

Speaking of stewardship: dealing with the confusion

by Benjamin J. Sheets, M.Div. Senior

While on internship last year, I had an opportunity to observe and participate in the congregation's annual stewardship drive. It went something like this: recruit stewardship envelope delivery persons, deliver stewardship envelopes, have a temple talk, ask members to fill out their pledges, pick them up a week or two later. The deliverers were asked to do three things: deliver the envelopes, pick up the envelopes, and not to talk about stewardship or pledging. While this "don't ask, don't tell" campaign was successful in raising more funds in the first couple of years it was used, its effectiveness soon began to fade and pledging to the general fund leveled off. As my internship year ended, the congregation began to search for a new stewardship campaign.

With myriad stewardship campaign programs available to pastors and congregations claiming to get the most out of members, stewardship is taught through what does and does not work. Every few years a new program is used when the former one grows stale.

The congregation forms its understanding through these various programs, which may or may not be effective or theologically sound. They are left confused about what is meant by stewardship. In a survey of first call pastors who were three years out of seminary, many said that they were not well-prepared by their seminaries to teach stewardship. The confusion surrounding stewardship pervades the pulpits as well as the pews of the Church's congregations.

Recognizing this, the ELCA and Thrivent Financial for Lutherans challenged the eight seminaries to be intentional in teaching stewardship to future identified religious leaders. In response, LSTC has begun to implement a stewardship education program for students and their families.

The vision of the LSTC Stewardship Education Taskforce includes a series of six workshops offered over the course of four years. Each workshop will focus on a different aspect of stewardship beginning with a workshop on personal finance in the fall of a student's first year and ending with a senior capstone event in the spring of their final year. Workshops will cover care of creation, time, talents and spiritual gifts, budgets and stewardship drives, and biblical and theological underpinnings of stewardship.

LSTC hopes that by training future leaders in

stewardship, the Church will develop a healthier understanding of this aspect of discipleship. The leader of this new program, the Rev. Connie Kleingartner, Logos Chair of Evangelism and Church Ministries and the director of field education said, "LSTC is recommitting itself to forming identified religious leaders who are personally and professionally solid stewards of life and life's resources and who see that as a fundamental part of faith."

Kleingartner envisions LSTC being a resource to the Church as future events and workshops will be open to area religious leaders and lay people.

The taskforce includes several students and voices from outside the seminary to guide the program.

Starting on February 17, the first phase of this program will begin with a two-part workshop. Open to all seminary students and their families, this workshop will cast a vision of stewardship that

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challenges participants to think about their faith in connection with the totality of their life, particularly financially. Participants will be asked to spend time in prayer about stewardship, to discuss it with family and friends, and to change their own behavior. The second part of the workshop will be March 25, when participants will gather to reflect on how they met previous month's challenges.

The senior capstone workshop takes place April 20-22 and is funded by a grant from Thrivent. This weekend event will allow seniors and their families to "get away" for a weekend and further discuss financial matters in a more formal conference-like setting. It is both a challenge to students to continue their struggle with issues of stewardship and a reward for the years of work that they have put in during seminary.

The silence about stewardship is being broken at LSTC in various ways. Stewardship is more than raising funds in order to finance the Church's mission, it is a core component of the mission, a mission that reaches to all of God's people.

Stewardship as discipleship

by Kathryn North (2001, M.Div.)

I was called to Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in North Aurora, Ill., almost six years ago to redevelop the congregation. Through that process many members moved on to other congregations, including four of the five top givers. At that time, those households represented about 20% of the congregation's income. Yet in that same time period giving has increased each year and continues to rise.

Certainly the Holy Spirit was at work in the process, bringing new members with solid stewardship practices into our fold. More significant to the increase in income has been a change in giving practices by members who grew in their understanding of discipleship and its relationship to stewardship.

Healthy giving vs. unhealthy giving

Like many congregations, Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd was filled with generous people who practiced bad stewardship. They loved to give money towards worthy causes. When funds were needed to purchase a large tent to house picnics and outdoor worship, monies were quickly donated. Each year at Christmas a van load of gifts and food were delivered to a needy family. When a "face was painted" on a need, donations flowed freely.

However, this kind of giving was not healthy for the life of the congregation. We seemed able to fund all kinds of new projects while unable to sustain long-standing core ministries, such as worship. In many other places this kind of giving has allowed a small group of people the ability to control ministries as they coordinate and fund special pet projects, while depressing funds for unfavorable projects.

All we have comes from God

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37) We have been called to love God with ALL that we have. Nothing is excluded. In his book *Loving Jesus*, Mark Powell described this kind of person as a Jesus Freak. The early Christians understood what it meant to be a Jesus Freak. The disciples gave up home, career, and family in order to follow Jesus because they loved him. The next generation of Christians sold everything and put it in one large pot to continue the mission of Jesus Christ.

