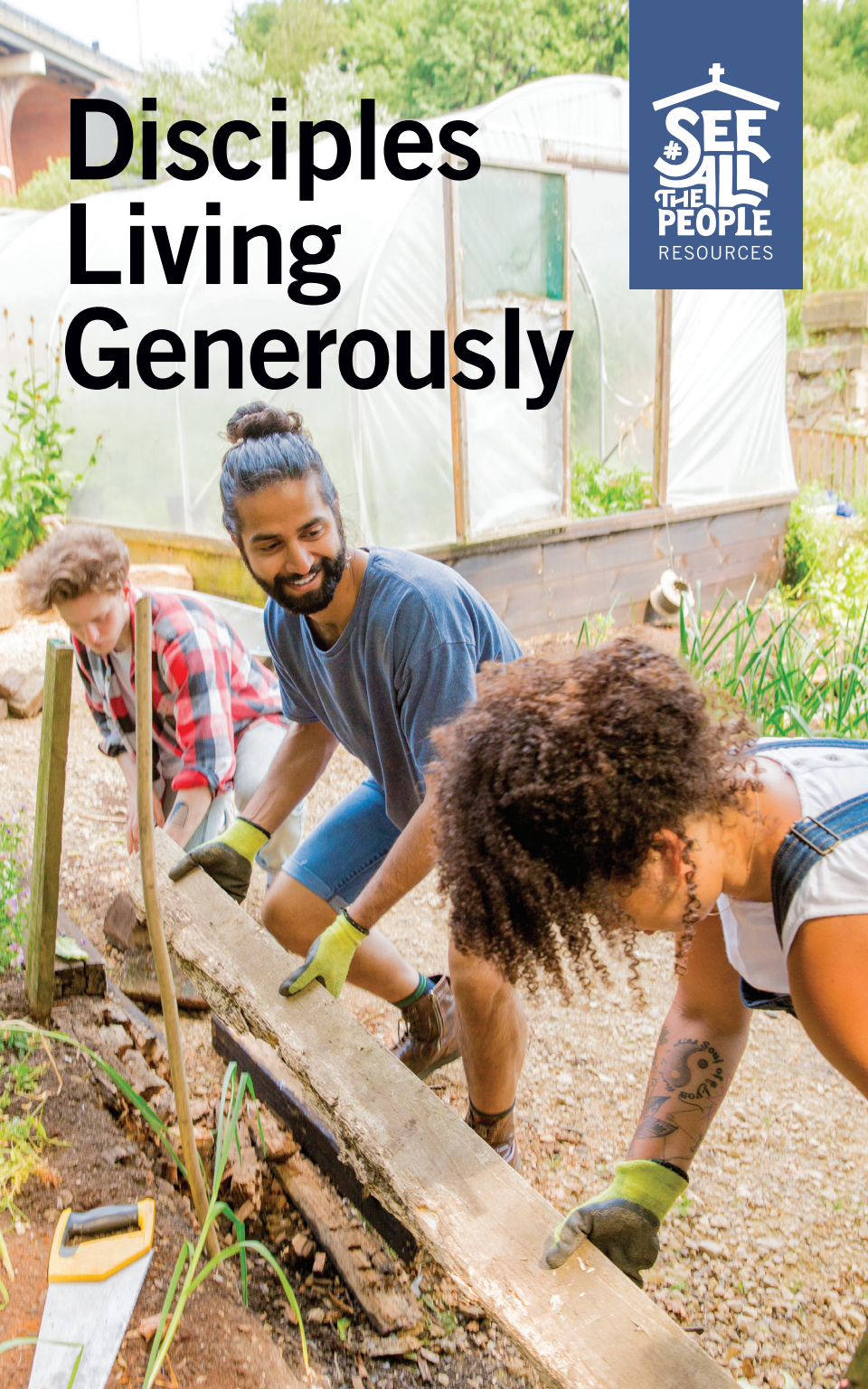


Disciples Living Generously



#SEE^{ALL}THE PEOPLE

“We cannot disciple people that we are not in relationship with. Discipleship begins with relationship.”

