



Annual Giving Campaign of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

Richmond, Virginia

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A more detailed summary of the information presented at the Episcopal Communicators conference in San Diego, April 16, 2026

The three most recent annual giving campaigns at St. Stephen's Church have coincided with the first three years in the tenure of our current rector, who has articulated **clear vision** and has set ambitious financial and participation goals in consultation with parish leaders. For each of these three campaigns, we have surpassed the financial goal. We have come close to achieving participation goals, as well. As of today we are at 97 percent of the 2026 participation goal. Results have also included increased giving by a significant number of households and many new pledges from people who have not pledged in the past.

Two campaigns have coincided with situations which had the potential to depress giving but didn't. We believe this is due in part increased transparency about financial issues.

Transparency and trust are as important to an annual giving campaign as materials and messages.

Another important factor in a successful campaign is good data. Ensuring that you have accurate information about parishioners is a year-round enterprise that will bear fruit when you ask for financial support. This has been our biggest challenge.

Each year we've followed a series of steps that can serve as a possible road map for you to tailor to your own situation.

Laying the groundwork

Identify who is leading the campaign; it might be one or more of the following.

- Rector
- A committee
- A committee chair or co-chairs
- Other staff
- Other parishioners
- Anyone else?

Decide who determines the theme and crafts the message.

- Who will write it?

- We have found that having the rector write the message provides continuity of style, approach, and voice that might not be possible if, for example, a committee or committee chairs wrote it, as had been done in the past.
- Does the message lend itself to use in all of your media and for varied audiences?
- Thread the needle between breadth and specificity; avoid a “kitchen sink” approach to brochures and other communications. If you are communicating well throughout the year about your ministries and their impact, it isn’t necessary—or effective—to try to cover all the bases of what your parish does.

Setting goals

Our top goals always include

- Broad participation (number of pledging households)
- Deep participation (dollar total)
- Ministry plans (how we will use the pledges if the goals are reached)

You may have other goals. For example:

- Explaining to people why it’s so important to make an annual pledge, as opposed to giving without making a pledge;
- Teaching parishioners that giving to your faith community is not the same as giving to a charity or non-profit, using biblical teaching as well as testimonials;
- Explaining what proportional giving is and why it’s important.
- Think about what other goals you might have.

Audiences

We target messages to various groups for greater effectiveness. We identify subsets/groups and target our messages to each. Examples of these groups are:

- Those who pledged last year; this is the largest group and our letter to them is the starting point;
- Parish leaders (current and past vestry, committee chairs, staff, etc);
- Those who have pledged in the past but lapsed for one or two years;
- Those who pledged last year and have children 18 or younger;
- Those who didn’t pledge last year and have children 18 or younger;
- Those who attend a particular service or are deeply engaged in a particular ministry;
- Those who participate in our offerings and are known to us, but are not “members”;
- Those who make gifts but do not ever submit a pledge.

Later in the campaign:

- LYBNYTs (last year but not yet this year);
- Those we believe might be willing and able to increase their pledge.

All the materials (brochures, etc.) are the same for everyone, but the cover letters are tailored for particular groups.

Ways to convey the message

What assets or tools are available to you to communicate your giving messages and goals?

- Database with financial/giving information
- Letters as described above, signed by the rector and the campaign co-chairs
- Campaign brochures (simple is preferable)
- Website
- Signage—digital, print, banners
- Newsletters
- Videography
- A well-organized photo archive from which to draw for brochure, website, etc.
- Social media
- Email newsletters/lists (if you have differentiated lists, you can also target messages to them)
- Personal stories/testimonials

Vocabulary

If you've ever been involved in a special campaign in a church, like a capital campaign, or a planned giving campaign, or a special appeal, you have probably experienced confusion among parishioners about what you're asking them to give to. "I already made a pledge." Or "I already made a gift." We try to be very clear about what a campaign is for. A differentiated theme for each type of campaign helps.

