

A Case for Rethinking Stewardship

Randall E. Davey, President, accruWealth

Bonnie and I attended Sunday services today during which we were reminded of the obvious. The country is in a severe recession. Apologetically, the pastor referenced the worship folder where the facts were crystal clear. The church is operating short of budget. He asked those who could to do more but assured those who couldn't do anything that he understood. I'm not sure I did or do.

Though stewardship is a word generally relegated to the vocabulary of the church, its' roots are far more pedestrian. A few centuries ago, a land baron would hire a *steward* to manage his staff, his money and his resources. I suppose today, we may think of a steward as the CEO or COO of a privately held company and come close to the genesis of the term. Back to Sunday services.

The church I attend is like most which have multiple staff members. The majority of the annual money raised supports staff with salary, benefits and expenses as well they should, but when viewed through a stewardship matrix, I'm not sure we merit high marks as stewards. Let's take a closer look.

Recessions force us to do what we should have done in boom times. We scrutinize budgets, cut excess spending and eliminate redundant staff. The assumption is that the only solution is to cut expenses instead of raising that which is needed. I think that may be a quick and unwarranted assumption but let's press on.

Stewardship doesn't begin with finances and may not end with finances though they are certainly included in the conversation. Stewardship is a broad brush and begins with the one to whom we owe our very lives. Consider this.

God gifts the church with pastor-teachers-evangelists, and the church is charged with stewarding them. Now square that with the rising numbers of pastors and evangelists who are dropping out of ministry. Some are burnt out. Some are depressed. Others fail morally, and others are ousted for failure to meet expectations. Why? I would venture to say, pastors fail when churches' expectations don't square with a pastor's gifts.

Let me be quick to say, this isn't about blaming anyone. It happens more by default, and perhaps pastors have contributed heavily to the problem. Pastors are called to be, well, pastors. Not chief executive officers. Not chief operational officers. Not fund raisers or builders. They are called to craft biblically sound, theological contextualized worship services during which they preach and teach, celebrate the sacraments and shape the congregation's perceptions of the trinity. It takes prayer, meditation, study and reflection to do just that. Can you quantify that in hours? Can you stuff those criteria into a management by objective code? Not really.

And beyond the pulpit, the pastor is to shepherd the flock. That includes some aspects of counseling, grief work, pre-marital and post-divorce conversations not to mention evangelism, discipleship and being an emissary to the community, ecumenical groups and denominational responsibilities and none of this is to come at the expense of 'equipping the saints to do the work of ministry.'

Can all of that be done? Is it a doable job? Obviously it is or God wouldn't have called pastor-teachers to do it. But if he has called and empowered, why are so many failing? Could it be that we have unwittingly

and indefensibly tacked on multiple responsibilities for which pastors are ill-equipped and those that God can't possibly bless, all of which trumps the pastor from doing his or her core work?

All of this invites a question around stewardship. How does the board steward the pastor? How do they protect this God-called servant to ensure he or she has the time and energy to do the work of ministry?

Though I'm not an athlete, I love to watch quarterbacks play. I know this much. There are other players on the team whose job it is to protect the quarterback. Every time a defensive player breaks through the line and sacks the QB, you know that someone didn't do his job. Watch the QB and you'll generally figure out who it was.

Who sacks the pastor, and more importantly, whose job was it to hold the line? Unfortunately, most pastors of churches 2,000 and less don't have anyone in place to protect the pastor. So, having preached his heart out, the pastor may get tackled within minutes of the benediction by a parishioner who is upset about the color the children's wing is being painted, the pastor's failure to announce the senior adult pot-luck or for not recognizing Bertha Heimlich's 80th birthday.

During my twenty-eight years of pastoral ministry, I so often felt that I couldn't play to my strength because of the myriad expectations that drained me of the time and energy to do that which I truly felt called to do. For years, I was tempted to think that mine was an isolated issue but not so. An inestimable number of pastors confess that their loss of joy has little to do with their preaching ministry, worship leadership or pastoral care. It has everything to do with the impediments to ministry, most of which could be done by a pagan and perhaps done better!

