

Memorial and Honor Giving

by Donald W. Joiner

Some people want to give and have those gifts used immediately. Some want to give and only have the income used. The first is usually called **memorial or honor giving**. The latter is sometimes called endowment and at other times permanent Funds. Both become part of the *Gift Planning Strategy* of the local congregation.

The gift planning strategy of a local congregation is to facilitate a person's desire to give. Most churches have some form of "memorial" fund. The problem is that most of these funds, in the way they are not used, encourage people not to give. Many church's memorial funds have between \$5,000 and \$25,000. Many of these funds were given years ago and no one can remember what they are for.

Memorial gifts are traditionally a gift at a person's death. The invitation is often listed in the obituary as "in lieu of flowers." Memorial gifts are often given at the time of a person's death instead of giving flowers. It is a time to say that that person was important and will be missed. But, memorial gifts do not always have to come at a person's death. Some people also like to make memorial gifts on the anniversary of someone's death. Or, at other times in remembrance of someone close to us. Some gifts can be given to "honor" someone who is still alive. It is a celebration of one's life at an anniversary, birthday, or just to say thanks. One person I know has a very close aunt. She is past eighty in age, yet very vibrant in all she does. She doesn't need any more gifts. In fact she is in the process of giving away many of those items of worth to her. On the anniversary of her birth, a gift is given in honor of her through the memorial funds for youth ministry (her favorite).

Does your church encourage gifts through your church's memorial funds? The scenario in most churches is that when mom died the children decided what the church needed was new choir robes. Mom sang in the choir for a long time. Her involvement in the church was because of the choir. The choir needed new robes and that would be a lasting tribute to mom. The obituary in the paper instructed persons to make memorial gifts to the church "in lieu of flowers." Of the \$3,500 cost for new robes, \$2,500 was given. Then the memorial committee waits until the rest comes in. That was seven years ago and they are still waiting. Meanwhile, the family has left the church in anger over the memorial never being completed.

The problem is that, in most churches, there is not a committee or policy for memorial gifts. There is just one person who manages the funds; usually in a bank savings account. No one is really in charge. People know there is a fund, but because of its inactivity they do not see any need to give to it.

Institute a six-month memorial policy! The problem in the above scenario is that the family was never given a report of the progress of the fund. In other cases, money has been given, but no communication has been made with the family to decide how it is to be spent. In still other cases, churches simply put the funds in the general account of the church, and the money is "lost." People know that money has been given. They never see any of the money being spent for any program, mission, or ministry of the church. **Why give?**

With a six-month memorial policy all funds must be spent within six-months of a persons death, or of the money given to the church. After a persons death, or money given to the church in memory or honor of someone, but no later than six months, someone from the church communicates with a representative of the deceased (honored) to see what is to become of the money that has been given. If there has been no declaration of intent, the church can make suggestions regarding the use of the money.

If the family had previously selected a use for the money, but not enough was given to purchase the selected item, the family should be given a choice: [1] select a new item for the memorial, consistent with the amount that has been given; or [2] see if the family can come up with the additional funds to fulfill their gift selection. In most cases, the family will raise the rest of the funds. They have chosen a proper memorial and they will find a way to make it happen.

The leadership of the church should **control gift selection!** Some time ago, someone wrote an article titled “More Than A Brass What’s it.” Left to their own, most people do not know what the church needs. What they see is what they think the church needs. What they see is usually something to do with worship: a brass cross, a brass candlestick or candelabra, or brass communion ware. The church can only use so much brass!

Annually, the leaders of the church should decide what kinds of gifts they would like to receive in the coming year through the memorial and honor gift fund. Include in the list items that are costly. Maybe the church needs a new computer system for \$30,000. Also, include small gifts. You may want to put Bibles in each of the classrooms at \$15 each. Include program gifts (vacation church school or youth ministries) as well as potential mission gifts (Habitat for Humanity, your church’s mission in Africa). List the gift as well as the cost of the gift. If you have a current (or near-future) building program, include gifts to the new building of chairs, wall boards, podiums, sound systems, etc. in memory of or in honor of a loved one. Revise this list annually, if not more often!

Six Elements of A Memorial Fund

1. Appropriate and immediate responses to donors and family
2. A public and permanent record of the name of the person being remembered
3. Adherence to policy on the use of such funds.
4. Complete annual reports to congregation.
5. Both immediate and annual recognition of person being remembered.
6. Annual contact with deceased person’s family.

Organization is the key to any program or ministry in the church! Recruit at least three persons to be part of the memorial and honor committee. When you have just one person, not much gets done, except keeping of the accounts. When you have two persons they sit and talk about all they cannot get done. With three persons there is enough discussion to actually get the work done. Give each member of the committee something to do! If you have three persons, have one person in charge of “marketing.” This is the work of helping people in the congregation know that they can make gifts through this fund and how the gifts are used. Put one person in charge of sending thank you notes to those who give, and a recognition of a gift received to a member of the memorialize person’s family. The third person can keep good records of who gave, how much, and how the money has been spent.

Set-up a system to let persons know that a gift has been received. All gifts should be recorded in some form of memorial record. This is often a type of an album set out for all to see. Work with a printer to design a memorial card just for your church. Use these cards to report to givers a word of appreciation for their gift. Within a week of a gift being made a note of appreciation should be sent for each gift given. A note of appreciation goes a long way in inviting persons to make a subsequent gift. On the other hand, when people do not know their gift has been received, they may not give the next time.