In the case of annual requests to support the parish budget, we use the term "annual giving campaign," and when we need synonyms to avoid being repetitive, we might say "annual commitment" and or "annual financial support."

(A few years ago, our campaign chairs didn't like the term "pledge" because they didn't think younger people understood what it meant. But after trial and error, we're consistently using "pledge" because other terms can be even less well understood.)

We do not use "canvass" or "every member canvass," because unless you are actually sending campaign volunteers to visit each member of your parish, your campaign is not a "canvass" or an "every member canvass." Besides being inaccurate, it's unfamiliar to people under a certain age or those who have not been a member of a church for long.

The label "stewardship campaign" is not ideal because stewardship is a broad term that refers to more than annual giving.

Using the term “gifts” in lieu of “pledges” doesn’t help us much because we want to stress that it’s important to pledge, not just to give, because it lets the vestry and staff know what you plan to give, helping leaders make sound financial plans.

Timetable/Map

These are the steps we take each year, beginning in late June or early July. We’ve learned that if the content is fresh every year, keeping the delivery methods consistent saves time and even some money.

1. Recruit campaign co-chairs.
We have three co-chairs, each one representing a distinct community in our congregation.
 - Those who primarily attend traditional morning services and Sunday morning formation
 - The “Palmer Hall” community; a service of Holy Eucharist designed especially for families with young children.
 - The evening community, those who primarily attend our Celtic Evensong and Communion service, our Sunday supper, and/or our evening sung Compline service.
2. The rector suggests a theme; he might have two or three ideas and ask staff and parish leaders for their responses.
 - Two years ago it was “Love in Action,” when a major goal was to reinstate an outreach director position that had been eliminated during the pandemic.
 - Last year, it was “Abound in Hope,” which echoed our relatively new mission statement and resonated with the anxiety felt by many in our parish current national and world events.
3. The rector drafts a message which becomes the basis for a brochure, the cover letter, and other communications. Finance staff add financial information, and the communications team gathers photos and provides everything to our freelance graphic designer in late July or early August.

While the content changes, we’ve used the same brochure format for a few years. This streamlines the process, it keeps costs relatively consistent, and even allows us to order the outer envelopes in bulk because we already know the size of the brochure. The pledge card is a perforated panel in the brochure, which has reduced the number of times we hear, “I never received a pledge card.”

The timetable for the brochure and other packet elements takes into account a quiet phase (more on that below) as well as the kickoff date for providing packets to all parishioners.

4. With the message articulated, the clergy, our videographer and I brainstorm with campaign co-chairs, stewardship committee members, and others about parishioners to approach about providing testimonials expressing the chosen theme, and we issue invitations. Some give brief in-person testimonials during the announcements at Sunday services, while others appear in a campaign video. The live testimonials take place for a few Sundays in a row.
5. With input from the campaign chairs and me, the rector drafts a cover letter to go in the campaign packet. Using this letter, we tailor modified versions for various audiences. (The modifications are not extensive and are chiefly contained in one paragraph.)
6. While the letters are being written and edited, the administrative staff works on the data so that we can mail merge for the various audiences.
7. Once the brochures have arrived and the letters are ready, we stuff packets. We use window envelopes so there's no need to match envelopes to letters. Just three items go into each envelope: cover letter, brochure, and reply envelope. The packet stuffing is an all-staff activity. No one is exempt! The stewardship committee also helps.
8. The first group to receive their packets is a leadership group—current vestry members, members of various standing committees of the vestry, parish staff, and other parish leaders. This is a little like the quiet phase of a capital campaign, though it's brief—a few weeks. We do not expect to get the bulk of the pledges this way as you might in a capital campaign. It's simply a way to “prime the pump” before the full campaign kick-off, when we like being able to announce that parish leaders and staff have already made X pledges totaling X number of dollars.
9. We sort the rest of the packets into alphabetical order and make them available for people to pick up on the campaign kick-off Sunday and the following Sunday. After the second Sunday, we mail the remaining packets. We send them First Class to increase the likelihood of timely delivery (and no sorting is needed).
10. On the kick-off Sunday, campaign co-chairs and staff give presentations at the Sunday morning forum and during the Sunday supper. These presentations include the campaign video.
11. Once we're confident that most people have received their packets, we place separate pledge cards around the parish house along with locked drop boxes and extra envelopes. Sometimes people who misplace their packets; some who are not in our database do not receive packets; some people want to make a pledge on the spot

when they're at church, and their packet is at home. These cards, and all materials, carry a QR code for online pledging in case they prefer that.

