

What is Most Important?

By Glenn Taibl

Nineteen months ago we began our work as Interim Co-Directors for the Center for Stewardship Leaders. A number of people have asked me what I think is most important when teaching and preaching stewardship in a congregational context. There are a number of things. To begin with I still like the definition of Stewardship as the management of all of life with Jesus Christ at the center. Because of the importance we have assigned to money and possessions I would add that it is especially in relationship to our money and possessions that Christ needs to be centered.

In his last weeks of writing for this newsletter, Chick Lane encouraged everyone to talk about money when you aren't asking for it. We say "amen" to that and this encouragement goes along with the definition of stewardship above. I have another encouragement to add and I will begin with an excerpt from Clif Christopher's book, Not Your Parents' Offering Plate.

- *I got a donor letter the other day from a large southern church. It was their main appeal letter for support for the upcoming year. What was their message about why they deserved the support of the people? We need 3 percent more than last year! That was it. The letter bragged about how the staff had done a great job of not spending much money the previous year, and if people will just come up with three percent more, they can get by once again and balance the budget. The summation of the entire letter was that we exist to balance a budget and here's how you can help us do it. The church is losing forty members per year and yet seems happy that they are managing to balance the budget.*

I have observed too many congregations who begin with a focus on their budget in a congregation's annual response program. They have skipped at least three foundational steps in their planning process. If you begin here, you are doomed to fail in bringing capacity to your congregation's mission. There are three important steps that precede talk about financial stewardship outcomes.

1. Everything we do as a congregation is grounded in the Word.

Open up the biblical conversations about our relationship to money and possessions. The focus will soon lead you to a foundational assumption that it all belongs to God. The money in each member's bank account belongs to God and the money in the congregation's budget belongs to God. The Word keeps bringing us back to a simple truth, "God is the subject of the active verbs." The biblical witness relieves your need to be apologetic about money and the mission of the church. Begin with the Word and stay there throughout your program. Your members will appreciate this focus

2. Clarity of mission is a key to any budget.

The budget is not the mission. The mission is the work that **God** is giving to the congregation in relationship to the community the congregation serves. The congregation's mission is the mission that God is giving to you. Take time to discern the call that God is giving to you. If you are a congregation with 25 worshippers on a Sunday or a congregation with 1,000 worshippers on the Sunday you each have a mission that is beyond your individual lives and sanctuary walls. Scripture and prayer will lead you there. Listen for it! The budget serves this mission! Mission does not serve the budget.

3. Pray about it!

Pray about stewardship and mission in the prayers of the church and encourage members to pray about mission and the resources to support the congregation's mission. Take prayer seriously as a key to financial stewardship in your church.

Now that you have moved through these first three steps you are ready to begin to talk about bringing capacity (money) to the mission of your congregation. Thank you once again for your partnership and we pray that Stewardship will be at the heart of your ministry.