Rev. Junius Dotson

General Secretary, Discipleship Ministries

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This booklet is a companion piece to:

Developing an Intentional Discipleship System: A Guide for Congregations

by Rev. Junius B. Dotson

Introduction

What is the secret to creating a culture of generosity in the local church? Why does stewardship seem so easy for some congregations, but so difficult for others? Why isn't there a kit that people can buy or a box to open that will make it all better?

When I hear people talk about creating a culture of generosity in the church, my first response is, "We have a culture of generosity in The United Methodist Church – we are full of very generous people – but we have not been very good about inviting others to join in that culture." I base that opinion after looking at cumulative giving in The United Methodist Church. Even in the present decade, when membership has been on a steady decline, giving levels have been pretty consistent. The generous culture is there, but how are we welcoming others to be a part of it?

If there is a kit or a box people can open to make generosity magically happen, I haven't found it yet. Maybe that is a good thing. As disciples of Jesus Christ, growing generosity should be second nature to us, part of our DNA. Jesus, in his teaching and presence, set us on a path that if we follow and pick up the cross of discipleship, means we are to live generously in all aspects of our lives. So how could we ever say we are about the business of making disciples and not be prepared to lead people to live generous lives?

Foundations

I worshiped for a period of time in a church that had signs posted everywhere – on entrance doors, exit doors, doors that opened into the fellowship hall, and even doors on the men's and women's rooms. Those signs read, "It's all about relationships." That wasn't the church's mission statement, but it was a core value. An individual could not be in that church facility for more than a minute without realizing that value. The signs referred to people's relationship with God, with Jesus Christ, with other people in the church family, with their neighbors and community, and with the global community. This church lived it out; they were all about relationships.

Stewardship is about relationships. Stewardship is not about what the finance committee does in August or September in preparation for the pledge campaign in November. It is not about the little box in the Sunday bulletin that tells people how much less last Sunday's offering was from what was needed to make the budget.

While creating revenue for the church is essential, it is not the foundational purpose of stewardship. Don't misunderstand this: raising money for the operation of the church is important, and the money people give or don't give will either empower or cripple ministry that the church must be about and that the world desperately needs. However, stewardship is about relationships: with God, with the church, and with our money and possessions.

Because the word "stewardship" is so strongly identified throughout the church with the fall fundraising event, many of us have started using the word "generosity" as a way to embrace a focus that is not so limited.

To view this from a biblical perspective, the dominant theme in the Hebrew Scriptures is the understanding of the covenant that God established with our Hebrew ancestors: "You shall be my people and I will be your God" (Jeremiah 30:22, NRSV). More than an agreement or a contract, the covenant defines a relationship. We can't understand or teach stewardship until we understand the blessings and obligations that undergird this covenantal relationship. For the Hebrew people, their part of the covenant was to keep the law as given by God through Moses. As the New Testament unfolds, we are freed from what Paul called the "bondage of the law," but we are not without our side of the covenant. Our responsibility is still rooted in relationship: acceptance of the good news of redemption offered through a relationship with Jesus, who accepted the cross for us.

So how does our teaching about stewardship connect and call people into relationships?

1. Stewardship is understanding our relationship with God, who, in love, has sought to enter into covenant with us.

2. Stewardship is understanding our relationship with Jesus Christ, the embodiment of that love, who called us to a discipleship role whose scope would extend “to the ends of the earth.”
3. Stewardship is understanding our relationship to the church, Christ’s body in the world, and the mission to which it has been called.
4. Stewardship is understanding our relationship to money and possessions (time and talent also, which we often exchange for money and possessions), and this understanding can hinder or enhance our growth in discipleship.

