

Goals for a Congregational Committee for Stewardship

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The church of Jesus Christ is basically not a fund raising agency, but a teaching agency. It exists primarily to teach. Jesus' last words to His disciples, you will recall, made this clear: "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you." The word "disciple" means "learner." But before anyone can learn, he's got to be taught. Many of us can remember back to the time when this truth did not receive the emphasis in our church and especially in our Synod that it receives today. Many of us can remember back to the time when the pastor did just about all the stewardship training in the average congregation. The topic which has been assigned to me this morning is: "What role does the congregation's Committee for Stewardship have in the teaching process?" I submit that the role which the congregation's Committee for Stewardship has is a very large role and a very vital role. If the Committee for Stewardship can be helped to carry out its assignment, the congregation will be richer for it, because the job of teaching Christian stewardship in the congregation is way more than a pastor can handle.

I think that to assume that the church council can take care of this teaching assignment is also misguided thinking. Very often church councils are concerned pretty much with the ongoing affairs of the congregation. They take care of its financial needs. They maintain property and grounds. They see to it that the teapot lids which are exploding here and there in the congregation are all put back in place again.

Whose job is it, then, to see to it that the congregation sees its role in God's larger scheme of things? Which other group in the congregation is assigned to take a larger view of the congregation and its assignment and progress it is making toward fulfilling that assignment? Who better than the Committee for Stewardship can act as a sort of a congregational steering committee, who doesn't have a lot of finance assignments, but who have as its prime job to help maintain the spiritual caliber of the congregation? It has been my experience that the Committee for Stewardship is excellently suited for this vital task. It has also been my experience that the alumni of the Committee for Stewardship often provide some of the very best members of the church council. Because of the discussions which they have shared, they are able to see not only what the congregation has been, but what under God it might be if the Holy Spirit were really having His way with the congregation and with each of its members. There are two points that I would like to make this morning in discussing the

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- I. to provide necessary information, and
- II. to teach God-pleasing motivation.

I.

What information does a member of a congregation need to carry out the assignment which God has given him—individually, and as a *member of a group*, called a Christian congregation? The first and most basic piece of information that he needs is to understand his role as a priest of God. This is a bombshell which Luther exploded at the time of the Reformation. He held before the eyes and the hearts of the Christian people of His day that they were not just flunkies, but that they were royal priests, that they came from royalty. Imagine that, sons and daughters of a King, with all the honor that accompanies such a high position: The Committee for Stewardship needs to emphasize this wherever it can. It needs to share this valuable information that God has called us not just to be nice, quiet, sincere people. He has called us not just to be good and loyal church members. He has called us to be *His chosen representatives*, wherever in life He happens to have placed us.

Think of how the New Testament emphasizes this truth. St. Peter reminded Christians: "Ye are a chosen people, a royal priesthood." St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Christ died for all, that those who live should no

longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.” At the time of the Old Testament God spoke to His people through the Prophet Isaiah: “This people have I formed for Myself. They shall show forth my praises.” We recall this statement from the lips of the Lord Jesus: “You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, that ye should bring forth much fruit.”

This is the first bit of information which the congregation’s Committee for Stewardship needs to share and share again and then emphasize once again to the people: “We are God’s priests.” The Christian’s primary responsibility then is not to his congregation. How much more helpful we would be to the members of our congregation if we would back off from expressions like: “Your congregation is asking you to do such and so. Your church has these plans for you.” The day after Judgment there isn’t going to be any such thing as St. John Congregation or Trinity Congregation or whatever. The primary relationship in which the Committee for Stewardship is interested is not that of a man to his congregation, but that of a man to his God. It’s to Him that we are responsible. It’s to Him that we want to emphasize loyalty. Our goal then is changed people, not just larger income and bigger budgets. Surely we must all confess that often we have been too ready to tap a man’s wallet when the Lord wanted to touch his heart. Our goal—and let us state it real honestly—our goal is simply to change people.

I like the way St. Paul once said to the Corinthians: “We seek not yours, but you.” In our everyday vernacular that would sound something like this: “We don’t want your money. We want your heart. We seek not yours, but you.” This is the first piece of information that the congregation’s Committee for Stewardship owes to the members of the congregation.

