

Denice K. Leslie
November 18, 2007
Genesis 28: 10-22
Matthew 19: 16 – 26

“The Church in a Materialistic Culture”¹

“A pastor was preoccupied with thoughts of how she was going to ask the congregation to come up with more money than they were expecting for repairs to the church building.

Therefore, he was annoyed to find that the regular organist was sick and a substitute had been bought in at the last minute. The substitute wanted to know what to play. Impatiently the pastor said, ‘Here’s a copy of the service—But you’ll have to think of something to play after I make the announcement about the finances.’

During the service, the minister paused and said, ‘Brothers and Sisters, we are in great difficulty; the roof repairs cost twice as much as expected, and we need \$4,000 more. Any of you who can pledge \$100 or more, please stand up.’

At that moment, the substitute organist played ‘The Star Spangled Banner.’

And that is how the substitute became the regular organist!”²

Yes, the church has the same mundane financial needs and anxieties as any other human organization or business, for profit or not for profit.

Salaries, utilities, building maintenance, insurance, copiers, computers, telephone service, piano tuning, custodial service—these things are not what we consider “religious” but the fact is they are important to the support and function of the larger mission of any congregation.

They help make possible what we do together: provide worship space for congregants worshipping in three languages, outreach ministries to the poor, the homeless, the hungry; small groups, classes and bible studies, our food pantry and community garden, and support of our UM missionary in Macedonia, Carol Partridge

currently funded through the efforts of our Boutique group.

Speaking of supporting Carol Partridge, did you know that the First UMC in San Luis Obispo has also adopted Carol to support?

The fact is there are a number of churches that have covenanted to support Carol. I wonder how many churches it would take to completely support for Carol and her mission? Salary, professional expenses, travel, health insurance, housing and retirement, mission site expenses and resources?

As a congregation, we could not begin to do that alone, could we? But together with all of the other United Methodist congregations all over this nation, we can not only support Carol but hundreds of other missionaries in missions all across this nation and all over the world!

Together we United Methodists support universities, seminaries, publishing houses, mission and ministry world wide!

We do this through our Connectional Giving—our missionaries are recruited, trained, sent and supported through the World Service Fund, one of thirteen connectional giving funds. Our ministers are trained through seminaries and continuing education funding through the Ministerial Education connectional giving fund.

Every church is assigned a portion of our connectional giving-- the total funding required annually to carry forward our United Methodist mission and ministry around the world.

These funds include the Africa University Fund, the Jurisdictional Korean Mission Fund, the Ethnic Minority Congregation Fund which helps fund our Hmong Ministry, our Conference Program Fund and Emerging Congregation Fund which funds Rev. Yang’s salary, and other funds which are more mundane but which are essential to the support of our local, national and global mission: clergy pension, General Administration and Conference Program, office and administration.

I mentioned our Hmong ministry pastor’s compensation. Because of the faithfulness of churches who pay their portion of our

¹ Cell Phones, Dessert, and Faith, by Steve Clapp

² Somebody sent it to me on email—no idea who!

connectional funds we are able to provide a language pastor for this ministry.

Unfortunately, in the past ten years that I have been appointed here as your pastor we have not paid %100 percent of the connectional funds apportioned to us. Last year we neared %80. Its time to pay %100. This is not only a moral obligation to pay our fair share, its mission and ministry made possible through a covenant relationship we have with one another as United Methodists everywhere—that we could never begin to accomplish on our own even if we were four times the size we currently are!

I want us to see first hand what our World Service fund does. Watch this presentation of our connectional dollars at work through the World Service Fund.

Together, through the faithful stewardship of our giving, we transform people’s lives!

The role of the Church of Jesus in any society is to reach out with the life changing goodness of God’s love, God’s justice and God’s life-changing message of salvation through Jesus our Christ.

Jesus makes it clear to the wealthy young man who comes to him that he needs to do more than go to church—he needs to get his priorities straight by putting God first. The man went away sorrowfully because he was honest enough to know he couldn’t at that point in his life do it. How sad! Like the camel having to squeeze through the small gate—get down on its knees—that’s what it takes—it takes submission in order to stand tall again and be free of the heavy burden of guilt, of anxiety, of living our lives around our money instead of taking control and having our money serve our values.

The role of the Church in our materialistic culture—where money is more and more the dominating factor of our lives in a consumer world, is to show through our own stewardship choices how people can make a difference with their dollars that doesn’t contribute to the destruction of the planet through the mindless acquisition of things that we don’t need, and that does provide for the needs of others.