A Matter of Trust

Dr. Carol Johnston, associate professor of theology and culture at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, has done extensive research on generosity in a variety of congregational settings and interviewed church members across a wide range of income levels. She observed that, regardless of economic status, when asked about money, people consistently expressed anxiety about whether they “had enough” to feel secure. They were unable to see that money couldn’t guarantee security in this life. Johnston’s reflections on the interviews are powerful:

“From a Christian perspective, security comes from healthy relationships – with family, community, and ultimately with God. But we live in a society in which relationships of all kinds have been unraveling for decades ... In order for people to change the way they think about and use money, the focus needs to shift from money as the measure of wealth and security to the only true security there is: placing your life in God’s hands and learning to build healthy relationships in this life – healthy families, healthy communities, and a healthier world.”¹

¹ Carol Johnston, “Thinking Theologically About Wealth, Including Money.” P.5, <http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/research-article/thinking-theologically-about-wealth-including-money>

Jesus talks more about money and possessions in the gospels than he does about any other subject: heaven, salvation, or evangelism. What we miss sometimes is the most obvious: Jesus doesn't talk about money and the church; Jesus talks about money and *me*; He talks about *my* possessions, what *I* own and what owns *me*; he talks about how what I have helps or hinders my walk with God. Jesus talks about how I invest my money and resources, and what that says about where I put my trust and what it says about where I think I will find happiness, security, and contentment.

Focus on the Giver

Way too often, we begin the stewardship conversation with what the church needs: more money, more tithers, a new roof on the Sunday school wing, and so on. All of these may be real needs, but if the conversation remains locked on the church's needs, people will feel so hounded for money that they will literally walk by on the other side of the street to avoid us.

How different might stewardship in your local church be if you put the focus on the giver; on his relationships; or on her ability to be in a trusting relationship with God, instead of on the church's need to pay the bills?

What Is Enough?

In 2007, Adam Hamilton and the staff of the Church of the Resurrection United Methodist Church in Leawood, Kansas, were preparing for their annual stewardship campaign. In the midst of their planning, they came to a shared realization that Adam describes this way:

One thing became painfully obvious. There were many people in our congregation who were struggling financially. They were struggling, not because they were not making enough money. They were struggling because they were living beyond their means and were saving nothing.²

² Adam Hamilton, *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity – Stewardship Program Guide* (Abingdon Press, 2009. p. 7

Adam and his team realized that the traditional stewardship campaign was not what was needed. Instead, he and his team needed “to help people *redefine their relationship* with money and begin to think carefully and biblically about where we find real joy and what our lives are really about.” The result was a sermon series called “Simplicity, Generosity and Joy,” which became the basis for the book and video study, *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity* (Abingdon Press, 2009I revised 2018).

Ultimately, in 2008 (the year following the preaching series), the members of Resurrection gave more than they ever had before, but for Adam and the church staff that was not the real payoff:

As exciting as that was, the emphasis was not about increasing our budget. It was about helping people to experience the life God wanted them to live and to have the kind of relationship with their money that God wanted them to have. And as they did, they simplified their lives and found greater joy.³

What a great lesson! When we move the focus of our efforts from preserving and supporting the institution (the focus of so much of our efforts at stewardship in the church) to the making of genuine, joyful, generous disciples, our work is fruitful; and the church is blessed!

This is why I go to great lengths to make a distinction between conducting a successful pledge campaign and growing generous disciples of Jesus Christ.

In too many cases, a pledge campaign focuses almost exclusively on the needs of the church, or specifically, the budget for the coming year. Often, this time of the year is referred to in an apologetic tone, as an “uncomfortable process” we have to go through for four weeks each year, so we can “put it behind us.”

Even if this were no more than a simple fundraising effort (the United Way or the PBS Pledge Break), the pledge campaign would be a questionable tactic. Jesus Christ taught us so clearly and emphatically

³ Hamilton, p.8

the importance of people being rightly related to God in regard to money and possessions. For disciples of Jesus Christ, anything less than a comprehensive, year-round focus on growing in generosity is less than worthy of our calling.

Five Key Elements

Churches that have been successful in shifting the stewardship focus have found that nurturing their members to become generous givers has made the process less “seasonal” and more an ever-present value. Their attendees rarely perceive the congregation as one that is “only interested in money,” and they are not embarrassed to talk about money and possessions because they understand those conversations are part of being true to the gospel.