12. The video gets additional play in our weekly email newsletter, on our social media platforms, on our website, and in clips of individual speakers from the videos.
13. We clip in-person testimonials from our Sunday livestreams and use them as we do campaign video clips.

Reporting results

14. We use a poster displayed on an easel in a prominent spot in our parish house to show campaign progress for a few months. The graphics—no thermometers, please!—reflect the graphics from the brochure. The poster is printed and mounted commercially and we print the updates in-house and tape them to the poster each week.
15. We provide progress reports in our two main weekly communications (printed newsletter on Sundays, e-newsletter on Thursdays). The reports always include reminders about the various ways to make a pledge, as well as a reminder that the vestry will be creating a budget based on what they know from pledges.

Active campaign and follow-up

16. There are two fixed dates in the campaign: the kick-off date, and an ingathering date. The ingathering is simply a Sunday where we encourage people to bring in their pledges if they haven't already submitted them, and we celebrate our progress. The campaign is not over, but certain aspects such as weekly testimonials stop. We'll continue to provide progress updates, but the campaign will shift away from parish-wide messages toward more targeted messaging—emails, letters, or phone calls—to those who have not yet made a pledge; these are primarily LYBNYTs, but some are to people who give but do not make a pledge. This will go on until early in the new calendar year. Once the vestry adopts a budget, this activity tapers off.

Other campaign features

Palmer Hall challenge

On Sundays at 9 a.m., we hold simultaneous services in two locations. One is a traditional Rite Two service in the main church. The other takes place in Palmer Hall, a chapel that was St. Stephen's original church building. The Palmer Hall service is designed for families with young children. It is a Rite Two Eucharist with modifications that make it more child-friendly. In addition, the chapel has a "soft space" and more relaxed norms for noise levels and movement. Readers, acolytes, and the choir are children. This is our fastest-growing demographic. Traditionally, there were very, very few pledges from this group—less than five. Last year, we had close to 70. What changed?

We began giving this group goals of their own. We challenged parents to make a certain number of pledges, and children to bring in a certain number of giving boxes—and promoted it as a friendly competition, parents vs. children. The parents’ pledges are added to the overall pledge number for the campaign, but we also have a separate progress poster for them. The collected offerings from children’s giving boxes are given to one of the church’s outreach partners—chosen by the children themselves—and the amount is matched by the discretionary fund of one of our clergy. We have a progress poster for them, as well.

Celtic service focus

The Celtic service at St. Stephen’s began 20 years ago. For many years, some folks who did not attend that service assumed that no one from this group was pledging, because the service does not include passing offering plates; people make gifts in baskets at the doors. Staff did not believe this was true. A few years ago we added a field to the pledge card asking the donor to indicate which service they attended most often. This allowed us to report to the parish how many pledges were coming from those who primarily attend the Celtic service, finally putting this idea to rest.

This went hand-in-hand with developing special messages for this “evening community” on kiosks at the entrances to the church. Because these services attract not only parishioners but many people who are not in our membership database, we know that a large number will not receive a mailed packet. We place generic packets at the kiosks to make it easy for them to respond to the giving messages they read in the Sunday newsletter and in the in-person testimonials—and they do respond.

Collecting service attendance information on pledge cards

Asking people to tell us on their pledge card which service they attend most regularly has not only given us the data we sought about Celtic service pledging, but about Palmer Hall pledging, and pledging from those whose primary participation is via livestream. We do receive pledges from livestream worshippers—not a large number, but some, including some who live in other states.