Those of us living in first world nations have an especially large moral obligation to

consider how we use our personal resources. And this is why:

We represent 20 percent of the world’s total population. We use 75% of the world’s timber and consume 75% of the world’s energy; and we generate 90 percent of the radioactive wastes and chlorofluorocarbons.³

Think of the energy we use for things that are really of no intrinsic value—things we get in fast food bags and throw away, small plastic items that clutter up our environment and landfills that, whether they are recyclable or not, still consume precious energy to make.

Its mind boggling, when you think about it. Just the plastic forks and spoons that accumulate in my utensil drawer over a year is amazing.

We don’t have to participate in this kind of consumerism. We can make Christ educated choices, every day and at the holidays.

The holidays are around the corner. How many of us will buy things for people who already have more than enough? Wouldn’t it be nice if this year, we as families sat down together and talked about our God choices: talked about pooling our holiday giving dollars and give to every one we love a gift that keeps on giving? Such as Heifer Project International? Or Habitat for Humanity? Or sponsoring a family in Fresno county together?

Through our Advance Special giving in the United Methodist Church you can pick out a specific mission any where in the world that our World Service connectional funds have made possible: a variety of specific medical clinics, schools for children, youth, colleges and universities, evangelism projects, housing or other infrastructure projects, agricultural and food projects such as HPI—you can pick one of your choice to give to through your church.

Giving like this is called Alternative Giving. Choosing to scale down your Christmas giving or even not giving any kind of “thing” to someone who already has enough—Alternative Giving!

³ -Imprint, November 29, 1996.

But actually, when you think about it, this is not alternative giving for us because we are Christians. Followers of Jesus have their priorities right—they give to the building of God's Kingdom because they know that they are citizens of God's Kingdom. A kingdom that is not only temporal but eternal. A kingdom which is our promise and inheritance!

Another or additional way to give is simply to step up to a tithe. Did you know that if every Christian tithed it would only take about \$65 billion to eliminate most of the world's poverty? If every church member tithed, we would have that much with an additional \$17 billion left over, all the while maintaining church activities at their current levels.

Think, people, of the time and energy that would be freed up just within our own congregation that we could focus on ministry and mission if we didn't have to worry about fundraising. Tithing can make that happen!

So how does one tithe? I've been asked this before. Tithe on your after tax income. In the bible the tithe was ten percent of your resources for the year. However, the Romans laid an income tax on the people in addition to their tithe. So a biblical tithe is ten percent of your after tax income. You have no choice about your taxes. You do have a choice about what you give to God from what is left.

Some of us have more income than others. Those of us with more, who have more discretionary spending left after what it takes to cover necessities—we need to think about not just tithing but giving beyond a tithe. Because it's easier for us to do! Much easier for someone who makes 6,000 a month than someone who lives on 600 a month. 600 out of 6,000 is not as big a chunk as 60 is out of 600.

But the Christian life isn't about scarcity; it's about gratitude and service. It's knowing what God has done and is doing for us.

"There was a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer, and had been given three months to live. Her doctor told her to start making preparations to die, so she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes.

She told him which songs she wanted sung at the service, what Scriptures she would like read and what she wanted to be wearing.

The woman also told her pastor that she wanted to be buried with her favorite Bible. Everything was in order, and the pastor was preparing to leave when the woman suddenly remembered something very important to her. "There's one more thing," she said excitedly.

"What's that?" came the pastor's reply.

"This is very important," the woman continued. "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say.

"That shocks you, doesn't it?" the woman asked. "Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," said the pastor.

The woman explained. "In all my years of attending church socials and functions where food was involved, my favorite part was when whoever was clearing away the dishes of the main course would lean over and say, 'You can keep your fork.'

It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming. When they told me to keep my fork, I knew that something great was about to be given to me. It wasn't Jell-O or pudding. It was cake or pie. Something with substance.

So I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand, and I want them to wonder, 'What's with the fork?' Then I want you to tell them: 'Something better is coming, so keep your fork, too.'"⁴

We Christians not only know something better is coming—we are called to make that something better happen for others right here and right now out of our gratitude for Christ at work in our lives.

We are called to provide the world with dessert first, God's dessert! Because that is what God does for us!

⁴ From Homiletics Illustrations; Devry Nix, via e-mail.