Here are five characteristics that are often found in congregations that are leading people to be generous givers:

1. **Self-Examination:** These congregations offer guided self-examination of personal values and practices around money and priorities to help people find joy and abundant life.
2. **First Fruits Teaching:** Leaders offer unapologetic “first fruits” teaching in regard to joyful giving as an expression of gratitude to God and not an obligation or duty.
3. **Personal Witness & Storytelling:** Leaders offer opportunities for people to give personal testimonies about the joy found through generous giving.
4. **Clear Vision for Mission:** Budgets go beyond numbers and state clearly how lives will be changed because of the gifts of time, talent, and treasure offered by members.
5. **High Expectation of Members and Leaders:** These congregations hold membership as something of value that requires buy-in, and leaders are willing to articulate that without embarrassment.

No one model, program, or package has a monopoly on the right formula for every church setting. As a congregation looks to embrace a model for shaping vital, generous disciples (or to create its own model), it may use these five elements to build a comprehensive strategy:

1. Self-Examination

The challenging, unpredictable economic times in which we live have provided fertile ground for self-examination. Not only are many people struggling to find ways to navigate through the uncertainty, but also most of us are ready to acknowledge that many of the current crises find their roots in internal struggles.

We are part of a culture that has, in many ways, lost its vision of the difference between wants and needs. We have tasted the sweetness of immediate gratification, and that has become the staple that people want on the table all the time. People are not accustomed to saving for something when they can charge it and enjoy it immediately.

The quote has been attributed to different persons, but often to financial guru Dave Ramsey: “We buy things we don’t even need with money, we don’t even have, to impress people we don’t even know.” Whoever said it originally, there is a wisdom there that convicts some of us.

Brad Hewitt, former CEO of Thrivent Financial (Lutheran counterpart to our UMC Wespath) co-authored a wonderful book titled, *Your New Money Mindset: Create a Healthy Relationship with Money*. Hewitt and writing partner James Moline, a licensed psychologist, dig deep into the idea that the relationship we have with money (money mindset) plays a much bigger role in the quality of our physical, emotional, and spiritual well being than the bottom line on our bank statement or the balance in our pension account. They write:

Countless books and other resources will give you the nuts and bolts of making smarter financial decisions...[but] before you can remake your habits, you need to remake your heart. You have probably tried to “do better with money” through

*brute force...but a better relationship with money begins with the heart. Altering how you think and feel is the only realistic way to bring about a lasting difference in how you act.*⁴

The people in our pews are ready to acknowledge that there are spiritual issues along with financial ones in the present crisis. Many are willing to admit that the ways people have sought contentment and fulfillment, joy and purpose do not resemble the abundant life Christ promised his followers.

In the example of Church of the Resurrection, which I mentioned previously, Pastor Adam Hamilton admitted that, normally at his church, a stewardship campaign would mean an attendance drop by about fifteen percent. As he preached his series on “Simplicity, Generosity and Joy,” his attendance swelled. “It had clearly struck a chord with the people,” he said.⁵

Isn't it the goal of every church, of every pastor, of every disciple to help people find the joy and contentment of the abundant life that Christ has promised? Not abundance defined by things, but by purpose and meaning? And if the church won't help people find this abundant life, who will?

ACTION ITEM: Your church can offer a class on basic money management, using one of the great resources available (two suggestions, *Enough* and *Freed Up Financial Living*, are listed in the Resources section at the end of this booklet). Make sure the leader of your group is not just knowledgeable about finance, but understands the spiritual impact and is a generous giver. If a study group focusing on money values is a better fit for your congregation, try *Your Money Mindset*, *Defying Gravity*, or *A Year Without a Purchase* (noted on the resource list as well).

⁴ Brad Hewitt & James Moline, *Your New Money Mindset* (Tyndale House, 2015), p. 19

⁵ Hamilton, p. 7.

