

Stewardship of Our Gifts in Our Own Congregation

Our Gifts to the Lord on the Congregational Level

By Fritz H. Miller

When speaking of Stewardship an old ghost story comes to my mind. “One morning a minister awoke to discover three ghosts at the foot of his bed. Perplexed, he aroused his sleeping wife and besought her counsel how to get rid of the ghosts. Supposing them to be irreligious he reached for his Bible and began reading. To his amazement they listened attentively. Then he began to preach, only to discover that they responded with far greater enthusiasm than his congregation had shown. He and his wife in desperation began to sing a hymn, but the ghosts joined them, one tenor, one soprano, one bass. Finally, he reached for his hat to take up an offering; whereupon the spirits immediately vanished.”

It is easy to talk about what other people should be doing about their money. But don't you put your hand into *my* pocket: Don't try to tell *me* what I should do with *my* money. One almost begins to feel as though he is doing some trespassing on private grounds when speaking of money. However, Jesus never experienced the slightest embarrassment in talking to His followers about money, and the right use of money. Much of God's Word is devoted to the topic of riches and Christian Giving.

The Usual Problems of Finance in the Average Congregation

Our congregation is in no way any different from the average congregation in our Synod. We experienced the usual deficits and shortages in finances. As a result we repeatedly instituted *special drives* with all the appropriate publicity, with enclosed *special envelopes* and special appeals for the various needs. Generally we were able to collect a substantial amount of cash. *But* we immediately experienced another slump and actually there was no improvement in the overall picture of finances. The continuing appeals and mailings became a source of irritation to the members. The *efficiency* of repeated appeals and mailings was justly questioned.

The congregation in its history of more than a century *had never* brought up its “fair share” of the budget for Missions and Synod. We were barely solvent in our own congregational matters. Many necessary things were postponed and even neglected in the congregation because there were no funds on hand to pay for them. (Years ago the constitution listed as “DUES” \$10 for a married couple and \$5 for a single person.) Why should one ever ask: “What is our “fair shares,” or how much shall I give?”

Another problem arose for us: A “new child” came into our family—the “Luther High School” at Onalaska. The burden of support, of course, fell upon the communicants of the immediate area. I wouldn't care to mention some of the very discouraging sentiments expressed by individuals. We also found in our congregation that some individuals would contribute to support their own pet projects while other God pleasing projects were neglected. For example some would contribute only for Home Purposes; others had various reasons why they would not support our own parochial school; again others had no heart for Luther High—and *The Synodical Budget*—who cared about that—what comes in comes in and that's that. We must look out for ourselves *first* or else we will come short. Had we forgotten that we are members *with other congregations* in the spiritual body of Christ?

We always had an estimated budget and expense proposed in our October meeting. It generally was kept as low as possible in view of the past performance of the congregation. If necessary money didn't come in then many vital projects were postponed. The special “drives” and the organization for the same came around all too often. We could collect a goodly sum—but within a short time there would be another deficit and another “drive.” We tried every plan we could think of but *none* of them brought *lasting* success.

The Board of Elders and the Finance Committee realized that *something* had to be done. The congregation was not accomplishing what could and should be done. In spite of the unemployment in our city it was felt that the *potential* of support existed. There were stewardship discussions and sermons which seemed to bring some improvement. But something just had to be done to put the congregation onto a more solid basis for

the collection of necessary funds. There dared not be any double aims divided interests. There had to be an intensive concentration on the *one thing needful*.

What would it be?

We knew that if there was any success—it would be due to the grace of God. We could be either a “drag” or an instrument of the Lord.

At the time of our *Centennial observance* we wanted to carry out certain projects. Plans were formulated for several years in advance. We managed to pay for these projects, when they were completed—but of course other well-deserving projects were neglected. Monies were collected ahead of time and we were able to observe the Centennial with all the projects paid for. It wasn't too difficult to enthuse the people for certain projects, especially where *they* benefited directly, but soon interest would die down, and other funds would suffer and show deficits.

Conclusion

What has been mentioned this far is the general picture of the problems in our congregation—and I believe it is the average picture of the average congregation in our synod—regardless of what plan has been adopted for collecting monies.

