

Selecting Lay Witnesses in Your Parish

An important part of stewardship education in a successful Diocesan Catholic Appeal is through the personal testimony of people in your parish who have been transformed by making *stewardship a way of life*. These lay witnesses are necessary to the success of the appeal. There are many reasons for this. Stewardship is a part of the internal change of heart or conversion process that we know so well from the scriptures. The Old and the New Testaments are full of stories of real people who became aware of the need to put their faith into action.

Lay witnesses send a strong message to their fellow parishioners about giving of oneself and one's possessions and time in gratitude for all the gifts God has given them. People who hear that stewardship is working for other people are motivated to bring stewardship into their own lives. Christians throughout history have been raised to a new level of awareness by learning how a deeper sense of spirituality has taken over the lives of people just like them. As we have learned by participating in the *ARISE: Together in Christ* communities in our parishes, making a commitment to live as Christian stewards is our loving response to Jesus Christ.

Selecting Lay Witnesses

The lay witnesses should be individuals from the parish who match the demographics of your parish. They should believe and practice stewardship - giving of their time, talent and treasure in an intentional, planned and sacrificial way. They should be regular contributors to the DCA. They should also be individuals who can relate well to other parishioners, feel comfortable speaking to a group about their personal experiences, and be enthusiastic about their mission.

A potential lay witness may say, "Yes, I believe in giving back to God in gratitude, but I don't want to stand up and tell everyone what I am doing because it sounds like I'm bragging about myself." The response to that person could be, "You are not bragging because you are unselfish in your giving. By sharing with us how you arrived at your decision for stewardship, you will be testifying about the Lord and reaching out and touching individuals like yourself."

Preparing a Lay Witness

Adapted from an article by Robert J. Pfundstein, International Catholic Stewardship Council. A Word version of this lay witness guide – in English and in Spanish, as well as many other English and Spanish lay witness talks are available to download at www.catholicclubbock.org/DCA.

In discussing the stewardship lay witness, we can only begin to scratch the surface of a subject as deep and wide as God's gift of life and our own personal experiences of that life.

All individuals are called to present themselves before the Lord and listen to the unfolding of God's story from within.

The purpose of this section is to give you the tools to organize and present an effective lay witness talk in your parish on Pre-Appeal Sunday or during your parish's own *Time, Talent or Treasure* Sunday. The goal is that others will be encouraged by your personal story and respond by sharing their gifts more abundantly.

Lay Witness Process

To begin, consider this thought: "God has blessed my life." Every individual has a story to share. Repeat the words to yourself, "God has blessed my life," and start to prepare your witness using the following six points.

1. Pray

Often, we allow our minds and outside activities to influence much of our daily routine. The suggestion for discerning about, preparing, and giving a lay witness is to spend time in prayer. While to some this may seem obvious, others may think the effective witness relies on their expertise and presentation style. You are encouraged to: Pray when asked. Pray after saying "yes." Pray while preparing. Pray while waiting. Pray while walking up to the lectern. Pray when finished. Many times it is helpful to work with a mentor (couple) and have that person (couple) share with you a "prayer minute" before you begin your talk with confidence in God's blessings.

2. Introduce Yourself

Your lay witness will include much about who you are through the stories you share. However, at the beginning, you should briefly share your name, family members and parish affiliation.

A personal example is:

“Good morning! I am N. and I have been married to my spouse, N., for N. years. We are blessed to be expecting our sixth child. I would give you their names and ages but then I might have to quiz you later. We have been members of the parish for more than seven years. I would like to express our gratitude to Father N. for asking us to share our stewardship story with you.”

This short “ice-breaking” introduction allows you to “see” those to whom you are speaking and helps take away some of the nervousness.

3. Define Stewardship

Stewardship is our grateful response to an ever-loving God who has given us all that we have.

Begin to define stewardship in your own words as it pertains to your life and to your personal story. This portion of your talk should include appropriate quotes from the U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral letter, *“Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response,”* which is available online or in your parish office, or other good stewardship resources.

The definition you share needs to be what you believe as well as how you try to live the stewardship message in your day-to-day activities. A personal example is:

“Stewardship has more to do with the vitality of the parish community than with the hours we volunteer or the dollars we place in the collection basket. Stewardship is about how we live our faith not just about how we spend our time or money.”

A Christian steward is one who “receives God’s gifts gratefully, cherishes and tends them in a responsible and accountable manner, shares them in justice and love with others, and returns them with increase to the Lord. - USCCB

4. Include Scripture

Read the Scriptures for the day you are speaking and refer to them if possible. While it is not your role to give a homily, it should be a joy to share a quote from the Scripture readings which connects with your stewardship message.

The Scriptures are filled with stewardship messages. The challenge is to find an appropriate quote and share it within the context of your talk. Remember, if you don’t see one in the readings of the day, use your favorite stewardship Scripture verse. It makes a difference to many people to hear the connection between the Bible and stewardship.