2. First Fruits Teaching

Too often, I have heard a pastor or financial leader say, “Well, if everyone just tithed, the church would have plenty of money.” The phrase is problematic on a number of levels. First, it puts the focus on the church’s need rather than on the giver’s need to experience the joy of generosity. (We will discuss this in more depth later.) Second, it implies that there is a scarcity of resources available to do God’s work that would magically disappear if everyone tithed. Third, it leads people to the conclusion there is some kind of cap on what God expects us to do in ministries of nurture, outreach, and witness.

Practically, it implies both obligation and duty – terms often associated with enforcing tithing. In previous generations, words like *duty*, *obligation*, and *commitment* were motivators for giving. For the boomer generation and generations after them, these words are rapidly losing effectiveness as motivators.

A few years back, Kennon Callahan, author of *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, spoke to a group of leaders about giving in the church. He commented, “People are less and less motivated by words like duty, commitment, and obligation; and they increasingly are motivated by words like hope, compassion and community.” In that simple sentence, he succinctly captured the generational shift in what moves people to give generously.

Michael Reeves, minister of financial discipleship at University United Methodist Church in San Antonio, Texas, has written several excellent books on stewardship and generosity. He recently shared an essay on “The Attributes of a Biblically Generous Church.” He writes:

*It will be surprising to some that tithing is not one of the attributes considered. While tithing is generally stated as the goal or standard of giving by many churches and denominations, tithing is seldom confused with generosity. Tithing has been the exception and not the rule since the time of the early church.*⁶

⁶ Michael Reeves, “Attributes of a Biblically Generous Church,” paragraph 6, <http://christianstewardshipnetwork.com/?s=Attribute+of+a+Biblically+Generous>

Many churches continue to teach the biblical standard of tithing, but emphasize even more the concept that is found in the Bible side-by-side with tithing: giving to God the “first fruits” of our labors. This focus has helped many contemporary families move to more generous living, by bringing the giving of time, talent, and treasure to God to the top of the list.

Thanks to digital technology, I have an easy time illustrating this concept to church leaders during my workshops. Like many, my workplace offers the convenience of direct deposit of paychecks. In listing our account information, we have a tithe account that is a separate account from the account that takes care of household expenses. How easy it is to be sure that what we give to God is the first fruits, not what is left over after other expenses are paid! Contributing to the tithe account first (and giving electronically to the church on every payday) reminds us of God’s place and the order of the blessings in our lives.

Please don’t hear any of this as discouraging tithing as model for giving or a benchmark as some refer to it. If you have a congregation where everyone tithes, my feelings won’t be hurt if you skip right to the next section. I am convinced that our role as leaders in the church is to help people find joy in giving. I can remember my father getting up in church one Sunday (he was perpetually on the finance committee) and saying, “We’re not asking you to give until it hurts; we want you to go past that and give until it feels good.” I think that phrase can be a great guide for giving. If your giving is not providing you joy, you probably should do some examination: the odds are that it is not because you are giving too much.

There is a wonderful book written by Jeff Anderson and published by the folks at GenerousChurch with the catchy name *Plastic Donuts*. The image captured in the title was from an epiphany the author had one day with his eighteen-month-old daughter. She found a plastic donut from her kitchen play set and proudly brought it to her daddy. He took it and quickly realized she was waiting for a response. He held the donut to his mouth and said, “yummm...yummm... thank you, Autumn, this is so good!” He describes her reaction:

*Her big brown eyes widened, and her lips pushed a giant smile against her puffy cheeks. She stood up on her heels, shrugged her shoulders up to her ears, and let out a high-pitched squeal!*⁷

This doesn't seem like a landmark interaction, especially to those parents and grandparents who have spent time with an eighteen-month-old. In it, though, Anderson came to this intriguing conclusion:

*At that moment it occurred to me, this is how our giving must feel from God's perspective. Our gifts to him are like plastic donuts. God does not need our gifts or our money, but like a father moved by a gift from his child, our gifts can really get his attention.*⁸

My deep belief is God wants us to find joy in our tithing, in any giving, given in gratitude and love and not out of obligation, guilt, or coercion. Those gifts given in joy are the ones that truly please God.

