

The Pre-Budget Subscription System - Its Goals and Methods

The Church of Jesus Christ is not a collection agency; it's a teaching agency. As a Lutheran Synod, our goal is not to raise enough money to operate the Synod and cover expenses for a year or two. Our goal is to use the Means in such a way that Christians will be built up in their faith and life. Paul expressed his joy over the gift the Philippian Christians had sent him "not because I desire a gift, but I desire fruit that may abound to your account." (Phil 4,17).

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I. GOALS OF THE PBSS

A. help individual Christians of the Synod understand and appreciate their role as God's priests.

1 Peter 2,9 Peter tells all Christians: "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood..." The clergy doesn't have an essentially different status from that of the layman. Stress of the PBSS, consequently, is not institutional, but personal. ("Nobody worships for you, prays for you, communes for you, tells you how loud to sing, determines -- or even suggests - what gifts to bring your Lord").

In the first few years of experience with the PBSS, some unlovely comparisons have been made about how much better the Synod fared financially under the quota system. But remember: it's possible to raise more money within a congregation without changing giving habits and attitudes on the part of a single church member. Our goal is changed people, not bigger budgets. Four years ago the Synod resolved to adopt the PBSS as our method of gathering and receiving offerings, because it was convinced the PBSS lent itself better than the quota system to being a tool in the Lord's hand to change people's giving habits -- for life.

B. help congregations of the Synod view themselves not as supporters of the Synod, but as spiritual communities in which God is working out His plan for reaching all men with His love.

congregations must be helped to combat their self-centeredness, selfishness, congregations must be helped to look upon themselves not as receptacles, but as channels through which God's mercy flows to others. But it's no help to the Christians making up a congregation if each year the budget is pared to meet "starvation" requirements.

C. help the Synod determine what its collective response is to be to the calls of God.

Synod convention can plan much more intelligently; avoidance of peaks and valleys in congregational remittances. Synod is helped to see not only what it has been in years past, but also what under God it might be.

How does one achieve these goals? I'm sure we all agree they're commendable ones, but if we can't attain them, then even discussing them is pointless. Various stewardship methods have been tried and are now being practiced in our congregations. Many of them surely need closer scrutiny. Much of our stewardship heritage of the past is of doubtful value when it comes to building Christians. It seems that in the area of stewardship methods, as in so many other areas, the pendulum swings. Our German ancestors, brought up under a state church system of taxation, transplanted that idea to America. It naturally led to the assessment system, "church dues". "The quota" was next. Now it seems we're in the "program" stage (congregations adopt a budget or program, and push hard to reach that). Some congregations present highly emotional appeals at time of crisis. But why should it take a financial crisis to bring into action a concerted effort to do what the church should've been doing all along?

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1963
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II. METHODS OF THE PBSS

- A. to present information about the work being done through the Synod, including the open doors God is placing before us.

warning: don't let informational material become motivational! Information has value, but it's only incidental - never motivational. Avoid the clever switch which identifies the two! (Example: Just yesterday I saw a sheet of instructions prepared by one of our congregations for the visitors who were going to make home visits to solicit special offerings for a building program. Visitors were told: "Some of your prospects may not be enthusiastic about the building program, but they'll be inspired when they hear you present the need for the new facilities.") It's no help to your people to present all the budget needs of Synod or congregation, listing them in great detail, and then say, "Now may we all strive, in love and gratitude, to accomplish all these!" There's a wide gap, in all of our Christian life, between knowing and doing. Don't confuse propaganda and promotion with stewardship.

- B. to present motivation from God's Word which will enable the Christian to respond.

Dangerous symptom visible everywhere: the church is suffering financial shortages when income, spending, and savings are higher than ever before. The problem is, however, not basically financial, but theological. Weakly sanctified lives and crawling pace of many Christians and congregations are evidence that somebody is not facing the sins that plague us, and is not battling them.

