StewardCAST
A monthly e-newsletter of LCMS Stewardship Ministry
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Thinking Stewardship Out Loud

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When a pastor leads an adult Bible class, he will often encourage people to “think out loud.” This is not an encouragement to dominate the class with mindless rambling. It is something far more important. In an adult learning setting, the person who “thinks out loud” is very likely giving voice to questions that are on the minds of the other participants who are unwilling to be the first ones to ask. When another person asks a question and an answer is given, it opens the door to other questions. Once the questions start flowing, then other participants become brave enough to put forward their questions. With questions come answers. With answers comes learning. But without the “out loud thinking,” this process doesn’t start. These brave folks are crucial to getting the conversation, and meaningful learning, started.

The same thing could be said for some of the recent inquiries that have been coming in to the Office of National Mission–Stewardship Office. Every month the office fields one or more emails that most often contain very good questions. Many of those questions deal with the mechanics of stewardship. These questions often are programmatic. These queries are posed in the search for good materials, good guest speakers and presenters, and the other nuts and bolts that go with leading stewardship in a local congregation. This means that the answers may be more tailored to the specific local parish concern that is being addressed. These are great questions that ONM–Stewardship loves to handle.

However, every once in a while, the Stewardship Office gets a serious question, often posed by a pastor or stewardship committee chairperson, that would be in a Bible class setting regarded as one of those

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"thinking out loud" kind of questions. This is the limitation of an email exchange. If left to the repository of the electronic world, those "thinking out loud" stewardship questions, which may well be (or perhaps should be addressed) in a much broader setting, fall silent and are lost. When that happens a great learning opportunity for the Church in the arena of stewardship is also lost.

Recently a layperson who is the chair of a congregational stewardship committee posed one of those "thinking out loud" kind of questions. It was regarding the setting of congregational support for district missions. The question was presented like this:

> *I am working with our Stewardship Board on calculating our Mission Partnership Gift to District for our next budget. No one seems to know how this gift should be calculated. Should it be based on total budget or number of members? If there is a calculation that we should be following please advise me as to what that might be.*

This is a decision that every congregation faces in their annual budget process. As congregations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod we have voluntarily consented to walk together. This walking together is a matter of stewardship. First, it is the stewardship of the Gospel. But it also goes beyond that. It includes the way that we as congregations walk together to do the work of the Lord in settings that the local congregation would find difficult to handle effectively on their own. This walking together puts missionaries in foreign fields and on the streets of our communities, teaches the Word of God through childcare, preschools and schools, and provides Gospel-centered service to our neighbors through food pantries, shelters, and pregnancy resource centers. Even as effective as these ministries are, the harsh reality is that it takes the faithful corporate stewardship of our congregations at the circuit, district and Synod levels to make them happen.

This is the "why" of this great question. But the question deals with the "how." This is where the question posed addresses something key. There are many ways that determining support in Synod is handled very formulaically. The clearest example of this will be a budget issue in all the congregations over the next budget cycle: convention assessment. In this case a formula is applied. You take the number of communicant members and multiply it by the amount that is assessed by the district or Synod. Whatever number appears on the display of the calculator is what gets entered into the line in the budget and on the subsequent check that is written. There are

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other entities that use the method as well. Many association schools at the elementary and high school levels are also funded by this model. This process is very clean and easy. It becomes a mathematical equation followed by a financial transaction.

There is another manner in which this number is determined within the congregations of Synod. Many congregations have adopted a policy at the level of their Church Council, Board of Directors, or even at the congregational level that sets the mission partnership gift as a percentage of what is received in the offerings in a given year. The target for many congregations is ten percent. Other congregations come in at different levels. While this method has all the markings of the tithe, it also has a strange resemblance to the mathematical equation followed by financial transaction method. These similarities can give rise to the question, "Is this the BEST way for a congregation to set its mission partnership gift?"

As easy as the assessment model is, this is not how we as congregations normally determine the manner in which "mission partnership gifts" are determined. The percentage approach gives the appearance that it is correct. Both are troubling. How might this best be handled?

Here is how Stewardship answered the question:

> *This is a challenging question. At the Synod level we don't necessarily have a formula for this number. We do have them for convention assessments, but nothing like this. As a congregation God has called you to model the same kind of corporate stewardship as you would ask of those whom God has called to membership in your congregation. It is really something that the congregation should prayerfully consider in the same way that you would want your members to prayerfully consider their individual commitments to your congregation.*
>
> *That being said, the gift from your congregation should be in proportion to the gifts you receive. It should be made generously. It should also be made joyfully. That decision could lead you to a percentage or it may simply be a flat sum that the congregation sets aside to send in. That is the freedom we have in this to freely and joyfully manage all of life and life's resources for the glory of God and the extension of the Kingdom.*

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH
Missouri Synod

Life Together

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It would be easier if there were a formula. However, a formula would not be in keeping with what the Lord calls for in the realm of faithful stewardship.