ACTION ITEM: Use a preaching/teaching opportunity to start dialogue around the priority decisions we make all the time. Use questions like:

- If fire were moving toward your home and you had just a few minutes to fill just one box, what would you take?
- Imagine looking into that box: "What does this say about what is important in my life?"
- Imagine looking at a list of what you have spent money on in the past six months: "What does this say about what is important in my life?"

⁷ Jeff Anderson, *Plastic Donuts: A Fresh Perspective on Gifts* (Acceptable Gift Inc., 2012), p. 11

⁸ Anderson, p. 12

3. Personal Witness & Storytelling

When Bishop Robert Schnase was crafting his book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, he chose to describe the practice of extravagant generosity in the context of the personal witness of Matt and Kerri, two young people raised in the church who had been asked to give their testimony at their church's Consecration Sunday celebration. This couple had grown into extravagantly generous disciples of Jesus Christ through the nurture of the saints of their church. Schnase did not choose the testimony of bishops, or the treatises of theologians, but the personal witness of two Christian parents who managed to make the way from fearful, restrained giving to a bold offering of themselves and their resources.

Kerri would describe how, for she and Matt, tithing had broken the sense of panic, worry, desperation, and fear that had driven many of their financial decisions in the past. The knowledge that they could give away 10% of their income relieved their feeling of being trapped, paralyzed, or hopeless about their financial situation. By giving more, they worried less.⁹

There are so many fine, inspiring sermons out there about stewardship and generosity, but can any of them be as powerful for this congregation as hearing from fellow travelers on the journey? In years past, these testimonies might have been shared around the kitchen table of our parents and grandparents; and in some places, they still are. How crucial is it, though, that where those kinds of conversations are not taking place, we abandon classrooms and pulpits to re-create as best as we can those kitchen tables, so this conversation, this personal witness can happen?

Finding leaders in your congregation who have found their way to the joy of generous giving is a wonderful goal; finding people who are able and willing to articulate that transition through their personal testimony is a double blessing. Some people will have the gift to do this publicly, sharing testimony with the whole congregation at once.

⁹ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 106

There will be others, though, who will not be able to do that, but will be able to share their witness in a more personal, intimate way.

One of the most powerful examples of this in my ministry was at the first church I served as pastor in New Jersey. A young couple who had been coming to that church suddenly made a large jump in their weekly giving. When the husband, Gary, had to go to the hospital to have gall bladder surgery, we spent an afternoon at the hospital visiting. He shared with me about the growing relationship he and his wife had with Charley and Lillian, a much older, retired couple in the congregation. I knew they sat near each other on Sunday, but Gary told me that as their relationship grew, Charley and Lillian had shared with them how their tithing had shaped their lives. They explained that they realized all their blessings were a result of their relationship with God in Jesus Christ. When Gary left his job with a plumbing contractor to start his own business, he and his wife decided that they wanted the blessings that tithing would bring to them.

My ministry at that church was blessed by something that had happened about which I was totally unaware. From then on, I made it a point to provide opportunities for the faithful and generous in my congregations to share their personal witness, in public and in private ways. There is no more powerful tool.

Stories have power to move people toward generous giving. Many of us have experienced congregations whose leaders have relied exclusively on numbers to motivate people to give; and too often, those numbers have been “bad news numbers” – deficits, shortfalls, and doom and gloom projections. Numbers play an important part in being a financially sound and transparent church. Numbers can reveal the church’s need for money; stories can paint a picture of the joy and the impact that generous giving can produce. Stories are the currency of growing generosity.

I was leading some workshops in Wisconsin, traveling with a friend of mine who was on the annual conference staff. He told a story of a young man he knew who had grown up in a tough neighborhood in Milwaukee that was served by a conference-supported center that had an ongoing outreach with children and youth. That center had been life-changing for this young man. With the center’s help, he had

graduated from high school, attended college, graduated from college with a degree, and secured a well-paying job. When my friend ran into this young man, he learned that he was still living in the neighborhood in a tiny apartment. His transportation was a bicycle; and because his apartment had been broken into multiple times, he carried his worldly possessions – his phone, headphones, and laptop – in his backpack, which was with him at all times. My friend finally asked him why he hadn't improved his living arrangements since he had such a good job. The young man replied, "Well, I've been helping put two of the other kids from the neighborhood through college." Like my friend had been, I was blown away by that answer, by the impact the neighborhood center had made, and by the impact church members had made by supporting the center through their apportionments. I wanted to write a check myself. That's the power of story.

