

# **Proper Stewardship Of The Congregation In Regard to “Outside Needs” *A Practical Paper***

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## **Introduction**

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians about stewardship, he didn't do so for personal gain—even when he had the right to expect financial support for his work of spreading the gospel among them. “If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 9:12).

Paul was in a unique situation. He could quote Moses and say, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” (1 Corinthians 9:9) while at the same time saying, “I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me.” (1 Corinthians 9:15) Of course we know that, for the most part, Paul supported his own work by making tents. Thus the term “tent ministry” has been used where ministers of the gospel support themselves through other outside work. Through his own “tent ministry,” the Apostle Paul demonstrated that his teaching about stewardship was not for or about himself.

Similarly, I am not coming to you as a Synod official. I am not coming to you as a member of the Manitowoc Lutheran High School board or any other agency. The topic of congregational stewardship as it relates to “outside needs” has nothing to do with or about me. And yet, I am not without some personal experience in this area. Without meaning to disparage my previous congregations, I have served as a pastor in two different locations where my salary was at times in arrears up to two and three months. As a result, I understand some of the pressures and pitfalls that relate to congregational stewardship. I have also seen first hand how the Lord miraculously provides.

[If you will indulge me an Olympics style “Up Close And Personal,” this account, which I call the story of the three widows, is too special not to share. It happened just over five years ago. My mother was having a heart transplant in Milwaukee. I got word of this on a Saturday evening. Even if I left immediately, there was little I could do, so I stayed for the Sunday morning worship service. Afterwards, I left to drive back to Wisconsin. (My sister was also going to be married that coming Saturday as well.) Less than two hours into the trip, my car broke down. My congregation was several months behind in my salary and I didn't have the cash to pay for repairs. I simply put the \$300 bill on my VISA card and continued on my way the next day trusting that somehow it would be taken care of. My mother recovered—so well in fact that she was released from the hospital on Friday and attended the wedding on Saturday! Now, I had not told anyone about my repair bill or the lack of funds that I was experiencing. Yet, three widows in my family (each of whom did not know of my need - or about the other two) took me aside one by one and each gave me a hundred dollars! Suddenly, I had the money that I needed. God certainly does provide.]

The point in regard to stewardship is that God does provide there as well. Abraham was correct in saying on and about Moriah, “The Lord will provide.” (Genesis 22:14) When it comes to our worship and service, including our stewardship, there is nothing that we can add or give to

God that he hasn't already provided for us. We confess that fact even in the word "stewardship" itself. We are merely the stewards of what God has already given.

With that in mind, we will take a brief look at the topic: "Proper Stewardship Of The Congregation In Regard To 'Outside Needs.'" Since this is quite a focused, narrow topic, I suspect that this paper will not be too long. Perhaps that is just as well. But I do hope to cover this topic as thoroughly as possible. It is hoped that this will at least serve as a springboard for discussion not only here at our conference, but also among our councils and voting assemblies as we consider the best use of God's blessings among us.

### Principles

Any discussion of proper stewardship must begin, remain based in, and end with Scripture. I would hope that all of us are familiar with the principles of proper Christian stewardship, but a review is never out of place. If we want to look at *congregational* stewardship specifically, we have to have a solid understanding of what *general* Christian stewardship entails.

First things first. The principle of *firstfruits* giving was quite clear to Old Testament Israel. God said, "Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the LORD your God." (Exodus 23:19a) Again he said, "You are to give them the firstfruits of your grain, new wine and oil, and the first wool from the shearing of your sheep." (Deuteronomy 18:4) Through King Solomon he told his people, "Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops." (Proverbs 3:9)

We might think that that does not apply to us though, since we are no longer under the Law. For the most part, the New Testament speaks of firstfruits in regard to Christ, the resurrection, and us believers. But this principle is also evident in Paul's teaching. "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money." (1 Corinthians 16:2) Since the believers were to set aside their sum of money on the *first* day of every week, it was not the leftovers which were to be offered (if there were any), but the firstfruits.

That last passage pulls double duty when we look at the principle of *regular* giving. Again, the Word says, "On the first day of *every* week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money." (1 Corinthians 16:2) Stewardship shouldn't be a matter of starts and stops. It should be regular. After all, the Lord's mercy, love and compassion to us (which are our very motivation) are "new every morning." (Lamentations 3:23)

The point of regular giving isn't that it must at all costs be weekly. If there is no income from which to give for a period of time or if income is only received on a monthly or yearly basis, regular giving can take place at those (or other) intervals as well. For the most part, however, a weekly offering will be the way that much regular giving takes place.

A third, significant principle is that of proportionate giving. In the early Christian church we hear that, "The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea." (Acts 11:29) Paul also spoke to this principle. "For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have." (2 Corinthians 8:12) Once again we can draw from 1 Corinthians 16:2. "Each one of you should set aside a sum of money *in keeping with his income.*"

Of course the Old Testament standard was the tithe or ten percent. "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD." (Leviticus 27:30) Certainly this can serve as a guideline for New Testament Christians. However, we are neither bound to it, nor limited by it! Christian freedom allows us

the liberty to set our proportionate giving at any level. The amount, even the percentage, doesn't matter as much as the motivation behind the giving. When we recognize all that the Lord has done for us, we see that even 100% isn't sufficient to repay him. Yet Paul encourages us in the level of proportionate giving. "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." (2 Corinthians 9:6)

Giving is in reality a privilege. God could do without our offerings. If he could make children of Abraham out of stones (Matthew 3:9), our Almighty God can carry out his work with or without our meager offerings. Yet we cannot do without giving to him. Faith longs for an opportunity to share in God's good work.

