



ASKING WORDS: Writing Donor Letters

StewardShop 101

Description

“Asking Words” helps letter-writers improve the effectiveness of their fund-raising letters. Participants learn basic principles for effective fund-raising letters, and engage in guided practice in letter-writing. Peer review and editing complete the 55-minute workshop.

Audience

“Asking Words” benefits pastors and stewardship leaders in congregations who want to write letters that effectively ask congregation members (donors) for their financial contributions.

Skills

Participants in this workshop will sharpen their skill in writing forthright, persuasive, honest, and caring letters that ask for donations.

Materials

- Writing paper, several sheets per participant
- Pencils/pens, one per participant
- Blank paper, several sheets per participants
- Handout, “Principles for Writing Donor Letters,” one per participant
- Handout, “Asking Letters 1,” one per participant
- Handout, “Asking Letters 2,” one per participant

Schedule

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| Presentation, “Effective Letter-writing” | (20 minutes) |
| Write Your Own Letter | (15 minutes) |
| Peer Review Time | (10 minutes) |
| Large Group Sharing Time | (10 minutes) |

WORKSHOP DESIGN

Presentation, “Effective Letter-writing” (20 minutes)

Provide participants with copies of the handouts, “Principles for Writing Donor Letters” and “Asking Letters.” After a few minutes for their quick review of the material, offer a presentation that includes the following matters, referring to the material on the handouts as you speak. Suggest that participants take notes on the opposite side of the handouts or on a separate piece of paper, so that these pages may be used as reproducible originals for back-home training or discussion.

Presentation matters:

- Where these personalized letters lie on the “ladder of effectiveness”: Third most effective, after personal visits and personal letters. Letters are an efficient way to ask for commitments.
- The benefits of the personalized letter include: strengthening personal relationships with donors; keeping the donor base broad and deep; establishing the basic information for your annual fund appeal; informing your congregation members; establishing examples and leadership; and providing a way for donors’ immediate response.
- Effective fund-raising letters follow the same guidelines as effective business letters, friendly letters, and informative letters.
- Spotlight three to five of the guidelines on the handout, “Principles for Writing Donor Letters”, drawing (positive and negative) examples from your own knowledge or experience AND from the sample letters on the handout, “Asking Letters.”
- Remind participants of the importance for stating the case for giving.
- Do the same for the last two items on the “Principles” handout, which feature some hints.
- Add your own insight and ask for participants’ own observations about effective letters they have responded to.

Stay within the time allotment for this activity, but don’t rush through the material. If appropriate, use a chalkboard or newsprint to highlight some of the salient points you want to make. (Before the workshop, you might write summary statements from the “Principles” handout on the chalkboard or newsprint.)

Write Your Own Letter

(15 minutes)

Refer participants to the two handouts, as you direct them to write a practice donor letter for their own congregation. Suggest these options, perhaps writing them on the chalkboard or newsprint:

- Write a letter to members of your congregation, as though asking for their regular commitments for the next year.
- Write a letter that calls for special/additional contributions to a special cause or event in the congregation's life (e.g., a special fund for a local social ministry).
- Write a letter to kick off a capital fund appeal that will result in a brand-new multi-purpose building – parish hall plus gymnasium plus meeting rooms.

As participants write, they should keep in mind the principles you have just presented, and the good and not-so-good examples they have encountered in the handout, "Asking Letters."

Circulate among participants as they write, answering questions and offering encouragement. Let participants know when about five minutes remain available for their writing.

Peer Review Time

(10 minutes)

Divide the large group into groups of two or three, and ask participants to read each other's letters silently. As soon as they have read the small group's letters, they should quickly review each other's work, offering comments about matters such as:

- The directness of the language, especially the asking portion of the letter.
- The amount of code language (e.g., churchly platitudes, tired phrases)
- The length or complexity of sentences.
- The quality of the spirituality in the writing.
- The overall tone of the letter.
- How clearly the case for giving has been stated.

Large Group Sharing Time

(10 minutes)

Spend the remainder of the workshop time collecting participants' observations about the experience, including matters such as these:

- What seems to be the most important axiom about writing asking letters?
- How did you change the style or content of your usual way of writing this kind of letter?
- What similar themes seemed to emerge from your group?
- What do you need continuing help to correct?
- How could you get letter-writing help back in your congregation?

- Who else in your congregation could benefit from learning what you have learned in this workshop?
- How will you share what you have learned with others in your congregation?

Dismiss participants with your thanks for their attention and hard work. If you are offering this workshop in your own congregation, before you dismiss the group, decide together what next steps to take in order to extend the benefits of this workshop to other members.