ACTION ITEM: Set aside time in worship once or twice a month for people to share personal testimony. Don't direct the testimony to be about giving or money, but suggest more general topics, such as, "When I felt closest to God..." or "My hero in the faith." Some will touch on their giving, and you will identify those who might be approached in the future to witness to their giving. If your church has the capability, videotape these testimonies. You can control the length. You may get more than one testimony out of a single recording, but you will also build up an archive – saints of the church sharing a powerful testimony, even after they have joined the "church triumphant"!

4. Clear Vision for Mission

Churches that are known for the generosity of their people are consistently ones that have a clear sense of their mission in their community and the world; that mission is not just known by a few leaders, but throughout the church family.

Leaders of the Willow Creek Church in Barrington, Illinois, would challenge people who came to their leadership conferences to ask anyone they met at the church – from the staff to the parking lot traffic guys to the volunteers who emptied the trash cans at the end of the Sunday School hour – "What is the mission of this church?"

The leaders were completely confident they would hear the correct answer, and they were rarely disappointed.

How about your congregation? Is the mission of your local church well known by your people? More important, is it more than just words on the bulletin? Is it something on which your church focuses its energy and passion? Do you fulfill it well enough that people can see it being lived out and would be willing to give generously to support that mission?

Clif Christopher, in his book, *Not Your Parent's Offering Plate: A New Vision for Financial Stewardship* (Abingdon Press, 2008), tells the story of a young lawyer he met who had donated a large amount of money to a youth center in his community. Christopher visited him to learn more about his generosity.

I can still see him leaning forward excitedly in his chair. He began to share the story of a young, inner city boy from a broken home with seemingly no hope, who had gotten involved in the center and how it had completely turned his life around. Now that boy was on his way to college with wonderful plans to return to his neighborhood and make a difference. By the time the attorney finished he was just beaming with excitement. He said, 'I asked the director what could be done to create more stories like this, and he quickly told me he needed a new center and one would cost 1.5 million dollars. I thought to myself, "I have 1.5 million dollars and that would be a great way to use it. If he can change lives, I can fund it."

Then I shifted gears with him a bit and asked him about his church involvement. He told me he was very active in his local church, attending about 48 Sundays a year. I asked him if he gave to the church and his answer was revealing. 'I give as good as most,' he replied. Then I asked him if he would ever consider giving a gift like he gave to the center, to his church. He stared right at me and said, 'Lord, no, they wouldn't know what to do with it.'"¹⁰

¹⁰ Clif Christopher, *Not Your Parents' Offering Plate* (Abingdon Press, 2008), p. xiii

Between 2006 and 2015, the number of nonprofit organizations grew by twenty percent, along with the rapidly growing opportunities for people to give online and to create their own charitable cause or project with the invitation for others to join through financial support. The church no longer owns the field when it comes to charitable giving. The reality is that people give where they see a clear mission that is carried out by capable, empowered leadership and that is bearing tangible fruit.

ACTION ITEM: Set aside a Saturday for church leaders to gather to work on your church's mission statement. If you already have a statement, ask these three key questions:

- Is it relevant to who we are and who we strive to be?
- Is it clear and concise so that everyone in the church could be expected to know it and be able to repeat it?
- Would it satisfy Jesus, since it is not our church but his?

Start by showing the video by author Clif Christopher of Horizons Stewardship.