This leads us to the final principle of *personal/joyful* giving. "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." (2 Corinthians 9:7,8) Earlier in the same chapter we read, "So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given." (2 Corinthians 9:5) If someone feels that they must give, it would be better if they didn't give at all. God doesn't twist arms and neither should we.

### **Application**

Perhaps you are thinking you know all this already. Good. Perhaps you are wondering what this has to do with *congregational* stewardship. It has everything to do with it. Nowhere in God's Word do we have an indication that Scriptural principles apply only to individuals and not to groups of Christians as well. If anything, there may be additional concerns, but they do not negate or overturn these basic principles of stewardship in the congregation.

When I came to my current congregation, I was most impressed that they placed the Synod Mission Offering *first* in the budget. Next came Manitowoc Lutheran High School and all other outside giving (including tuition support for students attending a Lutheran Elementary School in the area.) After these, support for the Called worker came next and all other items followed after that. It doesn't surprise me that these budgets have been running in the black. The priorities are in order. Similarly, when the insurance and utilities are the first bills to be paid, it doesn't surprise me when budgets are in the red. I've had to say as much to my previous congregation - with tears in my eyes.

Certainly wanting to balance the budget isn't the reason we practice stewardship principles. But since a congregation wants to teach its members proper stewardship principles, it's important to realize that it teaches a significant portion of that in the way it budgets and carries out its *collective* stewardship. If a congregation wants its members to give firstfruits regularly, proportionally, and joyfully, the tone is set by the spiritual leaders of that congregation. In the budgeting process it is important to "practice what we preach." By placing outside needs first, we recognize their importance and trust that the Lord will also provide for our needs at home.

You might say that we can't look at outside needs without balancing internal ones as well. What about paying Called workers first? Isn't that Scriptural? Yes, it is Scriptural to pay our Called workers. "The worker deserves his wages." (1 Timothy 5:18) I've already mentioned my previous situations so that you would know that this encouragement is coming from someone who has not always been paid in a timely fashion. But such a question is really a straw man. This needn't be and shouldn't be an "either/or" proposition. It's "both/and." If outside needs are left

for last, however, we often end up in a “catch up” situation where the work of the Lord outside of our immediate sphere is inadvertently treated as less important.

Giving the Synod and/or the Area Lutheran High School lump sum or “catch up” payments at the end of the year may be considered regular. (And there is nothing wrong with a single *annual* offering to a single *annual* commitment.) However, do we want to teach our people to give to the congregation in exactly that same way? I suspect not. If the local congregation recognizes that they have on-going expenses themselves, the same holds true for the Synod and other agencies and federations supported by our congregational offerings. The local congregation would be in great difficulty if every member put his own needs first and only gave lump sum or “catch up” offerings in November and December after the rest of the family budget was met.

Perhaps the difficulty with firstfruits and regular giving at times is our propensity to think in terms of dollar amounts rather than percentages. This can be said of members who have always given \$10 in the offering plate without evaluating what their income actually is. Has it gone up? Has it declined?

The same thing applies to congregations. Has income gone up or down? Are there other circumstances that have changed? If the offerings aren't there, how can a congregation give the same as they have in the past? If even more monies are given why are outside expenditures kept stationary? I have yet to see a congregation set their Synod Mission Offering or other outside support at a strict percentage that is paid out as soon as the offering envelopes are counted and deposited. I suspect that that would be extremely beneficial. As in all areas of sanctification, there is room for improvement among us all.

Who is it that provides for our people and congregations? The Word answers that question as well. “You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” (Psalm 145 :16) “He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” (Acts 14:17) When we recognize that all blessings come from God, it puts our budgeting in perspective.

As a teenager I needed that shift in perspective. I worked as a busboy who earned tips from the wait staff (It's amazing how fast a teenager can spend cash!) After a couple weeks, I realized that I wasn't leaving much of anything for an offering at church. Since I had worked for my tips, the money I received from the waiters and waitresses wasn't really theirs. They may have picked it up off the table, but it wasn't theirs. They didn't spend it all and then come back to me at the end of the week and say that they didn't have anything left. No, they gave me a percentage off the top. The same thing applied to God. I may have received it, but not all of that money was mine. In fact it all belonged to God. When I began to set aside a percentage immediately it was amazing how quickly the offerings accumulated.

Since it is God who provides all that we need, I suspect that he will not let our Called workers go unpaid if we place him first and them second. Did he not say, “Test me in this . . . and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.” (Malachi 3:10)? Whenever I went unpaid, it wasn't because of Mission Offerings or other outside giving. It was partially because *other* bills were paid first. Sadly, because it seemed to be their priority, that congregation has lights and insurance on their building—but no resident Called worker anymore. I pray that we don't act that the same way toward our Synod or High School.

## **Conclusion**

It is easy for us to fall into the trap of legalism. Just as we do not want to coerce members into giving because of the Law, we don't want to shame congregations into giving for that reason either. We want ourselves and others to be joyful givers. We give because of all that God has given us!

Every congregation will be different though. Budget processes will vary. Internal needs will change. What may be proper for one may not be proper for another. But the principles of stewardship remain the same—whether we are speaking about an individual or a group of Christians.

Our Synod is a walking together. Our high school federation does what each of us individually could not do. It is my hope that this paper will lead us not to point fingers at one another, but to prayerfully contemplate how God has blessed us and how he has given us the privilege of sharing in this common work of spreading the Gospel.