Tip of the Month

October, 2020 : What is Your Narrative?

The Lake Institute for Faith and Giving had a survey of congregational leaders from across the country, Lake Institute on Faith & Giving in a July 2020 survey of 555 congregations found that congregational giving declined by 4.4 percent on average from February through June 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. A plurality of congregations (41 percent) reported experiencing a decrease in giving, while more than a quarter (28 percent) said giving increased.

**Key findings include:**

* While a majority (52 percent) of congregations reported an increase in participation, a plurality (41 percent) experienced a decrease in giving.
* Catholic parishes and small congregations (fewer than 50 weekly participants) reported declines in participation and giving more often than any other group.
* Sixty-five percent of congregations surveyed received federal Payroll Protection Program loans. Just 14 percent of all congregations reported having to make reductions, layoffs or furloughs of staff.
* Thirty percent of congregations raised funds to support other congregations and nonprofits in need.
* Just over half (53 percent) of congregations reported that they had already resumed in-person services or anticipated doing so by September 1. One-third of congregations indicated that they did not know when they would reopen.
* Congregations’ political orientations appear to have a greater effect on reopening than do public health or financial considerations. Nearly three-quarters (71 percent) of conservative congregations had reopened or planned to reopen by August for in-person religious services, compared to 20 percent of liberal congregations and 49 percent of moderates.
* None of the congregations surveyed expected to increase its budget during the next year. The majority (52 percent) plan to maintain their current budgets, while 48 percent anticipate reductions, with most of those anticipating cuts in the five to 10 percent range.
* Congregations that continue to face a financial shortfall going forward plan to continue to reduce administrative expenses while developing new fundraising appeals and drawing down from their financial reserves or endowment.

In the face of these statistics, what is your narrative? A narrative is much more than a story. It can change the trajectory of a church or ministry. So, begin shaping your tomorrow with the words you choose today.

One narrative emphasizes survival. Phrases like “hunker down” or “conserve resources” or “circle the wagons” characterize this narrative. This is a natural instinct when the world seems to be a dangerous place. The second narrative emphasizes opportunity. Leaders may talk about “taking new ground” or “better to try and fail than not try at all” or “getting out of our comfort zone.” It calls for movement that breaks out of the status quo.

It’s important to note that you can find facts to support either narrative. More important to note is that **those in leadership largely determine which of the two narratives has the most traction** within an organization. The themes and stories that you emphasize in your communication will set the tone for your church or ministry.

As you might guess, I believe the positive choice is better. Leaders who want to breathe life into the positive narrative do more than repeat the simple phrases in the previous paragraph. These leaders:

* Find and highlight the stories of good things that are happening. Dan and Chip Heath refer to this as “finding the bright spots.” Even in a pandemic, you will see bright spots if you look for them.
* Encourage creativity and experimentation. This may lead to new bright spots to highlight. And when it fails, the leader applauds the willingness to try something new.
* Retell the biblical stories that show God showing up and God’s people prevailing in the most difficult circumstances.
* Enlist others to be positive storytellers. The burden of creating a positive narrative shouldn’t fall on a single individual. Recruit and empower a team for this task.
* Stay anchored spiritually. Shaping and sharing a positive narrative comes much more easily from a soul that is being nourished by the Holy Spirit.

What is your narrative?

Adapted from September 15, 2020 [Leading Ideas](https://www.churchleadership.com/category/leading-ideas/) By [Mike Bonem](https://www.churchleadership.com/author/mike-bonem/)

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