And it's no real help to such a congregation or to such a Christian to use motivations which may have been hallowed by long years of use, but which when examined in the clear light of God's Word are shown to be sub-Christian. I submit the following as examples of sub-Christian motivation (which not only will not help an individual Christian, but which will likely hinder and mislead him in this important area of Christian life:

1. appeal to the old man: "Every good guy gives!"
2. appeal to sense of duty: Read Article 39 of the congregation's Constitution which says: "You assumed responsibility when you accepted membership in this congregation."
3. appeal to pride: "St. George's Church hasn't missed its mission goal in many years, but it will this year unless you bring more generous gifts in December."
4. appeal based on reason: "We Americans ought to give generously, because we never had it so good." (could backfire in lean years; this appeal directs attention away from spiritual truths).
5. appeal to fear: "This is our last chance; once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." Too many Christians give generously only when they are moved by some high-pressure, emotional need to meet an emergency. Some congregations, it seems, experience only a succession of financial crises.
6. appeal to sense of shame: "You have failed!"
7. appeal to powers which since the Fall do not lie in man's heart: "Jesus died for you, and now He looks for you to produce the fruits of faith and love." Scripture is quite silent about that motivation!

How can Christian people be helped to bridge the gap between knowing what God's will for their lives is and leading such lives? Proper Scriptural motivation dare not ignore or sidestep the following:

1. point out the conflict that hinders us from being God's kind of Christian (old man - new man conflict); we were slaves to sin; even under the most

favorable conditions, Satan is still powerful and active. Luther: "our worst enemy beats within our breasts."

2. point to God's action in Christ. God is not content to watch the struggle as a box-seat holder at an athletic event. He's in our struggle. Somehow we are going to have to help Christians to learn to recognize:
- a) the plan God has for him (not necessarily the Synod's plan for him that year)
 - b) God's judgment on his progress or failure in meeting that plan
 - c) God's grace in Christ by which he is enabled to fulfill the plan

In Christ God took drastic steps to change the course of our lives. The Law reveals our sin (selfishness, idolatry), but the Gospel is God's way of breaking it down. And this does not mean that we simply tell people: "You are a sinner, but don't worry; God will forgive and forget your lapses in the calling." When God sent His Son to Bethlehem, to Calvary, into and out of a grave, He was not only writing stories for Bible history books. He was planting power in people. Through Christ God's plan for us is restored; we are enabled to be what God has called us to be.

3. stress God's promise, accepted in faith
 man's word reaches the ear only; God's Word reaches the heart. God deals with us not on the basis of challenge, but on the basis of promise. Predominant mood in God's speaking to His children is not the imperative, but the indicative. ("Sin shall not have dominion over you ...ye are under grace." "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.") The primary declaration of Christianity is not "This do!" but "This happened!"

Our stewardship efforts, therefore, dare never stay on the level of exhortations ("Let us do this...Let us stop this...Let us give, give, give... The church is asking you...") Don't stress the congregation's ability to reach its goal. (Look at the trouble Peter got into when he started figuring out whether he could walk on water). Invite every Christian to seek first the kingdom of God, and all these other things ("What shall we eat...drink...be clothed?") will be added by God. The Lord won't permit Himself to be outgiven. It's impossible for any Christian to "give himself poor".

Paul's motivation: "The love of Christ constraineth us" -- and that is not our love for Christ; that's Christ's love active in us, energizing us for the work He has called us to do.

4. practical implementation

- a. urge congregation to think in terms of maximums, not minimums (When God is your partner, make your plans large).
- b. if yardsticks are offered, make sure they're Scriptural ones! (regular, proportionate, sacrificial, first-fruit giving)
- c. Concentrate not on congregation's (or individual's) ability, but on God's promise. Help congregation to ask not "Can we afford to raise our subscription, when we missed it last year?" but rather: "Does this subscription represent our full trust in the Lord's power to produce more fruit than last year?" "Does this subscription represent stronger faith, deeper understanding of God's plan for us, larger love for God and for people?"

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 September 22, 1965