

In September 1979, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church unanimously adopted the following statement on Stewardship. Previous Conventions had expressed the need to strengthen mission. But this statement is the first to proclaim that stewardship itself is the prime order of business for the whole Church. I quote:

"Our vocation to be stewards is at the very heart of the biblical revelation which acknowledges God as the gracious giver of all things. One task of the Church, then, is to become as fully as it can actually be what God has already made us to be, namely givers like himself. This is one of the most profound truths about ourselves. It is not something that we could have learned by sitting down and figuring it out. The truth itself is a gift of God.

It is the faith of the people of God that God has made us, the world and all that is in it. The world and our very lives are gifts of God. This faith calls us, then, to be stewards of ourselves, of our brothers and our sisters [our friends as well as our families], of all that we have received, and of the world itself.

That we are accountable for our use of the gifts of God is no grim truth at all. It is, rather, a great joy; for to be held accountable is to be treated as being of great worth. We are, then, stewards of the worth which God has conferred upon us. The stewardship of our lives and of our deaths embraces the joy we find in our own worth.

We are stewards of the mysteries of God as we are stewards of the Gospel of God. We are the brothers and the sisters of all God's children. The hungry, the naked, the prisoner, the dispossessed, the tormented, the thirsty: all have been placed within our stewardship. Being stewards requires us to find the strategy and a means for giving ourselves to the needs of all of our brothers and sisters. To do the work of evangelists it is not enough to proclaim God and his gifts. Stewards give gifts. They give their resources. That means that the steward gives his or her life. To give one's life is to give one's time, one's hours and days; it is to give one's capacities of whatever human strength he or she may possess; and it is to give one's money. One cannot be a steward if one does not also give whatever it may be by which a person measures wealth."

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The theology of Christian stewardship finds its roots in the Old Testament. We are told in Genesis that God created all things and that he saw that his creation was good. God created humankind, both male and female, and that he set them over creation to care for it, to be trustees or stewards, if you will, over that which belonged to someone else, namely God. In other words, what we have, our very lives, do not belong to us, but to God, and at that time when we see God face to face, we will be accountable for what kind of stewards we have been, not only over the created order, but over our lives as

well. Throughout the Old Testament the witness of God's chosen people was that God was in charge and yet, was also intimately involved with his people. "He's got the whole world in his hands" accurately proclaims this Old Testament truth.

Yet, the New Testament also witnesses to this same truth when it proclaims the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ---God made man--"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" as John's Gospel tells us. God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ so that we might become like him through the power of the Holy Spirit...to be enabled and empowered to become what God has created us to be. God continues to be involved with his people. He came himself to teach us that we are precious in his eyes and that he loves us--loves us enough that he sent his Son to die so that we might be free, not to do what we want to do, but to be what God has created us to be.

Now, you might say, what does all of this have to do with stewardship? The theology of stewardship goes beyond what we give to the church on a Sunday morning, though that certainly is part of stewardship. Stewardship involves all aspects of our lives, our money, our talents, and our time...our very lives. What we have is a gift from God, given at creation, given through Jesus the Christ, given through the Church in word and sacrament. Stewardship is also a corporate response, nurturing and caring for each other in time of need and in time of joy. In short, Christian stewardship is our response to the action of God in our lives.

Our response to God's participation in our lives is most particularly articulated in the baptismal covenant wherein we were made members of the Body of Christ, (Book of Common Prayer, page 293-4) and the various aspects of Christian Stewardship can be summed up by reviewing this covenant.

1. Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

We are called to worship. Worship is coming together--in the breaking of bread and in prayers, in the reading of Scripture, in the sermon and the hymns, seeking to know God, our creator, Jesus, our Redeemer and the Holy Spirit, our sanctifier. Worship is coming together--lonely and dispirited, sick and sinful, weary of the concerns of our lives--so as to repent and receive forgiveness and renewal. Worship is coming together striving to renew our faith, to get a clearer grasp of God's plan for us, of the direction we are to follow, of the way we are to serve others. It is in worship that we become responsible Christians and honest stewards of God's way.