However, we stand in congregations not just as individuals, like hermits, or something. The Bible teaches us that God’s Holy Spirit has called others to the same faith to which He has called us. We treasure this bond of fellowship. Each one of us is delighted that he doesn’t have to “go it alone” in his most holy faith. Here’s another bit of information which the congregation’s Committee for Stewardship owes to the members of the congregation. That has to do not with the role of the individual Christian, but with the role of the Christian congregation.

I suppose that there are members in every congregation who still feel that the congregation exists pretty much for our own good. It satisfies our feeling of wanting to give God some of our time. It offers us opportunity to satisfy some of our charitable inclinations. Besides that, we kind of enjoy the group of people who are members of our congregation with us. They’re probably members of the same economic group that we are, people with the same sort of interests. There’s a close bond of friendship. Here again is an area where the Committee for Stewardship needs to share some information. It needs to emphasize that the congregation exists not primarily to *serve our wants*, but to *respond to God’s call*.

In its contacts with the congregation (every member visits, reports to voter’s meetings, letters) the Committee for Stewardship can *restate God’s charter* for Christian congregations. Christian congregations do what they do not because they think it would be nice, but because they are under a commission. They have been called by God for a certain purpose—actually, for a number of different purposes.

God has called every Christian to *see to it that the Word is preached*. This is why a Christian congregation conducts its worship services—not just because people have been in the habit of doing that for nearly a century or so. We worship not only because we feel the need. Christian congregations conduct worship services because God has said: “This is what I want for you.”

Christian congregations conduct mission activities. Christian congregations join hands in the work of the Synod not because the Synod needs the money, not because our Synod speaks for you, not just because there is a need for a Christian mission. All these factors will enter into the picture, but the basic reason why your congregation recognizes its mission task is because God has said to each one of us: “Into all the world!”

Another facet of God’s charter for Christian congregations is indicated in His words: “The things that thou has heard of me, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” Every one of us shares the assignment of training another generation of pastors and teachers, who are to take over the job of passing on the truth after your lips and mine have been silenced by death. That’s an assignment given to our congregations by God, and this God-given nature of our assignment is something of which we who are

connected with stewardship may never stop reminding God's people. Our congregations share in the work of the Synod not because we think it's nice, not because we've always done it, but because God has called and commissioned us to preach the Word. "Go into all the world." "The things which thou hast heard of me the same commit to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." "Feed my lambs." There's our admonition to carry out programs of education. "Bear ye one another's burdens." There's our reason for doing work of Christian charity.

Here, then, is a message which a Committee for Stewardship must hold before the members of the congregation. The congregation dare not—either intentionally or accidentally—begin to look upon itself as a receptacle or a bucket to catch God's blessings and to hold them. If we think of ourselves as buckets, we lose our right to exist. God wants Christian congregations not as receptacles but as channels, into which He pours His blessings so that they can go out to people whom He loves just as much as He loves us. And if I forget that God has called me individually and my congregation as a channel, if I instead stuff up that channel, God have mercy upon my soul.

Information and transmission of information is the first assignment of every congregation's Committee for Stewardship. First of all, individual Christians understand their role as God's priests. Then restate God's charter for Christian congregations. And finally, every Committee for Stewardship owes the congregation specific information which the membership needs in order to determine its response to the Lord's call.

There is such a thing as zeal without knowledge. God does not want this to characterize our stewardship life, and so the congregation's Committee for Stewardship needs to share with the membership specific information which the members need to determine their individual response to the Lord's call. When the annual Program of Work is presented to the voters for discussion and adoption, members are entitled to know what the dollar cost is. They have a right to know how the new year's Program compares with the previous year's, whether the percentage of total budget allotted for missions and charities represents an increase (or decrease) over the previous year.

None of us will deny that disseminating such information has its place. But the caution is in order not to equate the congregation's work with finances. To call a Program of Work a budget isn't being real helpful; it can mislead people. When quarterly reports are sent to the members, financial problems sometimes get more attention than they deserve. Wouldn't it be preferable to supply the information members really want to know: what is the state of the congregation at certain periods throughout the year? The Committee for Stewardship is in the best position to supply that information. All of us know that Christian people look for yardsticks to help them determine their response to the Lord's call. Who should supply these yardsticks? The treasurer of the congregation might find it difficult to remain objective. A better group, I think, would be the Committee for Stewardship. And let the Committee be careful not to supply yardsticks that are simply mathematical, imagining that those are the ones that the members really need in order to make a proper response to the Lord's call: "Go into all the world." When supplying yardsticks for Christian giving, how easy it is to divide the budget total by communicant membership. I'm not at all convinced that this is the help people really need as they plan their offerings.

