

Stewardship as a Ministry in the Local Church

Understanding motivational reasons for giving.

by Randall K. Barton

Far too often, stewardship has been relegated to an elective Sunday school class, a special monthly offering, or an annual church emphasis. Some have said that Jesus taught more about money than the Great Commission, more about money than family relationships, more about money than the Second Coming—more about money than any other subject matter. Why? Because Jesus knew that where your money is, there your heart will be also (Luke 12:32–34).

Churches would benefit tremendously by considering stewardship as a departmental ministry, appropriately staffed and budgeted to serve the local church.

Martin Luther said there are three conversions—first the mind, then the heart, and finally the pocketbook. A ministry of stewardship focuses on the last conversion that is so desperately needed in lives today. In the last two decades, more personal, corporate, and ministry revivals have been ruined—not by lack of prayer, lack of results, or lack of commitment—but by poor stewardship. On the other hand, many churches and organizations are discovering that these are exciting days for stewardship ministries. The resources that God has placed in the hands of his people to meet ministry needs are more than we could ever ask or think. What does this challenge and opportunity mean for those in pastoral leadership?

Definitions of Stewardship

There are many definitions and uses of the term stewardship that it has almost become a cliché or a term that means nothing to anyone. Two definitions suggested by Christian Stewardship Association (Indianapolis, Indiana) capture the heart of biblical stewardship are:

1. "People who have yielded control of their finances to Christ habitually honor him in their financial decisions and steward resources that he has provided." This definition describes a fully devoted steward.
2. Another definition states, "Biblical stewardship recognizes that God's resources should be deployed through God's people to accomplish God's mission." At the Assemblies of God Financial Services Group, we have a simple motto that encompasses stewardship for us: "Directing God-given resources to God-given goals."

Understanding Motivational Reasons for Giving

Twenty years of stewardship work have convinced me that one of the primary reasons pastors and church leaders either fail to emphasize stewardship, or emphasize it inappropriately is: They do not understand the different motivational reasons for giving. The people in the pew are motivated differently. What captures the heart, attention, and commitment of one person is different from another. Understanding the different motivational reasons that affect people's giving will help you create a broad-based stewardship education program that appeals to your entire congregation, not just to a

particular group in your congregation. The five main motivational reasons why people give are:

1. *Commitment.* "I give because God's Word says to give." Historically, this has been the predominant reason for giving by evangelical Christians. Unfortunately, over the last several decades, parents have not taught their children the discipline of giving, tithing, or budgeting. Consequently, an entire generation in churches today does not understand the basic principle of committed giving.
2. *Compassion.* Today, the most frequent reason for giving (more than commitment) is compassion. Some refer to it as "emotional giving." I prefer to call it "heart giving." People give for a particular need or cause because they have a Christ-like compassion. To limit compassionate giving within your congregation will deprive a majority of your congregation from giving according to their primary motivation—their heart.
3. *Community.* Many people give because of a sense of community. They give to a particular project because of its success or the involvement of their friends. They invest in good soil for a good harvest. Stewardship should not be portrayed as an opportunity to pay bills but translated into ministry and mission. People like to see a return on investment. Providing your congregation with information regarding the results of investing in your ministry will substantially increase the giving of community givers.
4. *Challenge.* Because of past abuses in challenged giving, some have shied away from this approach. The thermometer on the wall pushing toward the goal, boys and girls giving their coins for missions, and weighing the boys' versus the girls' offerings are all forms of challenge giving. With the resources available today, many people are simply under challenged in their giving. Every day they are challenged to spend their money elsewhere—a new car, a new big-screen TV, or other things.

We need to challenge the members of our congregations to invest their money in Kingdom purposes. An annual missions convention has proven successful in many congregations, challenging people to give to missions. A capital campaign on an organized, congregation-wide basis is an excellent way to challenge people to give for building, expansion, debt reduction, or other capital needs. Challenge giving must go beyond the pulpit.

Some pastors are afraid to personally ask people to give. Many individuals have resources they will not share unless challenged in an individual capacity; this requires tact and understanding. Many nonprofit organizations in our communities challenge those in our congregation to support their worthwhile causes, and our members and supporters open their wallets and pocketbooks. Unfortunately, many of these resources could have just as easily been directed toward eternal purposes. This does not mean there is anything wrong with supporting organizations such as the United Way or the local food bank; we should support our community. But we must be just as active in challenging individuals in our congregation to share their accumulated resources for Kingdom purposes.

5. *Critical.* The final motivational reason people give is based on critical reasoning and analysis. I refer to these as "CPA givers." They give because they believe you are handling their contributed money like they would. This requires responsible budgets, full accountability, and full disclosure. If they see money spent lavishly, the

pocketbook closes. If all the details of the income and expenses are not shared, they reduce their giving. They believe that part of stewardship includes accountability. They are right.

In reality, there is no homogeneous way to teach stewardship. Unfortunately, for some pastors and leaders, the stewardship potential resident in the local congregation is never realized because of a lack of understanding of the different motivational reasons for giving.

What we teach should always be based on the Word of God, but the hearers of the Word in our churches are in divergent positions in their stewardship walk. We must have multiple strategies, with the goal of helping people to yield control of their finances to Christ, habitually honor him in their financial decisions, and steward the resources he has provided.

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