

ELCA Macedonia Project

GiveBack/FeedBack – A New Way to Listen

With cellphone in hand, you text a specific keyword to a string of five numbers. A text message comes back to you with a question to answer, such as, “What stops or slows your giving to your church?” You respond with another text message indicating your answer. Finally, you receive an acknowledgment thanking you for participating in the survey.

Simple, right? In a digital age and a state where people are spread out, face-to-face meetings can be challenging to organize. The above exchange is an experiment by the ELCA Montana Synod to determine whether people are more likely to fill out a “text survey” than a traditional pen-and-paper counterpart. So far, the response is positive according to the Rev. David Peters, director of evangelical mission in the Montana Synod.

“We inaugurated this program called GiveBack/FeedBack at our Synod Assembly in June, and we started with humor on the first question and will get more serious as we move along,” Peters said. “Our first question involved people texting a keyword like ‘bishophair’ to a number. In response, they received a question like, ‘What color should Bishop Jessica Crist dye her hair for Pentecost? Fire red, blood red, etc.’ This was a whimsical way for people to try this right then and there.”

The next question that went out to people was, “What best describes your reaction to the word ‘tithe’?” Questions appear in the regular Montana Synod newsletter and in bulletins and on bulletin boards in congregations across the synod.

“As a mission table, we have been committed from the beginning to doing a virtual walkabout of our synod,” said Peters regarding an effort to determine what lay and clergy members know about stewardship, what their concerns are, what resources they need, etc. This is part of the Montana Synod’s participation in the ELCA Macedonia Project, a program designed to equip stewards, grow regular giving and increase mission support from congregations to the synod and ELCA. The other part of the synod’s work on the ELCA Macedonia Project involves one-to-one conversations with rostered leaders about their stewardship journey.

“We have two goals in our particular approach to stewardship,” said Peters. “One goal is what we call broad and deep listening. This includes the text-messaging program.”

They added an 800 number to this program, because there isn’t cellphone coverage everywhere in Montana and not everyone with a cellphone can participate because of the coding. Anyone can call the 800 number to give input and provide answers to the same questions for which people text their answers.

Cindy Brattain pulled out her cellphone during the Montana Synod Assembly when invited to select Bishop Crist’s hair color.

“I think it’s a nice, quick way of giving input and then getting a response back,” said Brattain. “I’d never done something like this where you answered a question and then got immediate feedback. I thought it was cool.”

Brattain talked about this kind of program giving the average congregation member more input into the church at-large and feeling more a part of the ELCA as a whole.

“I would be more inclined to text than participate in a traditional kind of survey,” said Brattain. “If you have to take the paper, fill it out, bring it back or send it in — there’s just more steps to that. I just think this is more convenient, easily accessible and easy to do. I would definitely participate in this program again.”