5. High Expectation of Members

In August 2010, political comedian/TV Host Jon Stewart commented on the fact that Chelsea Clinton's wedding was co-officiated by a rabbi and a United Methodist pastor. *"Being a Methodist is easy," Stewart said on his show. "It's like the University of Phoenix of religions: you just send them 50 bucks and click 'I agree' and you are saved."*¹¹

Some United Methodists didn't see the humor in the remark, but many saw it as an opportunity for introspection, on how much we do ask from people who want to join a local congregation of The United Methodist Church. In response to the Stewart joke, *United Methodist Reporter* Managing Editor Robin Russell made these observations:

¹¹ "Wedding of the Decade of the Century of the Millennium," *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/mjj09s/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-wedding-of-the-decade-of-the-century-of-the-millennium>

Persons who take membership vows promise to ‘uphold this congregation of the United Methodist Church by [their] prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.’ All too often, however, there are few expectations beyond serving on a committee, showing up on Sunday and making a financial pledge—and certainly no follow-through or consequences.

Yet churches that ask something of their members tend to have a more engaged and active laity who feel empowered for the work of the ministry. Young people, in particular, are eager to invest their lives in something bigger than themselves.¹²

In a presentation I heard not too long ago, the speaker made the statement, “High-expectation churches are growing; low expectation churches are dying.” At the time, it seemed like a broad generality and oversimplification. The more I reflect on those words and our pursuit of what we call “vital congregations,” I believe we can prove at least half of the statement to be true: vital, generous congregations seem to have higher expectations of their members and are willing to articulate those expectations.

Visit any of the largest, most vital United Methodist churches in the U.S., and you will find that they did not get there by offering people an easy, “come when you want, give what you want” invitation to church membership. They want members who will give themselves fully to make disciples and transform the world.

ACTION ITEM: If your congregation has been one (like so many) that has not placed high expectations on membership, make changes with great care. One way is to introduce this idea in regard to leadership: having your church council set expectation levels for those in leadership and serving ministries first will make it easier to redefine the expectations for membership. Look at the membership vows that all United Methodists affirm when they join, and ask what it might look like if we actually held members accountable to those

¹² Robin, Russell, “Too Bland for Our Own Good?” Originally appeared in *UM Reporter*, reprinted in *Good News* (January 19, 2011), <https://goodnewsmag.org/2011/01/too-bland-for-our-own-good>.

statements. Remember that you can keep the doors open wide for participation in congregational life, even while raising the bar on what is expected from those who become members.

Conclusion

Every congregation has enormous potential for generosity. It begins with a focus on disciple making, not fundraising, and the giver's need to give must be central. Generosity is found where congregations teach “first fruits” giving, encourage the sharing of personal testimony and storytelling, and articulate a clear vision that they expect members to embrace and live out in the world.

There is no kit or box – a Leaders Guide, DVD, or workbooks --that will magically make generosity happen. It can happen when congregations become intentional about disciple making, and that happens by being in relationship with people. Our work is not about the church's need for money, but people's need to give and experience the joy of generosity.

Discussion Questions & Practical Helps

1. On a Sunday morning, invite the members of your congregation to respond anonymously to the following questions:
 - Is the way you are handling your money right now making you feel secure?
 - Is the amount of money you have at your disposal enough?
 - What is the amount of debt you presently have (estimate) in terms of equivalent number of weeks of household income?
 - Do you believe that you could live on less, reduce your debt, be more generous while being more content with your life and more secure in your future?

2. Use the anonymous responses as a resource for a sermon series, or to launch a small-group study on managing money in a way that would please Jesus.
3. Read and discuss some of the passages on tithing and giving found in the Bible.
 - Which is the bigger challenge: giving God the right amount or giving to God first?
 - Does giving to God first make us fear that there “won’t be enough”? Where does that fear come from?
4. Start a conversation with Sunday school classes and groups of all ages about giving – not just giving to God or the church, but about giving in the broader sense. Invite people to talk about things like:
 - What is the most memorable gift you’ve ever given; tell why it’s so memorable and how it made you feel?
 - Share a time when giving something meant making a sacrifice.
 - Describe the most generous gift you have ever given, received, or witnessed.

Resources

- Anderson, Jeff. *Plastic Donuts: A Fresh Perspective on Giving* (The Acceptable Gift, 2012).
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