I often thought: Why do we always have to worry about the lack of cash and the cost of things when we are about the Lord's work? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we Christians would with our gifts do so much in *glorifying* our blessed Savior that we would have to tell the people to hold back with their gifts, or to be begged by contributors to have opportunity to give, (Maudonians) that we have more than we need. It was that way once in the Old Testament times. We have the same Christ! We have tasted His love! What did *they* have which we do not have? What was the secret of their success? Why isn't it the same for us? The Old Adam had to realize that no loss is imposed on the individual when the Christian receives the gift of the grace of giving. The-Christian is the beneficiary.

I'm sure that we all have the proper *motivation* for good Christian stewardship—to give out of love and appreciation to our dear Savior who became poor for our sakes, that we might have the riches of heaven—but *why* aren't the *results* sufficient? Should we be satisfied with free-will offerings? Wasn't there something wrong with the will? The thing that is so disturbing is this—the *potential* is there—the Lord always blesses sufficiently to carry out His work. Our “fellowship” () with our Lord is not a one-way process, but it is reciprocal: Why are the corresponding results lacking? If people want something *for themselves* they generally carefully *plan* and finally acquire those things. Why can't *we* carefully *plan to glorify* our blessed Savior? Have we been trying to sell “*Projects*” instead of selling the Christian on the *constraining necessity of glorifying our Lord* in all that we are and have and do? In a family *all* the children are taken care of, one is not neglected over against the other.

We also had to come to the conviction of *what* our Lord's work was. Then Home Purposes, Christian Day School, Building Projects, Lutheran High Schools, Home and Foreign Missions, Synodical Institutions, Expansion Projects, Repairs, Salaries, etc., *all* fall into *one category*—they are *all* the Lord's Kingdom Work—*supporting* these things is necessary in order to *glorify* our Savior. As soon as we had that conviction, then the other things began to fall into place.

In order to accomplish something greater in the way of *glorifying Jesus*—our plans and our Christian Stewardship and Christian Giving *dared not be haphazard*. It must be planned and be a steady and continuous process throughout the year. It must be *proper* before God and man.

We therefore decided to set up a *program of planning our offerings in order to glorify our Lord*. (We did not use the words “dues,” “pledge,” or “fair share.”) In Oct. of 1962 an *estimated budget* was presented to the congregation. It was about \$25,000 higher than the previous year. In it we doubled the amount of the foregoing year for Synod and Missions which brought the amount to \$30,600. The amount for Luther High School was increased to \$19,760. Our own necessities amounted to \$58,980 *plus* \$7,500 for renovating some of our properties. We also wanted to cut down our School Debt by a considerable amount so \$10,500 was added to the

budget. Our *total estimated budget amounted to* \$127,340—a staggering amount—actually terrifying when we looked at the past performance of the congregation. We did not feel that it would take a super-human effort to carry it out. It was adopted, however, for we were convinced of the *potential* of our Christians and also convinced of all the wonderful promises of our Lord. We realized full well that only the *Grace* of God could give success: Cf. Meyer's 2 Cor. Chapt. 8,9, "God's grace is the active factor. Christian donors are really on the *receiving* end. This grace itself is a gift of God."