Here is an example of a stewardship reflection based on the readings for Pre-Appeal Sunday (April 29/30 Third Sunday of Easter, Cycle A) that might be appropriate to a lay witness talk:

“As today’s gospel reveals, the first meal shared with the risen Lord happened in a place called Emmaus. Perhaps there is no better time to reflect on this story than in those prayerful moments at Mass when we return to our place after receiving Holy Communion. Those few moments give us an opportunity to reflect on our stewardship of Christ’s presence within us. We have a chance to practice hospitality by inviting Jesus into our hearts to walk and talk with us about our own Emmaus journey. We can relive once again the time when he broke bread for the disciples. And just as they did, we too can recognize Christ in this meal we have just shared with others.”

A scriptural stewardship reference to use at any time is:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be” (Matt 6:19-21). Where is your treasure? Where is your heart?”

5. Share Your Story

What is the stewardship message that we are being called to share? The message for a lay witness begins with the recognition of our lives being a constant stewardship story. Repeat the words to yourself, “God has blessed my life.”

Whether we come from a large, medium, or small parish or family, or we are clergy, religious, or lay persons, the same basic concepts apply. The message can be simple or complex, and so can the messenger. It boils down to people of faith at all levels sharing their gifts and their giftedness in the way they live their lives and speak about their faith relationship with Christ.

As a lay witness, you provide three important benefits to the parish. First, other parishioners physically see and hear from someone “just like me.” Second, they hear about how spiritual conversion leads to living stewardship.

Third, the pastor is not perceived as being the only message bearer.

When preparing your stewardship story, answer some questions about your stewardship experience, whether newly begun or longstanding.

A few possible questions are:

- What was my first remembered experience of stewardship?
- What was my initial reaction to the concept?
- Why did I accept stewardship as a way of life?
- Has stewardship made a difference in my life?
- How have I shared my time, talent and treasure?
- What have some of the benefits of stewardship been in my life?
- Who likes to talk about money? (*Treasure witness*)
- Is there any way we can give people good news about money? (*Treasure witness*)

Personal stories make a stewardship witness come alive for others. Sometimes, witnesses share about major decisions, such as:

"I kept feeling that my high pressure job was pulling me away from my marriage, my family and my faith. It took a lot of prayer and support from my wife, but I quit that job and found another one that paid less, but brought more balance into my life. I now spend more time at home and attend Mass, but also serve in the RCIA program. We also give more generously of our income with the church. I may not have that fancy car anymore, but living as a Christian steward taught me that God's love and grace are enough for me."

6. Invite

Encourage and challenge fellow parishioners to participate in the parish as partners, growing in faith, and responding in gratitude. As a lay witness, we have little or no control over who attends Mass that week other than personally inviting people we know. What we can do as we prepare our witness talk is pray for those who need to hear the stewardship message. As an invitation, I have said: "As a family, we have faced financial challenges, health challenges, and many other challenges that most of you can relate to your own experiences. As this parish community grows in its stewardship efforts, I encourage you to share your stewardship stories with one another."

A sample invitation and conclusion specific to the 2017-18 DCA might include words like this:

"Speaking of gifts, a great gift to Father N. would be for each of us to participate in the DCA by completing our commitment form next week on Appeal Sunday. This would be a wonderful way to show your support and appreciation for him and to help our parish meet its goal of earning a rebate in the amount of N. for N. (project the parish would like to complete.) In conclusion, remember, it's not up to you to determine where the seeds may land; you are simply called to keep sowing and sowing. There are always new ears to hear God's message. So, what are you waiting for? Grab a big handful of seeds and start sowing—the fields are many. And, it's a wonderful way to say, "Take Lord, Receive." Thank you for all you do. God bless each and every one of you."

Some Closing Thoughts

As you present your witness, remember that the most effective witness follows from being prayerful, sincere, enthusiastic, friendly and, probably, nervous. Simply put your best foot forward and give the witness with which God has blessed you. Using the format and ideas presented, prepare your personal lay witness.

Even if you are not asked to present your witness in a public setting, you will be able to use appropriate portions of your witness any time you have the chance. Share your witness with a friend at lunch, a business associate at dinner, your foursome on the golf course, a backyard neighbor, the parents of your children's friends, or any place that God affords you an opportunity.

As your life continues as a good steward, occasionally dust off your written witness, read it, and revise it based on the realities of life and your deepening faith. The final evaluation rests with God as you hear the words of the Gospel, "Well done, my good and faithful servant... Come, share your master's joy" (Matt 25:21).

As lay witnesses, we have little or no control over who attends Mass the week of our talk, other than to personally invite people we know. What we *can* do as we prepare our witness talk is to pray for those who need to hear the stewardship message.