

# STEWARDSHIP

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By Margaret J. Marcuson

Stewardship season, for most pastors, is not our favorite time of year. “How can we get these people to support the ministry?” “How can we get them to understand the mission?” “Why don’t more people tithe?” “Will we be able to support the budget?” “Will I get a raise this year?”

Money is a high-stress issue in most congregations. Who gives how much is often secret, even from the pastor. Preaching about money is not easy, and as pastors we can feel frustrated that more people don’t “get it.” Congregations struggle to meet their budget, let alone increase their ministry. When pastor and people are both anxious, it’s hard to make real progress in this area. And our society as a whole is highly focused on money and success. The larger arena is fraught with anxiety, just as the congregation is.

But pastoral leaders can step away from trying to convince others to think correctly and act correctly, and begin to state clearly our own position and beliefs about this critically important issue. When we do this, we can find our stress reduced and our message more effective. We can use our own self-definition to challenge others. We spend a lot of effort telling people how they “ought” to think and behave about money. Yet it is always more effective to say “I”—“I believe,” “I choose,” rather than “you”—“You ought,” “you should,” “you need to.” People resist being told what to do,

and they are drawn toward leaders who are clearly self-defined.

## **Know Your Own Money Story**

As a pastor, I often found stewardship time challenging. I can remember early in my ministry thinking I could hardly wait for the stewardship campaign to be over so I could get back to “real ministry.” But I eventually learned that stewardship was, of course, real ministry.

I had some growth to do myself. As I learned more about my own family story, I discovered some of the multigenerational factors that were driving my anxiety about money, and about stewardship in particular. My grandmother, my father’s mother, had felt cheated out of an inheritance as a young woman, and bitterly resented that until she died. Depression-era financial struggles only intensified her feeling of deprivation. My father was raised by her, and he raised me—so I inherited the sense of scarcity that was part of our family story. My grandfather on the other side was a pastor himself who raised five children on a small salary, also through the Depression years.

As I explored these stories and got curious about them, asking my parents and other family members questions about the family and money, I found my anxiety about stewardship and about money in general lessening. I could talk more bravely about it in preaching. I could ask for a more adequate salary. For

each of us as pastoral leaders, our family history with money impacts how we lead in this important area of ministry. It is worth taking some time to examine our own story.

### **Money Problems as Symptoms**

In addition, I also began to view money challenges as symptoms. Problems with money in church are rarely “about” money, but almost always reflect anxiety in the congregation. With this perspective, I automatically became less anxious myself, and could ride out the natural ups and downs. So when I was getting ready for a sabbatical, I asked myself how the anxiety about my leaving might show up in the congregation. My immediate answer was: money. That fall as we were planning for my upcoming summer sabbatical, pledges were down for the first time in many years. But I stayed calm, the other leaders stayed calm—and giving during my summer leave was *stronger* than previous summers, and the year as a whole was fine. When congregational anxiety gets focused on money, we can find it useful to ask questions such as, “Why now?” and, “What else is going on the congregation?”

Understanding the congregation’s history with money, as well as our own story, plays an important role in staying calm and flexible around stewardship. Rev. Paul Thomas, pastor of the Evangelical Congregational Church in Westborough, Massachusetts, discovered this when the church had a major anniversary. He learned about the first settled pastor, Rev. Ebenezer Parkman, pastor for 58 years, with a huge ministry. Rev. Parkman struggled with his church

leaders through those years to make sure his pay and his allotment of firewood was provided. He even had to ask for money on his deathbed. In Parkman’s diary of 1781 he wrote, “I am going blind and it is sore times for me as my people have paid me no penny for fifteen months.”

Thomas realized that the current struggles around money in the congregation were part of a much longer story. Thomas suggests, “I have tried to get light and playful about the financial stresses and strains, and remind them about Ebenezer Parkman’s story and the systemic issues around money.” His strategic use of the Parkman story helps defuse some of the anxious focus on money in this church’s history.

Thomas says that he “asks the church board, and the church as a whole, directly, regularly and unflinchingly to support the ministry of the church.” When we can recognize those historical forces at work, calm down, and simply challenge people to support the ministry of the church, people are better able to hear and respond. Thomas adds, “I try very hard not to take it all too personally.”

### **Salary on the Line**

One of the difficulties when challenging people to give can be that our own salary is part of the picture. But even when our salary is at issue, the less we take it personally the better. There are always larger forces at work in the congregation.

The Rev. Nancy Cox, rector of St. Mark’s Episcopal Chapel in Storrs, Connecticut, says about the salary question, “My stipend is the biggest item in the budget. If I let

people, they will make it about Nancy Cox, so I don't. This is the rector's stipend, and this parish has decided to have a full time rector. So, whoever is in this position, this is how the position has to be funded."

Cox adds, "This is not my parish to save, it's Jesus', and that work has already been done. Churches organize themselves in many different ways, with buildings, and without, with paid staff, and without." She keeps asking, "What is this parish's prayerful vision for itself, and what do they need to make that happen?"

### **Leading in Stewardship**

Stewardship leadership involves recognizing the powerful forces that are at work in our society and in our churches, as well as in us. Yet we and those we lead need not be at the mercy of those forces. As we gain a clearer vision for the ministry of stewardship in our congregations, we can challenge ourselves and others to growth and greater freedom. Our relationship with money, like all high-anxiety issues, can be a lifetime of work, but as pastoral leaders we are called to make this journey and to call others to join us.

### **5 Tips for Dealing with Money in the Congregation:**

- 1. Learn as much as you can about your own family history with money (over as many generations as you can). This will help you manage your anxiety about money in the congregation.**
- 2. Share the responsibility for money challenges with the leadership. It is their church. When you feel anxious, ask yourself, "Whose anxiety is this, really?"**
- 3. Lighten up! Cultivate your sense of humor in this critical area. People get very serious about money, especially when it is tight, and this inhibits their ability to creatively solve problems.**
- 4. Define your own views on stewardship to the congregation. This will be much more effective than trying to willfully convince people to give more.**
- 5. Keep looking for the emotional processes at work within the church. Money is a convenient focus, but problems with money are always symptomatic of other issues.**

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