Thoughts to awaken us in our complacency! To make the Old Adam squirm! (What on earth were we doing for heaven's sake? How long are we going to remain of the receiving end? (Koinonia = bride and groom)—God doesn't ask us to do the impossible.—Why should those people in the front rows have a second helping before the back rows have had a first? (one foreign missionary for every 83 church members in North America) Why should anyone hear the Gospel twice before everyone has heard it once?—A Christian is under "new management."—We ought to feel uneasy when we consider how comfortable we are and how our efforts compare in sending out the Gospel. Where do we draw a line between our own needs and the Lord's mission? How much are you ready to invest in His Kingdom? If we still believe that souls go to *hell* without Christ, then we are interested in supporting the real work of our Lord.—Faith dares anything because it has the Lord's promises. We truly face an unending succession of *giants, Jordans, and Jerichos*. But we can conquer with the Lord!—No one glorifies God with "leftovers," gifts that "we can afford." Not "How much shall I give to the Lord" but "How much of God's earthly gifts can I with a good conscience keep for myself?" We are to honor the Lord with our *firstfruits*. It doesn't take faith to give a cash offering. All I have to do is to tell my hand to go into my purse and find the money, take it out and put it on the plate, —Planned offerings are different. I ask Him how much He would have me give and then trust Him for it each week and each month and depend on Him to supply it. You can't best the Lord in giving. "Give and it shall be given you."—If you faithfully give to God you will never find yourself in the breadline. —The Lord shows us that Givers are at the same time Recipients. If you want to get somewhere, you can get behind and push; or you can get ahead and pull; but you can't sit in the middle and I do nothing.—If you can't "go", how many substitutes are you sending in your place? —Are you sorry you are not still a heathen? And you do not believe in missions? Do you want to accuse Paul of making a mistake? —Christians never resent the "*high cost*" of *loving Christ*—of giving proof of having experienced His grace! —Is your offering a *faith* offering? How much can you trust Him to give you for His work? Have you had the thrilling experience that you can't beat the Lord in giving? How much are you sending to the bank of heaven? If we wait until we have it, we never would give it because we never would have it. In *faith* promise Him when you don't have it *and* God will honor it.—Give according to your income lest God make your income according to your giving.—"Like mild cattle, church members go dry if they don't give regularly." Time is running out rapidly!

We went about printing a *booklet* for distribution to every communicant—the title "*Your Planned Weekly Offering*" for 1963.

In the booklet we had at the beginning a *motivation* based on the explanation to the 2nd Article, a reminder of our spiritual riches, plus the thought of the constraining necessity of each child of God to *glorify his Lord*.

The 2nd page gave examples of what projects the congregation *had* successfully carried out because they had been *planned*. How foolish it would be to neglect careful *planning* in important matters. (Just think of how foolish it would be to purchase a home, train an army for war, to send up rockets and missiles, etc. in a haphazard way.) How much more is such careful *planning* necessary in the *most important work*—the saving of souls, Kingdom work!

Page 4 listed *unaccomplished things*—regarding Home Purposes, Missions and Synod work, Luther High, Expansion Programs—*because* we did not plan a way of collecting the necessary funds. It was pointed out that the *adopted expenses* for 1963 was nothing spectacular—that we would just be holding our own in our Lord's Work. In driving a car how far would you go if you constantly put your foot on the brake? We want to go *forward* in our Lord's Work. We want to do more to *glorify him*.

On page 5 the Estimated Expenses were listed and explained.

On page 6 we explained *how* the plan would be carried out—stressing weekly, regular support on the basis of the year’s income of the individual.

Now—we all know that the *potential* of support is there—but what should one suggest? On page 7 we felt it necessary to be very *practical* in suggestions. (One member had asked: “How *much* shall I give?”) The Lord cannot properly be glorified with mere “peanuts,” with mere token giving. Nor is “burial insurance” or just enough to get by with Glorifying our Savior. We therefore gave an example of *incomes* and what 3%—6%—10% would mean *weekly*. It was pointed out that *we barely hold our own* if we give *only* 3% of our income. At 6% we could start to go *foward* and we could *promise the congregation never to have another deficit collection or a special drive*. We encouraged the people to sit down and actually figure out for the year what they could do in earnestly and honestly planning to *glorify* Jesus. We asked each communicant to prayerfully talk it over with his Lord, *plan* it, and indicate it on the included *planned offering card*. Maybe a family consultation would be necessary. We did not feel that the newly confirmed were to be excluded. All have been blessed spiritually and also materially in varying degrees. With such careful planning we would be satisfied with what each one decided with the help of his Lord. Our gracious Lord would have to give success:

There were many “bugs” in the *mechanics for the organization* for carrying out the *plan* and we still need much improvement. Each congregation would have its own way and organization, so we shall not enlarge on our own method. “Sermons, bulletins, articles, reports, discussions, committee meetings, etc.”

What were the results? We had our ups and downs. Bad weather influenced our weekly goals. At times we were above and then we would fall a little short of our goal. There were many misgivings and fears that the *congregation* would somehow come short. “You know there is only a certain amount of money that the congregation has and will give.” With a steady attendance per Sunday—we generally made our weekly goal. A boost for our morale came even before we went in on *the planned program*. (Incident of \$10,000). How the Lord was blessing us ahead of time! We closed 1962 with a mere \$230.17 on hand in our General Fund, but we were shamefully short in Synod and Missions, and also for Luther High.