The principal difficulty with funding a budget through special fund drives is not that it is poor stewardship, it is poor discipleship. When we give towards a special project we often give towards a beloved item. The item itself becomes a god. As we give towards a special fund, we aren't called to consider the abundant generosity of our Lord who provides for all of our needs. Solid discipleship starts with an acknowledgement that God loves us and all that we have comes from that divine love. From that understanding we are able to give all of our being back to God in an act of love. We give up control. Rather than "giving to" something that moves us, we "give from" a heart that is moved to love. Stewardship and discipleship are linked.

Changing the concept of stewardship in the congregation

In some ways it was easy changing the concept of stewardship in the congregation. Generous people continued to have kind hearts. Kind hearts were open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. In some ways it wasn't easy changing the concept of stewardship. Changing habits takes time, education and a strong will.

The opportunity to teach a new model of stewardship came within the first months of my arrival. The parsonage was sold in order to finance the pastor's housing fund and there was a marked increase between the original purchase price and the selling price. That difference was lifted up as God's work. While the congregation had maintained the property, God had provided the economic circumstances that resulted in a profit. Once God's care of the congregation was acknowledged it was easy to move members to make a love offering in the form of a donation to a mission congregation. Linking God's abundant love in the form of monies earned with an act of giving towards mission in the world began a new understanding of stewardship.

Funding the ministries of the church

The next step in changing the congregation's concept of stewardship was to place all special funds into the regular budget. Either these items were part of the ministry of the congregation or they were not and should not be funded in any way. This took some time to actualize. It demanded a significant

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increase in budgeted expenses and considerable education. Through the process our vision and mission were refined. Members also came to recognize that our weekly offering was an act of being a part of God's greater mission in the world. Again, this linked stewardship with discipleship.

Good Shepherd increased its undesignated benevolence to the Synod as a way to place control of funding in God's hands. Just as individual members were urged to trust that God was able to work through the imperfect institution of their local church, so the leadership of the congregation was called on to trust God's hand in the work of the greater church, even when they disagreed with some decisions. Each year the percentage of undesignated giving has increased as we strive to be a congregation that gives a tithe of our budget to the Synod.

Tithing as faith in God's abundance

Two years ago a group of tithers, both new and old members, formed a stewardship committee. Their plan was to lift up the "joy of tithing." These people, diverse in age and economic status, were bound by their strong marks of discipleship, including a commitment to tithing. When asked what the word "stewardship" meant to them, they replied, "faith in God;" "trusting that God provides abundantly;" "loving God." These were the strongest mission-minded folks in the congregation who endeavored to live a faithful life 24/7. Their heartfelt witness about the growth of their faith and love of God inspired many in the congregation to examine their own hearts and make their pledge offerings accordingly. While tithe and percentage giving were lifted up, it was in the context of a faithful, loving response to God's abundant grace.

Discipleship and stewardship are one

As I stated in the beginning, weekly offerings con-

tinue to rise. Many members now understand the link between discipleship and stewardship. We strive to grow in both areas. New insights continue to be found. New goals for stewardship are set.

This past year our youth had their first mission trip in our 44-year history. The trip was funded through a variety of fund raisers as is the norm with many youth groups. Members of the congregation challenged this special funding. If we truly feel that discipleship is learned on a mission trip, isn't it a part of the congregation's mission and ministry? If so, shouldn't the cost be funded by the congregational budget? The new goal is set: even the youth group mission trip is a part of the congregational ministry. In the future we hope to fund the bulk of the trip through the regular budget and allow only those fund raisers necessary to build a sense of team spirit and ownership by the youth. We were pleased to note that the youth had tithed the funds raised as a donation to the servant camp they attended. Youth understood: discipleship and stewardship are one.

Helping others love God with heart, soul, and mind

As a pastor I seek to continue to grow in my personal sense of stewardship. My journey began long ago as I listened to my own pastor, the Rev. Norman Nelson, speak of the joy of tithing and percentage giving. He moved me from a person who had a generous heart and no real personal definition of stewardship to a person who enjoys speaking about stewardship. I know that by doing so I help someone grow in their faith life. While I am called to ordained ministry, I am really just a "Jesus Freak" at heart. My quest is to help others love God with their whole heart, soul and mind. You can call that stewardship or discipleship...or maybe it's just about love.

Tithing resources through LSTC

Last year, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago took up the mission of the Tithing Foundation. LSTC distributes materials about tithing through its Book Center and is committed to developing workshops, conferences and continuing education for congregational leaders. Courses will be developed by faculty representatives of the Association of Chicago Theological Schools and open to all denominations.

Founded in 1916, the Tithing Foundation promotes proportionate giving and the practice of tithing. It was an ecumenical organization from the start. LSTC's ties with seminaries of other denominations made it a natural partner in fulfilling this part of the Tithing Foundation's mission.

Printed resources available through the Tithing Foundation at LSTC are listed by category at www.tithingfoundation.org. They include bulletin inserts, pamphlets, books, and promotional items, with a limited number of products available in Spanish.

Many books on tithing are available through the Book Center's e-commerce site: www.lstc.booksense.com. Other tithing resources may be ordered via email to Kara Vehar at kvehar@lstc.edu or by calling 773-256-0679.