We are also called to learn--learn about the Scriptures, the history and tradition of our church, the life of Jesus. In order to proclaim the teachings of the apostles, we have to know what those teachings are and how that Gospel applies to the vital issues of our day. We are called to be stewards of the tradition handed down to us.

2. Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Evangelism is a difficult word for Episcopalians. When we hear that word, we immediately think of Oral Roberts and other TV evangelists who peddle the gospel with glitter and showmanship, or being button-holed in the street corner with "Are you saved?", or the door-to-door witness of the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses? Yes, that is evangelism, whether we like it or not--perhaps not the way we would do it; we would like it to be in decency and order. Yet, even Episcopalians are asked to share the Christian faith with others. We have been commissioned by our Lord to go into all the nations and share the good news through word and example. Evangelism is part of that baptismal covenant. Stewardship and evangelism go together. We are called to be stewards of the faith by sharing it with others.

3. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Jesus said that the two greatest commandments are to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. The cross in front of the church reminds us that Jesus served us and loved us by his death on that cross. We are called to love not just ourselves; we are to love others. And not just others in the congregation, within the family of the church, but also those outside the walls of the church, near and far. A vital part of Christian stewardship is to send God's love into all the world. This can be done through the United Thank Offering and the Presiding Bishop's Fund for World Relief. We can take part in Diocesan outreach programs and give toward the mission work of the church at large. Service is ministering to the pressing mission needs around us, in the church, the community and in the world. Michael Ramsey, 100th Archbishop of Canterbury, said one time that the church that lives to itself will die by itself.

4. Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Pastoral care and service go hand in hand. To serve the people in our congregation and community means that we will be involved in their lives. We will come in contact with those who are in hospitals and nursing homes, who are shut-in and unable to be a viable part of the community, the elderly who find no purpose to their lives, the teenager who struggles with the critical issues of life, the dispossessed, the troubled--needs of all sorts. We are called to minister to the needs as we find them. That does not require special training (it may require knowledge of community resources); it requires a loving and generous heart. Pastoral care is not reserved solely for the clergy. It is the responsibility of all Christians and is truly the work of the church. It is bringing the love of Christ into lives that are in need of that good news.

Worship, Education, Evangelism, Service, Pastoral Care--all are part of Stewardship. When the church is involved in all of these areas, the church is, in fact, being church--the living body of Christ in a world that is broken and hurting. We, the church, are to be the arms and legs, eyes and ears, heart and mind of Christ--stewards of God's promises, if you will--to a world that needs to hear the message.

A WORD ABOUT GIVING

The stewardship of our money is a topic that every church deals with sometime during the year, generally at budget time. And the question is raised, "How much should I give?" At root, that is a question that you and your family must answer. Only you know your needs and circumstances.

However there is a rule of thumb that might guide you to the amount you should give to the church. That is the tithe. The tithe (10% of your family income) is, at base, proportional giving. Proportional giving does not settle for the leftovers after all your other spending. Proportional giving asks you first to set aside a percentage of your anticipated annual income for God and his Church. It asks, further, a pledge large enough to let your congregation--and the Episcopal Church of which you are a member--begin to realize its potential as a spiritual light in this world.

Very few of us can jump to a tithe immediately. For most of us, it is wiser to increase our annual pledge by at least a full percent each year until that tithe is realized. One way of determining your pledge is to calculate what percentage of your income you are giving now, .05%, 1%, 5%, etc., and then increase that pledge by one percentage point the next year, and so on.

If this congregation is active in the Lord's ministry--Worship, Service, Evangelism, Education, and Pastoral Care--then it is important to support that ministry with your money, so that the ministry can continue. If the church is not active in that ministry, then there are a couple of choices that you can follow. One is to leave your pledge as it is. The other is to become involved in the ministry of the church so as to guarantee its effectiveness in the community, then increase your pledge to support it. I would hope that each and every one of will choose the latter. Ministry and giving is a corporate event...we need each other...and the world around us needs all of us working together, with our time, our various talents, and our money, to the glory of God.