The picture at the end of 1963

(Remember we had no special drives, no special collections, no special envelopes, not even for Mission Festival.)

Our Estimated Expenses were \$127,340—we collected a total of \$131,115.	Gen. Fund	46%
We remitted to Synod \$30,879	Synod	24%
We remitted to Luther High \$19,637	M. of Pr.	4%
We reduced our School Debt by \$16,500	Sch.Dt.	9%
We placed into a Swings Acct. about \$7,000 at 4%	L. High	17%
We had a <i>balance</i> of \$4631 in our General Fund.		

You can’t find a person who isn’t enthusiastic about the *planned program*; no one wants to go back to the old drives, Special Collections and Special Envelopes.

The picture for 1964

Our Estimated Expenses have been raised to \$132,547, a 4% increase, the biggest increases being for Synod and for Luther High—the increase is very modest, but from all indications the Lord will help us in 1964 to meet our anticipated goal of Glorifying Him.

“As ye sow, so shall ye reap!”

Conclusion

In the February 23, 1964 issue of the Northwestern Lutheran there was a very fine article: “*Why Do We Give*”

We tried to influence the people to support our Lord’s Work *in its totality* not because of some special need, but because *every* Christian has the “need” of expressing the faith implanted by the Holy Spirit by the

exciting and saving Gospel message. Faith in that blessed and sweet message needs to pour itself out in gratitude; it needs to burn itself out to Glorify Christ. This makes the “willing heart,” “the hilarious giver.” There is no other pressure but the need of the loved one to give himself completely to the Lover of his soul. The Christian is filled with a thankful heart, a holy passion until it seems to him he must explode unless he *glorifies* his Savior by proclaiming the Saving Gospel of Jesus in every possible way. When you feed souls that which will set hearts afire—then you no longer have to beg and plead—you will find that you can’t hold them back. Let us not launch all kinds of *new* crash programs and use material methods to solve that which is really a spiritual problem. The sweet Gospel kindles an inextinguishable blaze in the breast. Start a fire and get the popcorn popping.

After these “dry bones” have been made alive (Ez. 37- Eph.2) I can’t sit back and relax. The “Gospel” is a driving power; it gives “go” power. We cannot be hesitant. We need not apologize for our enthusiasm. No longer are we afraid or dismayed for we have a “great power” available. We have a great God behind us. We are under His marching orders. Our sufficiency is of God.

Don’t we experience the *sense of urgency*—in a world of dying men we are concerned that so many knew not Him who is the Resurrection and the Life. We should be filled with such an exuberance of zeal by the Holy Spirit that our members comment: “Pastor, I think you must be drunk!” Yes, we *are* drunk with sheer joy of God’s grace to us in Christ. Like the old prospector we shout at the top of our voices: “Yipee, I’ve struck it rich.” We are as such who are “possessed,” beside ourselves mad men for Christ. The thrilling experience of Grace causes us to dance around in circles; the thrilling experience of Grace burns in my soul like a heavenly fire. We indeed have something to be enthused about, to go out and march, to wave a flag. The message of grace uses the man.

Are we willing to step out into thin air at His gracious promise? When we see and read what others are doing—over \$700 per member—and we have so much spiritually and then compare our miserable efforts. As His epistles—*How is the world reading us?*

In conclusion: Quoting from the president’s Ascension Week letter: “Let us for our witnessing unto Christ implore Him to give us a rich measure of this spirit, to stir in us a consuming love for the souls of men, a burning zeal to work while it is day, and an undaunted willingness to spend and be spent in the Ministry of Reconciliation as ambassadors for Christ!”

Did you hear the story about the woodpecker—pecking away at a tree? All of a sudden a bolt of lightning hit the tree, shattering it. The noise was heard for miles around. Every bird in sight came flying in to ask the woodpecker, “Tell us how you did it!” Let us just keep doing what we should have been doing, where we should have been doing it, and the Lord will do the rests!