Send a report to the family of the deceased (or the person honored) of the gifts received. You do not need to tell how the value of each gift, just who gave. A periodic report of the progress of the funds received will encourage the family to make additional gifts, if it is needed. Make sure the family knows that something has been done with the money that has been given.

Annually, select a time to recognize those persons who have died in the past year, and to consecrate the gifts put into the ministry of the church through the memorial and honor fund. There are several times in the year when a church can **celebrate Memorial Sunday**. Memorial Sunday on the calendar is often not the best time. This may be a low Sunday in attendance. Some churches use All Saints Day the first Sunday in November. Any Sunday will work!

Memorialize and remember all those persons who have died in the last year. The accounting person on the committee should keep close records throughout the year. Keep a record of those members and friends of the church who have died. Also keep a close record of those persons who may have died in the past year who are related to members and friends of your church. You may want to include persons from your community or the world who have died in the last year.

A Remembering Space

A space within the church building, preferably a very visible space, can be created which will serve as a constant and continual reminder of the contributions and lives of 'those who have gone before'. The space should convey both good taste and permanence. It can contain appropriate art works, a 'book of abiding memory' wall plaques, and historical objects.

Invite all those whose lives have been touched by those you will memorialize to come to the Memorial Sunday service of recognition. Beside notices in your bulletin or newsletter, send personal notes to those who represent persons who have died, to attend this special time of recognition. At the same time, consecrate those gifts, which were placed into service this past year because of memorial gifts, into the ministry of your church. Find a way to praise God and thank persons for a life lived and the ministry of your church.

Celebrate the Saints in Worship

- Focus worship on thanksgiving to God for the lives of local people and for the lives of well-known figures such as Susanna Wesley or Francis of Assisi. God was glorious in them, and we long for a continuing sense of communion with them as we proclaim in the Apostles' Creed.
- Choose music that your congregation can do meaningfully. If "For All The Saints" is difficult for your members to sing, try "Faith Of Our Fathers" and "Forward Through the Ages."

- Tell stories about the people in your congregation who have died. Include in the sermon brief remembrances of local saints who lived in other times and places. A useful source is *For All The Saints*, edited by Clifton F. Guthrie.
- Host a banner-making session during Sunday school a week or two before the All Saint's Day celebration. Invite the youth and children to help make banners of saints' names. Be sure to include members of your congregation who have died in the last several years. display banners in the sanctuary.
- Read the names of those who have died, and ring the church bell after each name. Write a litany (see appendix for this chapter) for this action.
- Celebrate Holy Communion, which reminds us that the living and the dead are always together in Christ. Use "The Great Thanksgiving Prayer for All Saints" found in the *Book of Worship*.

At the same time, design a special **Memorial brochure**. People will not give, and often cannot give unless they are given a means to give. You will want to include in the brochure, ways to give, types of gifts to receive, as well as how to give and where.

People want to give, but often need ideas to spark their action. In the first section of your brochure list the ways people can give through your fund:

- Memorial Gifts - the most common way to give is to make a gift to the church at the time of a persons death. Some of us may have wanted to make a gift at the time of a person's death, but never got around to it. If we did not make a gift then, is there a way for us to make a gift later on? Many persons would also make a gift on the anniversary of a person's death, or at the time they would have celebrated their birthday each year. Without your giving persons permission to do so, gifts will not be made.
- Honor gifts - most persons would not think of making a memorial gift when a person is still alive. Give them permission to make a gift through your church's fund even before a person is deceased. Give them suggestions regarding a persons birthday, anniversary, or just a time when you are thinking of them. Why wait until someone is dead to say how important they are?

Your church will want to control the types of gifts you receive. In the second panel of your brochure make a list of the gifts and the estimated cost of the gift. Include not only large gifts, but individual gifts almost anyone can afford. Make sure to update this list annually and report to the congregation when gifts are received.

The third panel of your brochure will include a place to record the givers name, address, phone, etc. Also include a place to record the person's name who is to be remembered or honored, and the amount of the gift. Provide a list for which the giver can record choices for their gift: as the church needs; as the family has chosen; or for the following.

The most important part of this brochure is usually left out. We assume that everyone knows where the church is located. Don't assume! Put the church's correct address and phone number on the brochure where everyone will see it. If I have to look for the church address or worse yet, if I cannot find an address to mail the gift, you will not receive it!

Give a brochure to everyone who attends the memorial service. Find other ways during the year to give the brochure to everyone in the church. Ask them to keep it until they need it. Put extra copies of the brochure in a special location in the church where people will walk by and pick one up. You never know when someone is thinking of making a gift.

Don't forget the funeral home. Every funeral home has a storage area full of brochures for making gifts to the Heart Fund, or the Cancer Society. Why isn't your church part of that supply of memorial possibilities? The funeral director is the first one the family will talk to about making a memorial gift. It is usually part of the questions a funeral director asks as the obituary is being written for the newspaper. There is usually a place for visitors to sign in at each funeral home. Why not have brochures at the podium when they sign in, for members of your church, or others who want to include your church in their memorial plans?

Providing a means of giving through your church's memorial fund will increase funds available for ministry, promote greater ownership of the ministry and mission of your church, and will assist members in their need to give.

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