Principles for Writing Donor Letters Guidelines and Ideas

Letters to prospective or current contributors are an effective tool by which you can encourage or ask for contributions. The following guidelines and ideas will help you improve your letter-writing skills.

- 1. Write personally.** Write to one member/donors as though you're having a conversation with someone you know. Visualize this person reading your letter with appreciation. Identify yourself as the sender and sign the letter. Use a co-signer if that will strengthen the impact.
- 2. Keep your audience in mind.** You're asking for their contribution, their consideration, their commitment to God's purposes. The letter is not about you, but about how their giving can make a difference.
- 3. Make the first sentence count.** Busy people overwhelmed with information need to know right away why they should continue reading. Grab their imagination and interest with the first sentence!
- 4. Get to the point.** Say why you're writing this letter. Be direct. You're asking for their commitment, their contribution, and their consideration.
- 5. Use story elements where appropriate.** Whether for your annual response program or for a special appeal, consider relevant stories that illustrate the need, the possibilities, the challenge, the hopes or the emotions that you believe will characterize the eventual results of the funding appeal. Be positive as you tell the story. Be specific. Challenge readers' vision and imagination about your congregation and the wider church.
- 6. Be specific.** Be direct and brief. If you want contributions, ask for them. If you want people to increase their financial commitment, say so. If you want them to consider their blessings, say that. If you want them to attend a meeting or share an experience, tell contributors how they can do so, and when you want their response.
- 7. Don't apologize.** Apologies or subtle negativity will subvert anything else you write. You truly believe that the readers of your letter are generous and will respond positively to your asking. Write your letter in that spirit!
- 8. Thank donors for their past contributions.** They have contributed, committed their time and supported your congregation in the past, and will do so again. They deserve your thanks. Where possible, be specific.

9. Make the letter easy to read. Use short paragraphs, short sentences, and common words. Avoid compound sentences and prepositional phrases. Stay with an active voice, using lively, fresh verbs. Avoid complexity. Cut out jargon and unnecessary adjectives. Rewrite and rewrite again.

10. Consider the content carefully. Say why the contribution is necessary, what it will accomplish. Urge the donor to a prompt response. Talk about the personal benefits that will come to donors. Remind readers about positive results that will occur because of their contributions. Make the letter spiritual without becoming a doctrinal/biblical treatise. Avoid long explanations of thematic emphases, no matter how clever they are. Check the friendliness of the letter. Refer to your relationships with the donor(s).

11. Use a post script. People read the tops and bottoms of letters, then come back to the body of the letter. A post script can be a reminder, add interesting detail or be more personal. You might handwrite these final, personal notes.

12. Consider other touches. Enclosures, photos with lively captions, return post cards, small gifts (e.g., bookmark) and special stationery may help donors understand the nature of your request, and encourage them to respond positively.

13. Consider variations. You might try other variations on "personal letters," such as:

- Different-sized paper
- Note cards
- Personalized or individualized messages (e.g., "I appreciate your contribution of \$875 last year, and know your generosity.")
- A variety of letter-writers (e.g. official and informal leaders in the congregation)
- A series of letters, each for a different purpose (e.g., thanks for past contributions, announcements of events, invitation to contribute, thanks for returned commitment)
- Surprises (e.g., the writings of a child or teen; the announcement of a new congregational initiative; first-time special invitation)



Asking Letters 1 Examples and Ideas

(NOTE: The following samples from donor letters include both positive and negative examples of how to use written letters to ask for member contributions. Use the handout, "Principles for Writing Donor Letters," to see which principles of effective letter-writing have been violated or followed.)

Dear Disciples of a Giving Jesus,

It is with heavy heart that I come to you again, asking for your help in making up a budget shortfall that has occurred again this year. I know that you have been faithful in your support of the budget of St. Jacobi Lutheran, but I must ask you once again to re-examine your true commitment to Jesus and consider a special gift that will help erase the deficit of money and loyalty that so afflict this congregation.

I am sure that

Dear Friends,

I am so thankful for your continued financial support of this congregation! My prayers to God include all of you together and many of you individually, because I know that your giving comes from a generosity that goes deeper than "supporting St. Jacobi's mission." You understand what we all believe: When we challenge each other to give, and to respond to Christ's invitation for mission in the world, we respond generously.

That is why I am happy to come to you again at the start of this year's planning for mission at St. Jacobi, asking you to increase your annual pledge by 1% so that we can together accomplish some of the proposed additions to mission various congregational groups have suggested. They include the following

Dear Fellow Member:

Pastor Gretchen has asked me to write this letter, even though it is difficult for me to do so, and even though asking for money is not something I am really comfortable doing. But I have accepted her challenge because I know that money is something difficult for all of us to talk about in one way or the other.

