The Spiritual Practice of Story-Gathering

I recognize that talking about preparing for stewardship during the summer may feel like the tone-deaf audacity of a teacher assigning summer reading to my 11-year-old son.

Technically, it may be good for him. Spiritually, it may build discipline. Practically, it may help him be ready for what comes next.

Emotionally, however, it is still summer.
So, let me be clear: I am not suggesting that every church immediately turn its attention to pledge cards, budget spreadsheets, campaign calendars, or carefully worded stewardship letters while people are still trying to remember where they left their sunscreen.

But I do want to suggest that summer may be a surprisingly good time for one of the most important practices that will shape faithful stewardship later: gathering stories.
Not as a marketing strategy. Not as a way to prove that our churches are busy enough, successful enough, or worthy enough.

Story-gathering is a spiritual practice.

In fact, storytelling and story-gathering may be among the oldest spiritual practices humankind has. Long before committee reports, pledge cards, newsletters, or strategic plans, we had stories. Stories around tables, stories around fires, stories passed from one generation to the next to help us remember who we are, where we have been, and what matters most.

Before we ask people to give, commit, or consider what is needed for the year ahead, it helps to remember what God is already doing among us. It helps to notice the lives being shaped, the relationships being formed, the neighbors being served, the children being welcomed, the grief being held, and the hope being practiced.
In Scripture, the people of God are constantly being called to remember. Remember the wilderness. Remember the manna. Remember the covenant. Remember the God who brought you this far. Faith is strengthened when people tell the truth about where God has been present.

The same is true in our churches.

When we ask someone, "Where have you seen God at work in this community?" we are not simply collecting information. We are inviting reflection. We are helping people notice grace. We are reminding one another that ministry is not only measured by attendance, finances, or programs, but by the faithful and often quiet ways love takes root.

And yes, these stories become useful later.

When stewardship season comes, churches often scramble to explain why giving matters. We search for the right language, theme, and appeal. But the most compelling stewardship message is rarely invented in a meeting. It is usually discovered in the real stories of a congregation's life.

A story about a child who felt seen. A visitor who found welcome. A community partner who found the church to be a place of trust. A family who was carried through a difficult season. A ministry that began small and became a blessing larger than anyone expected.

These stories help us remember who we are.

They also help us speak more honestly about what generosity makes possible. Stewardship is not only about funding a budget. It is about participating in the life God is already bringing forth. It is about noticing the gifts already present in our communities and asking how we might tend them, strengthen them, and share them more fully.

So maybe one of the most faithful things a church can do this summer is listen.

Listen for the stories beneath the surface. Listen for the moments people almost forget to mention. Listen for the small signs of transformation. Listen for the places where someone says, "I don't know if this matters, but…"

It probably does.

Because somewhere in those stories, we may hear again the good news: God is still speaking. God is still moving. God is still creating something beautiful among us.

And when the time comes to talk about stewardship, we may find that we are not starting with money at all.

We are starting with memory.

We are starting with gratitude.
We are starting with the stories of what God has already entrusted to us.

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