What better way can there be for a congregation to teach those in the congregation about individual stewardship than to model that same type prayerful commitment at the congregational level? Formulaic stewardship by the individual does not allow for the growth and transformation that happens in the lives of faithful stewards. In the same way, formulaic stewardship by the congregation misses out on the transformation that comes within the local congregation when it becomes prayerfully committed to the mission work that is carried out under the auspices of our walking together as Synod. When God's people, individually and as a congregation, prayerfully seek ways to be intentionally committed in this partnership within the congregation and within the levels of Synod, amazing things happen! Generosity and possibility become the marks of the mission partnerships in the congregation. People begin to realize and practice that the resources entrusted to either the person or the congregation are not ours. They really do belong to the Lord and are to be used for His purposes.

This "thinking out loud" question is one with which each congregation in Synod needs to wrestle. How can we turn our back on the low hanging fruit of formula and embrace the high calling of faithful and generous stewardship?

Keep those questions coming!

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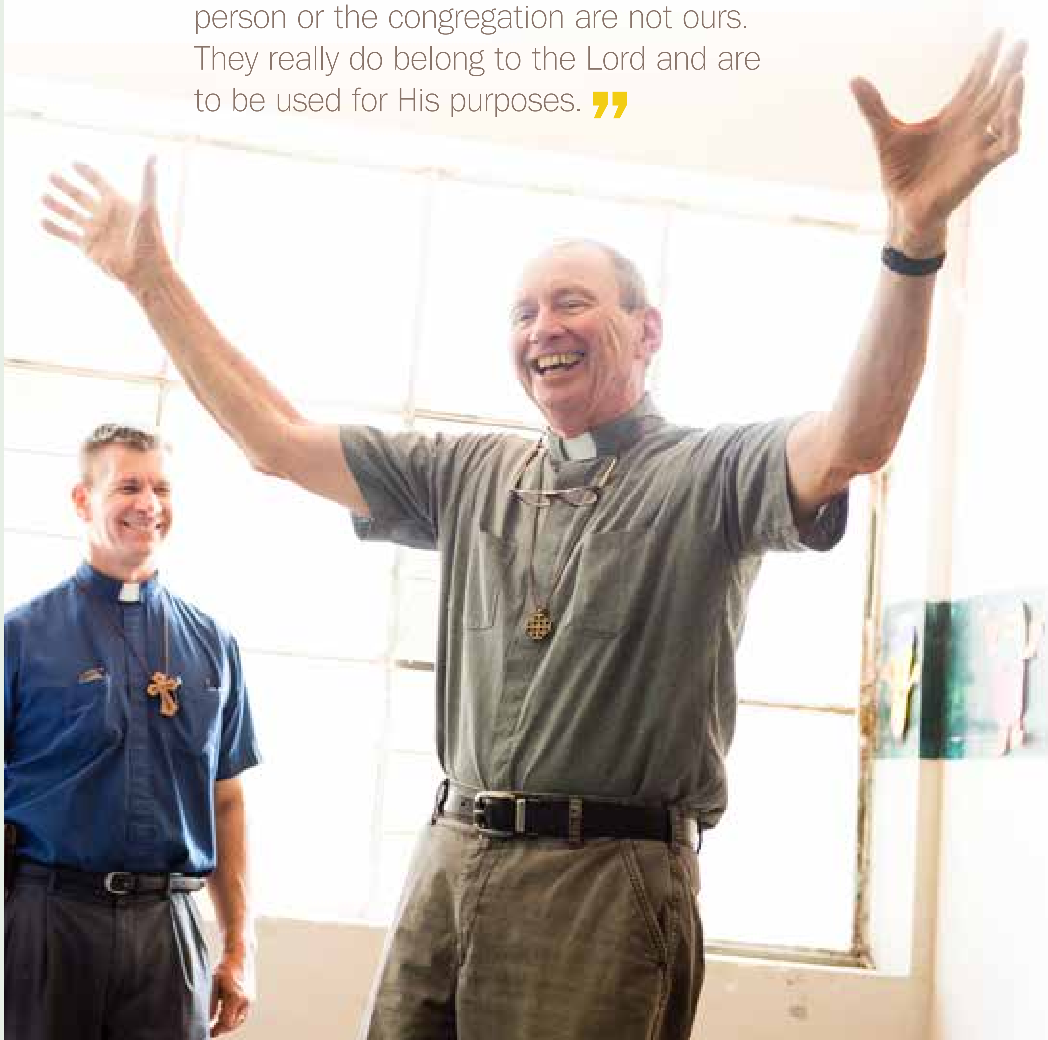

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