In my opinion, the yardsticks which are most helpful are the ones which the Lord supplies in His Word. Of course, they're not as automatic as the simple division problem referred to a moment ago. The yardsticks for giving which the Lord supplies don't give the Christian an easy answer; they let him sweat out the answer in his own heart.

What are these spiritual yardsticks for giving which the congregation's Committee for Stewardship ought to share with the congregation? The Lord says: "I want only *joyful* gifts." Give to the Lord with a joyful heart. Let the check which you write out for your Lord each week bring you more joy than any other checks you write out. The Lord asks that you bring Him gifts *regularly*. As often as He blesses you with income, return a share of that income to Him. I hope we're past the time in our church's history where "annual dues" were spoken of. St. Paul said: "On the *first day of every week* let each one of you set something aside." Another one of the Lord's yardsticks is this: He asks for gifts which represent not left-overs after we have distributed the rest of our income, but the Lord asks for *first fruits*. Here's a yardstick which I think is very helpful. Let God's

people be reminded that the Lord asks for His gifts from the top of our income, not from the bottom. You'll search the Bible from front cover to back cover but you'll not find any statement that the Lord asks for gifts which you and I "can afford." He doesn't. The Lord simply asks for gifts that show that we love Him most and that we put Him first, absolutely first in our lives. Finally, the Lord asks for gifts that are *proportionate*—proportionate to that which He has given.

I think that right there we can see how dangerous it is for a congregation to be content to give out mathematical yardsticks. Your congregation, for example, might be tempted to suggest to its members that a gift of \$5 per member per week will enable the congregation to do the work which it has cut out for itself. What's that going to mean to the member who brings her offering from monthly pension income of \$103? Might it suggest that she's doing less than her fair share? It would be downright unfair to her to suggest a weekly gift of \$5. On the other hand, what will that "\$5 a week" yardstick mean to a member who earns, say, \$175 every week? Do we really wish to suggest to that fellow that he might very well keep \$170 for himself? "Give the Lord a five dollar bill and He'll be satisfied, and the rest is yours, to do with what you want"? Why that's downright misleading! By using the scriptural yardsticks for giving, we avoid the pitfalls which accompany the use of the mathematical kind.

The first goal of the congregation's Committee for Stewardship is to provide necessary information to the members. In its contacts with the members, the Committee will do well to choose its terminology carefully. To refer to our offerings to the Lord as "dues to the church" is surely not helping a person, is it? "Church dues" smacks of assessment, and I think the term is misleading. Even talking about "church contributions" isn't exactly wholesome. Those are not gifts *to the church*. Of course, the church does receive the gift, and records it, and then invests it according to the program the congregation has adopted. But these are gifts *to the Lord*. These are gifts that tell *Him* something—either something that fills Him with loving joy, or something that fills Him with loving pity. Another term the Committee for Stewardship might well avoid in its contacts with the members is the term "collection." I don't like that word, and I hope you don't either. Where is the initiative behind a "collection"? The initiative lies with the collector, doesn't it? The gifts we're talking about here are offerings which come from the Christian's heart to the heart of his Lord.

How often haven't we heard: "If everybody does a little, we'll get the job done"? Every thinking Christian will know that that's horrible logic to direct at God's priests. Do "a little"? Apply that to your role as husbands, "It won't take much to be a good husband; just do a little, and you'll have a happy marriage"? To be sure, it doesn't take much to become a husband. The right two words will do it. But it'll cost you a whole lot to be a good husband. Frankly, it'll cost you all your married life to be a good husband. The Committee for Stewardship does the members of its congregation a disservice when it says: "If everybody will do a little, if you give what you can afford, we'll get the job done." That kind of talk demeans the Lord's work and His claim on His people, and I'm sure it's an irritant to the Lord.

II.

The program of giving out information is the first job of the Committee for Stewardship. It's a slow job, as is all education. But there can be no shortcuts. There are shortcuts, but they're not good ones. We all know that there's a shortcut, for example, to getting my lawn cut. I could have said to my children this morning: "When I get back home, that lawn had better be mowed, and if it isn't, there's going to be trouble." I suspect that the lawn would be mowed when I got home, but their motivation for mowing it wouldn't have been all that great.

