

What Is Stewardship? ...from an interview with David S. Bell, Director of the Center for Christian Stewardship of The United Methodist Church

What is Christian stewardship?

Clarence Stoughton said, "Stewardship is everything you do after you say, 'Yes' to Jesus." In other words, stewardship is a lifestyle choice that recognizes that everything is a gift from God. Our responsibility as Christian stewards is to manage all the gifts that we have received from God. God is the true owner of all that we have in life. This concept is very difficult for postmodern Americans to grasp. Our culture implies that we deserve the things that we claim as our possessions. We have earned our money, and any decision that we make about our money is strictly our own decision.

The writings of the Old and New Testaments teach us something different. Jesus talked about money and possessions more than any other topic. In fact, he mentioned money and possessions four times more than the second most popular topic, prayer. Jesus consistently taught that our responsibility as his disciples is to recognize that God is the provider of all that we possess and that our call is to be generous givers of our financial resources.

What does it mean to be a "generous giver"?

It certainly does not mean to give more money than anyone else. Jesus never taught that we were to give that which we did not have to give! Generosity is a spiritual gift. Paul stated, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us . . . the giver, in generosity." (Romans 12:6-8, NRSV)

A generous giver has adopted a lifestyle of giving. A generous giver contributes his or her time, talent, prayers, and financial resources with a willing and joyful spirit. I have known people from millionaires to homeless people who were generous givers. Being a generous giver is a spiritual response to God's goodness.

How does our culture influence people's giving to the local church?

We live in a consumer-oriented society. The popular culture promotes myths. Two common myths are (1) people's happiness is related to buying new things and (2) escalating personal debt is a reality of life. As a result of this orientation, most Americans are spending more money than they earn in a year. Consumer debt continues to climb to new, all-time highs. With the rise of consumerism and increased personal debt, smaller amounts of money are now available for personal giving. In addition, many church members have shifted from being stewards to being consumers. Many church members now view giving as a fee-for-service responsibility rather than a biblical imperative.

Are there systemic issues within the church that have an impact on giving?

Absolutely! I believe that talking about money and giving is one of the greatest – if not the greatest – taboo in the church. Many church leaders, both clergy and lay, have a fear of talking about money in the church. There are several reasons for their fear. In some cases, the church leaders or pastors have not managed their own personal finances well; thus, they are embarrassed to discuss most stewardship issues and financial matters. They may be caught in the pull of the culture and may not have developed a stewardship lifestyle of generous giving. Other reasons include the lack of church leaders making the important connection between faith development and financial giving and the minimal professional stewardship training that clergy or church leaders have received.

However, the scarcity syndrome is the greatest systemic factor that has an impact on local church giving. The scarcity syndrome is the assumption that the church is receiving all its potential financial resources. Countless churches have a scarcity mindset, rather than an abundance outlook. These churches believe that no matter what they do, they will not raise the level of giving. They have concluded that people cannot and/or will not give any more money to the church. In some cases, these churches project an impression to the pastor and to church leaders that money is a forbidden topic of discussion. The scarcity syndrome is one of the most prevalent perspectives that impair mainline churches from receiving more than 2.7 percent of their members' annual household incomes.

Who can transform this scarcity mindset?

I believe that the scarcity mindset is a spiritual crisis! Although a number of people within a church can respond to spiritual issues, the pastor is the primary leader who is responsible for addressing this spiritual crisis. The pastor can serve as a catalyst to begin the stewardship discussion. The pastor can help people discover the joy of giving. Through the grace of God, the pastor can help transform people from a scarcity mindset to an abundance outlook. In an abundance outlook, raising money in the church is not about raising money for the annual budget; rather, it is about offering people the opportunity to respond to God's abundance.

Why do people give to the church?

People give to the church for a wide variety of reasons — some grounded in biblical principles; others rooted in more selfish reasons. For instance, some people give as a response to God's blessing; some people give because the church changes people's lives in the community and beyond; still others give primarily for an income tax deduction or hoping to wield influence within the church administration. By recognizing that people are at different points in their spiritual journeys, we can understand that people's giving patterns and reasons for giving are also at different levels. The challenge is really a spiritual one. If we transform people's faith formation and develop their discipleship, they will discover the joy of generous giving.

However, if some basic principles that influence people's giving to nonprofit organizations are not followed, then the church will rarely maximize the annual giving potential of the congregation. So the local church needs to understand clearly people's basic reasons for giving to a nonprofit organization:

- They believe in the mission of the organization.
- They believe that the organization is changing people's lives positively.
- They were asked to give by someone in whom they have confidence. They have respect for the staff and key leaders.
- They perceive that the organization is fiscally stable.

The local church needs to assure that all its ongoing stewardship and finance practices incorporate these basic principles.

What are some of the "best practices" for developing an effective year-round stewardship program in the local church?

- Provide an opportunity for people to live a lifestyle with values other than consumerism.
- Focus on the spiritual need of the church member to give, rather than on the church's need to receive funding.
- Encourage pastors to embrace their role as stewardship leaders.
- Promote a vision of ministry that attracts people. Regularly highlight the mission and ministry of the church. Consistently provide examples of how the church is changing people's lives.
- Inform congregations of their giving patterns and provide numerous opportunities for people to give.
- Establish an endowment fund. Talk about and hold seminars on wills, trusts, and bequests. Promote giving from people's assets.
- Provide a course in personal budget planning and debt reduction.
- Conduct a spiritually-based annual financial campaign that focuses on percentage giving and tithing.
- Please also see "Best Practices for Year-Round Stewardship"

.For more stewardship information, contact David Bell at 877-899-2780, ext. 7077; or dbell@gbod.org