

Improving Stewardship Processes

Financial giving is especially important to both church development and personal spiritual growth. Many churches struggle in this area. When we develop and implement financial stewardship processes, we have opportunities to make these processes more effective and rewarding.

If financial giving were greater, our churches would be stronger and struggle less to meet budgets and support clergy, buildings and outreach programs. Denominational bodies could reduce assessment percentages. With a greater offering of time and talents as well as treasure, more people would be passionately involved in our churches. And we would experience a greater sense of God's abundance as we work together to strengthen, revitalize and plant congregations.

As Christians we will be asked, "Have you been faithful stewards of the gifts the Lord has given you?" To illustrate, Jesus tells a story of a man, about to travel to a far country, who distributes his assets ("talents") among three servants (Matthew 25:14-30). Two of the servants double their talents; one servant simply buries the money. When the man returns after a long time, he reckons with the servants. He praises the first two servants for their work, saying "Well done good and faithful servant"; promotes both servants, saying "you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things"; and invites them to share in his happiness: "Enter into the joy of your lord." The man calls the third servant "wicked and lazy"; tells him the least he should have done was to deposit "my money with the bankers"; takes his talent from the unproductive servant and gives it to the most productive servant; and casts the wicked servant "into the outer darkness."

This parable teaches us to be productive where the Lord has given us ability and opportunity. Growth is important. We will be asked: Have you made your talents grow? While Jesus describes growth in terms of money, he actually calls us to spiritual growth – especially in loving God and one another (Matthew 22:37-40) and in helping to make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20).

Financial giving is an important spiritual discipline that helps us to learn to live in a closer personal relationship with God and with a sense of grace, blessing and joy. Through stewardship, we turn our attention to God in a manner similar to prayer. We appreciate the blessings we have received and express our gratitude. We become more responsive to God by offering something of ourselves back to God for God's use and service. We express and experience more keenly our dependence on God for everything. We are transformed by reprioritizing our lives to attend to God and becoming more aware of God's presence. Proportional giving is especially effective in sustaining this important spiritual practice.

Developing stewardship practices is important to Christian formation, helping people learn to live with Jesus on a daily basis. Like prayer or Bible study, stewardship may be neglected; we need aspire to, sustain and grow into stewardship as a regular practice. This includes continuously encouraging stewardship and raising expectations – rather than just highlighting financial needs once a year. We can easily include stewardship training in all relevant formation offerings throughout the year, including inquirers' courses, catechumenal

programs and gifts discernment courses. And we can place financial stewardship within the broader context of stewardship of time and spiritual gifts and invite individuals into their true vocations in mission and ministry opportunities.

In addition to encouraging personal spirituality, stewardship processes are terrific opportunities to build up the church community. They offer a time to share a clear and articulate vision for the church community, to celebrate church accomplishments, and to directly and strongly communicate budget needs and expectations of members. Added benefits of many stewardship processes are the opportunities to involve a network of people and to hear some individuals share their faith stories.

Effective churches emphasize personal spiritual and church growth and use various marketing or fundraising approaches within their stewardship processes. Their leaders become an example for proportional giving. These churches highlight their successes and talk about their needs. They are not ashamed to ask for money, recognizing that they are competing with other charitable organizations and that no activity is more important than bringing people to Jesus. These churches recognize the importance of gifted givers (Romans 12:8) and pay special attention to them. They strive to get as many people involved as possible within the community and its outreach activities.

Churches can get a great deal of individual and community development from their financial stewardship processes.