There are shortcuts in a congregation's information and education program, too. But there are no good shortcuts. There are no magic words that will get the job done. There are no gimmicks that can help people recognize that they have been called by God, that congregations have been joined into a body by God. There is no such thing as instant stewardship. You don't just add water and serve. If there is anything that we can learn from this, it's this that information alone is not enough. We dare not confuse knowing with doing. In the State Prison at Waupun there are lots of people who knew that it was wrong to write those checks when they had no

bank balance. In Jesus' parable, the priest and the Levite knew that it was wrong to pass by the fellow lying there half dead in a pool of his own blood. They knew that, but somehow they were not moved to do that which they knew they should have done. And here's another big goal of the congregation's Committee for Stewardship: to teach God-pleasing motivation.

How do you move people to do what you know (and what they know) they should be doing? We'd all like the answer to this one. We can all think of plenty of examples of poor motivation, of sub-Christian motivation. There's, for example, the appeal to *our old sinful nature*, that heathen inside of us which the Bible calls "the old man." If I say to a member of the congregation: "Look, every good guy gives!" his sinful pride may wish to respond. Then there's the appeal to a person's sense of duty. How often hasn't it been said (usually in May or early June): "Look, our church's bills go on during the summer when you're out enjoying yourself. And besides, you assumed a certain responsibility when you assumed membership in this congregation. Well, then, get with it." Appeal to duty. I submit that that is basically sub-Christian. There's the appeal to pride. "Our congregation usually doesn't miss its mission goal. It's got a reputation to uphold among the other congregations. Let's not let our congregation down!" Here we're seeking support for an organization which isn't even going to be in existence the day after Judgment. There's an appeal to reason. "Most of us never had it so good. You're making four times as much money as your father or grandfather did. How can you be satisfied with the contributions that grandpa used to give?" There is an appeal to reason, which can easily backfire in lean times. There is an appeal to a sense of shame. At the end of the year we could lash out: "You have failed. You made our congregation look bad." This is motivation of a sort, but I submit very poor motivation.

What is God-pleasing motivation? I can only suggest a few thoughts that I hope will be helpful. Urge people to *find their place in life as children living under God*. You see, Christianity promises to make man free, but it never promises to make him independent. All of us, I'm sure, have memorized the explanation to the Second Article of Luther's Catechism, where it's pointed out that Jesus purchased us with His blood. And why? "That I should be His own and *live under Him* in His kingdom." Satan's temptation back in the garden of Eden was: "Listen to me, and you'll be like God." Do you see the temptation? "Don't be satisfied to be a flunky. You deserve a higher, greater dignity than that." It's for a congregation's Committee for Stewardship to remind people: "God never designed you to be His rivals. He designed you to be His *children*, living under Him. And if I rebel against that and say, 'Lord, can't I make up my own mind? Am I not a big boy now, able to make my own decisions?' we're rebelling not only against the congregation, but against the Lord. And rebellion does not make for happiness." If a fish was designed by God to live in water, a fish will not be very happy on your living room carpet. You and I want to be our own man. I guess the phrase today is: Do your own thing. But we won't find happiness doing our own thing. God has called us to live under Him, and it is a serious thing to say no to Him.

We would do well to examine our appeals in this light—our financial appeals too, which we as Committees for Stewardship address to our congregations. How does the appeal begin? "Your congregation is asking you..."? How does the letter begin? "Dear member of Trinity, or St. Paul," or whatever? Remember that the important relationship is not that of a person to his congregation. Members of your congregation are not primarily supporters of an organization. They are to be addressed as children who live under a heavenly Father and who are not only loved by Him, but who are loyal to Him.

Another part of a Committee on Stewardship's motivational process is to *urge people to trust their Lord's word*. The first word that our Lord has to speak to us is an unpleasant one. It's one, frankly, that's kind of hard on the nerves. That's the message of God's law. I think we know that a physician has to hurt a person before he can help that person. When we look at the crawling pace of many of our Christians and especially of our Christian congregations, we see evidence that somebody is not facing up to his sin. When we see congregations that are consistently bogged down, we recognize that somebody is not facing up to his sin. And the root cause there is that we want to go our own sweet way. We want to write our own ticket for once. And this calls for a call to repentance.