Consider this. If a church board does not effectively steward the pastor, is it possible that lack of funding is symptomatic of more significant issues? I fear that when money is in abundance, no one will raise the question, but perhaps with a little help, a revival of stewardship can begin with a call to steward the pastor.

Let's take a quantum leap. Suppose a church's leadership team embraces the idea of "protecting the pastor." Is the stewardship matter resolved? Hardly. The entire staff begs the question, "How does the church steward the staff?" If the question isn't raised, seminary trained staff pastors often become facility coordinators, errand persons or business managers. If the board is willing to steward the pastor, it follows that they should steward the staff, and collectively, the staff and board are called to steward the leadership of the church as well as the rank and file members of the congregation.

How does all of this play out in "real life?" You've heard the adage that 20% of the people do 80% of the work. So it goes that brother Bob is on the board of trustees, in charge of Upward Basketball, on the capital campaign committee and leads a men's accountability group. Is Bob the only one who can do these things? No, but he's so willing and gifted, it's easy to load him up with responsibilities with little thought of the impact on his vocation and family. Bob may be willing to do all of this but can you imagine the impact if the staff and or board said, "Bob, we can't abuse you and in fact, we won't. You tell us that which you feel most passionate about and that will be your ministry but it does mean that you can't do all of these other things. We believe God can raise up persons to do these various assignments you are doing but perhaps not until you step down and we have a need."

When I shared this notion with a pastor friend, he cried foul and said, "I won't have any help if you tell people it's okay to have one ministry." Really? What about that oft-ignored notion of the universal

priesthood of believers? Doesn't God call all who believe to the work of ministry? If not, why did He charge pastors with equipping them? It's a problem of stewardship. When we overwork some and underwork others, we set laypersons up for the same abuse from which pastors generally suffer. No one intends, but the practice is widespread and the consequences are predictable.

Pastors do the work of ministry and leaders not only let them, they sometimes reward them for it. The leaders in turn take on that which belongs to the laity and the laity doesn't object but morph into non-participating casual attendees who may or may not support the ministry financially. Not surprisingly, hosts of persons new to faith give little or nothing of time, ability or money and the workload for pastor and staff escalates unreasonably and the circular problem comes home. Since our pastors are exhausted, we simply have to hire someone to oversee the nursery, the facility, the grounds, visitation, programming and more, and that inflates the budget. Careful. I think we are on thin ice to dole out a good dose of Malachi 3:10 and call on the folks to fund the vision if the vision is neither Biblical nor necessary.

There is a stewardship issue but not the one that first comes to mind. It's a fine mess into which we've gotten ourselves. It's a mess God can't bless any more than God can bless a hot fudge Sundae to the good of my body!

Perhaps the time is ripe for **Rethinking Stewardship: Good News for Pastor and People**. Our message is not one of *planting seeds* and manipulating God into a lottery source but it is one of celebrating abundance and not scarcity. As always, to get from where we are to where we need to be, someone needs to be the voice crying in the wilderness:

- 1) **Steward your pastor and staff.** Protect them to equip the saints to do the work of ministry.
- 2) **Steward church boards and leadership types.** Call them to balance and focus. Give them permission to step down from multiple committees and projects that render them ministerially impotent.
- 3) **Steward the congregation.** Call all believers to find their ministries and equip them to serve. Not all gifts are as central as the preaching gifts, but all gifts are vital for a healthy Christian community.
- 4) **Steward financial resources.** This isn't a matter of sharpening the pencil. It is a matter of thinking differently about money and staying out of environments where the treasury can be depleted by the S&P, robbing the coffers of money that should, in the least go to those who have insufficient food to eat and clothes to wear. Gift donors with knowledge on ways to navigate through difficult financial times. If you do, saints know what to do with the excess.

Are there enough resources for the church to thrive in recessionary cycles? Absolutely! Will the church moving forward look like it did in times of financial abundance? Hopefully not.

CONCLUSION

Oh for a *voice* that could be heard around the world, calling the faithful to re-think Stewardship. It is more than a money matter but it does make dollars and sense. Now is the time for leaders to give donors ways to see through the present financial crisis and it is not by following Wall Street. Without question, the church has every resource necessary to do that to which we have been called. Where there appears to be scarcity, look more closely. There is a stewardship problem of our own making.