Why is that true? For some of us, "money" is always a difficult subject, perhaps because we have too little of it. On the other hand, some of us have too much of it, and that is a problem, too. Talking about money is like talking about our children in front of the Pastor, or about our marriages, isn't it?

I am reminded of the story my father told me when I was young. (My father was always a generous supporter of St. Jacobi, even though he, too, did not like to hear sermons about "giving" or "stewardship".) Anyhow, he used to tell us about the time when he

Dear (First Name),

It's time for us to fund God's mission at St. Jacobi for another year, and time for one of my many letters about your part in that mission. There is nothing I can say in this letter that you haven't already heard from the pulpit, so I am not going to repeat those worthwhile thoughts here.

Instead, I'd like to use this letter to tell you a story about my own first encounter with "generosity," and why I can be so bold as to ask you to examine your life priorities in order to set aside a percentage of your income for the work that God does among us here, and throughout the world.

My story of generosity doesn't start so positively. When I was fresh out of college, I had learned what many students learn: how to "suck it all up," even if you have to die with the most toys to win! I didn't know Jesus as Savior and example for my life back then, and so "generosity" was essentially a foreign concept to me.

The story goes on

Dear Fellow Members,

In his second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 9, verses 7 and following, St. Paul reminds the new believers that "God loves a cheerful giver." By God's grace and through the Holy Spirit's gracious in-dwelling, that's what I hope for you and all members of St. Jacobi's as you consider your annual pledge toward our congregation's goal of meeting our entire budget for the coming program year and adding a possible "love gift" for the support of other causes.

I hope you can be cheerful because of the wondrous blessings you encounter in the multitude of creation's gifts to your life, in the ample gift of salvation in Jesus Christ that you received at the time of your Baptism, and the continuing giftedness you experience through the Holy Spirit's filling you with a transformed spirit of service and love to God and your fellow humans out in the world.

Because it is time for us all to re-examine how and why we should be cheerful givers, I have included a copy of the sermon I preached in 1997 – which so many of you thought was a good one to send to all members – and hope that in reading it again you will be convinced how a joyful heart is the source for your generosity.

As you consider bringing your pledge to the throne of grace on Commitment Sunday this year, you might also recall how

St. Jacobi Friends:

This short note replaces my annual letter about "giving to the Church." I'm not writing you this year because I have taken a workshop in Writing Donor Letters and realized that I can't possibly ever write an effective one. Instead, I will visit each one of your homes during the next six weeks, and listen as you tell me how you're living your lives to God's glory. We'll laugh and cry and give God the glory, and then I'll leave. That's it. That's how I'm asking you to be part of St. Jacobi's mission for the coming year. And how God's asking you to be part of God's mission in all of your life. God keep you generous and joyful!



Asking Letters 2

Words and Phrases

Use the words and phrases on this handout to help you find your own “asking language. Trust God to help you discern your own capability for finding “just the right word for the right occasion.” (Proverbs 15:23 TEV)

Words and Phrases about Appreciation

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|---|---|
| I appreciate you for . . . | You have done something good . . . |
| Proud of you . . . | I thank God for you because . . . |
| You are unlike any other . . . | Unique |
| You remind me of/that/about . . . | Your (attribute) humbles me because . . . |
| The Holy Spirit has worked in you . . . | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

Words and Phrases about Identity and Belonging

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|--|---|
| You are part of a successful effort . . . | Member of a large team/group . . . |
| Something bigger than right here . . . | You join hundreds/thousands of people |
| You are part of a legacy of . . . | What your life is about |
| Personally connected to . . . | Associated with . . . |
| God’s people here and around the world | “The church” is filled with people like you |
| Together we can do what we can’t do alone. | _____ |

Words and Phrases about Asking

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| Invite | Ask |
| Want you to contribute to . . . | Express your thanks to God by . . . |
| Respond to God’s . . . | Give |
| Request | Challenge you to . . . |
| Offer to God . . . | Add your gift to . . . |
| Freely | Gladly |
| Joyfully | Join me in . . . |
| An opportunity | _____ |

Words and Phrases about Results

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| Your gift will make possible . . . | Because of your gift . . . |
| Important | Effective |
| Exciting | Successful |
| (Result) will continue for generations . . . | Impact |
| Changes | Compelling |
| Meaningful | Rewards |
| Hope will increase because . . . | Then/now |
| Promise | Legacy |
| Through you, God will . . . | You can make a difference |
| _____ | _____ |