Why? Because the congregation doesn't have enough money? Because we're umpteen thousand dollars down in our operating account? That's the cause??? No, that's just the symptom. If you've got little yellow

flowers shooting up through your front lawn about now, as I do, you can get to the symptom in a hurry. Just cut the yellow flowers off with a power mower. But would you have solved the problem? No; all you'd be doing is to get rid of the symptoms, the yellow flag which announces: There's a dandelion down there! The problem is not the yellow flower. The problem's the root down underneath. Similarly, let the Committee for Stewardship not hesitate to bring God's Law to bear on a bad situation, to issue the call to repentance. Is there evidence of covetousness in our lives? Have we come to look upon life as a glorified grab-bag? Is our giving joyous first-fruit giving, or selfish leftover giving? Have we convinced ourselves that the only way our family can make ends meet is by robbing the Lord of an honorable share of our income?

Now what? Here is the crucial step. Where do we go from here? Is our message: "You've got to try harder"? "You must do better"? "Your congregation is asking you..."? Let's give, give, give...? Let the Christians on the Committee for Stewardship urge their fellow Christians in the congregation to *take God at His word*. Ethel Waters put it this way: "Jesus don't sponsor no flop." Now that's not exactly eloquent English, but what do you want: good English or good theology? Jesus don't sponsor no flops. He has not called you to make a botch of your Christian profession. He has not called your congregation to be a fiasco, either. He is absolutely committed to granting His blessing when your congregation does His work His way. Take Him at His word! Take His promise at full face value. Pres. Boldt said it before I did, and the Lord said it before he did: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." Put the Lord first in your thinking. "...and all these other things ("What shall we eat? drink? be clothed?") will be added unto you." In Jesus Christ God took drastic action to change our lives. Trust Him every step of the way, and He'll give us the strength we need to be what He has called us to be.

We're in the Easter season now. We know that Christ's resurrection broke Satan's power. You're not slaves to Satan any more and neither am I. God asks us to believe this. He asks us to accept this Lord not only as the Savior of our souls, but as the Lord of our lives. He promises: "Christian, you put me first and I promise you will lack nothing that you need for body and soul." St. Paul put it this way: "My God shall supply all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus." "God, who has begun the good work in you, will complete it at the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Committee for Stewardship can well address a message like this: Take God at His word. Look what you've got going for you. Look at the resources on which you can draw as you live your life for the Lord. What if I doubt my Lord's promises? What if I say: "Yes, but if I bring Him liberal gifts off the top of my income, He might let my children suffer?" What's the problem? That I don't have enough money? The money is there; the problem is that my faith is too small. My love for God and for people is too small. Well then, let's call the sin by its name, you see? Let's not say: We just can't afford it. That's a lie. What we ought to be saying is: "God build me up. Help me to take you at your word."

In the months ahead, individual Christians and congregations will be making subscriptions for the Lord's larger work. Analyze your subscription. Does this subscription represent your whole trust in the Lord—in the Lord's power and His mercy to you? Is the gift what you really want to give? Does this offering reflect a stronger faith than last week's (or last year's) offering? Does it reflect larger love for people than my offering did last week? These are questions which are spiritual.

All right let's summarize. Wrong motivation is of several kinds. It may be *need-centered*; emphasizing the financial needs of the church. Some congregations offer their membership little more by way of motivation than: "Your congregation needs such and so much to continue." Much better is *person-centered* motivation: "The Lord has called you to bring Him gifts in such and such a way." Poor motivation is *budget-centered*. Much higher motivation urges Christians to bring *thoughtful offerings to the Savior*. Poor motivation makes an *institutional appeal*—appealing to you as members of a congregation on behalf of the congregation. A much higher level of motivation shows a *genuine concern for people* for their own sake. God asks us to love people not for what we can get out of them, but for what God has made them—His sons and daughters, His royal priests, His representatives in whatever slice of life He happens to have placed them. Poor motivation has *short-range* goals; your congregation's in the red and you must help it out. Much higher motivation has *long-range* goals. You're not raising money; you're raising people. Ask yourself—What would be the most wonderful thing that could happen to our congregation this week? Would it be that someone dropped a hundred

thousand dollars in our lap so we could pay off our mortgage? Would that be the most wonderful thing that could happen to your congregation?

I hope that the congregational officers present this morning will take the text which Pres. Boldt used in our devotion to the next meeting of their Committee for Stewardship and ask: "If God would come to us as He came to Solomon asking: Ask what I shall give thee, what would our congregation's Committee for Stewardship answer to the Lord?"