the pledge card that they attend our services primarily through the livestream.

## Active campaign and follow-up

- The campaign kicks off on a Sunday in October, and there is an ingathering date in late November.
- The ingathering is a day when we celebrate where we are in the campaign. The campaign is not over, but certain aspects such as weekly testimonials are done. We try not to wear people out since many have pledged by this time.
- We continue to provide progress updates, but we gradually shift away from parish-wide messages toward more targeted follow-up—emails, letters, or phone calls—to those who have not yet made a pledge. These individual communications go on until early in the new year.

# Other materials



Palmer Hall giving boxes and progress posters



Let's fill at least 50 giving boxes!

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33
34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44
45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55



## ABOUND IN HOPE

Our goal for pledges from Palmer Hall families:

1	2	3	3	4	6	7	8
12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41
45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52
56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63
67	68	69	70	71	72	73	74

Drop box for pledge cards



# Link to materials

[ststephensRVA.org/church-campaigns](http://ststephensRVA.org/church-campaigns)

Or scan this QR code



- This will take you to a page of our website where you can download these slides as well as a more detailed version of this presentation.
- If you'd like me to mail you a hard copy of the brochure, there is a simple request form on the same page.



**St. Stephen's**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA