

CULTIVATING STEWARDING COMMUNITIES:

LIVING IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

by Paul M. Dietterich

"I have rediscovered the excitement of the Christian faith!"

The young woman who spoke these words was expressing the thrill that comes with new discoveries, new learnings, and a new outlook on life. She and others from her congregation were participating in a stewardship research project guided by the Center for Parish Development.¹ They were immersing themselves in biblical and theological teachings about stewardship. Her exhilaration was a result of this process of study, discovery, and making connections between the gospel, her life, and her congregation.

It is exciting when a congregation begins to "indwell" the Christian faith. Retrieving biblical imagery puts people in touch with the powerful and compelling activity of God in their midst. People become energized, excited, motivated -- alive in new ways. Such a congregation becomes a dynamic and creative community that demonstrates a redemptive and transforming way to be and live within God's world.

The biblical image that excited this young woman was the stewardship image. She was participating in a process intentionally designed to reclaim a holistic theology of

Christian stewardship from the superficial meanings it has too often acquired. While exploring the richness of the stewardship image, she became excited about the possibilities of her faith.

Underlying all of the Center's research and support for stewardship cultivation is the recognition that most clergy and church members, even those most active, are captives to North American culture and are in need of conversion. We are the very culture we seek to change. As the Jesuits declared in their 32nd General Congregation: "We ourselves share the blindness and injustice of our age; we ourselves are in need of evangelization." Dr. Richard Hamm, former General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), made the same point: "The church is now the subject of its own mission."

The process of cultivating Christian stewarding communities therefore must be understood as a process leading to the conversion or evangelization of the church itself.

What does it take to do this?

1. Reclaiming the theology of stewardship

The first challenge is to help people learn a new way to think about stewardship and therefore the Christian life. Because of the trivialization of stewardship and its connection in most people's minds solely with fund-raising, church leaders and members alike become excited when they are put in touch with a biblical theology of Christian stewardship. People begin to recognize that Christian stewardship is about the activity of God who showers us with gifts and invites us into a covenantal responsibility for the benefit of all of creation.

The Greek word for stewardship found in the New Testament is *oikonomia*. *Oikonomia* is also the root word for economics. This word is a compound of *oikos*, household, and *nomos*, law or management.

Stewardship means literally "the law or management of the household."

"Household is connected with the production, distribution, and consumption of the necessities of life. . . . Without household people will not survive, for household is the mediation of what it takes to live."²

God is engaged in creating, reconciling, and sanctifying households. Household in scripture refers to many things: the people of Israel, families, a royal court, a place of God's abode, the whole creation, and in the New Testament the church of Jesus Christ. God is portrayed as responsible for the households of Israel and the church, the

households of the nations, and the household of everything God has brought into being. The *oikonomia tou theou* (economy of God) applies to the life of the Christian community (Col. 1:25; 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 3:2; 1 Tim. 1:4), as well as to God's work of creating salvation for the household of the creation (Eph. 1:9-10; 3:9-10). Due to the wide variety of associated terms and images, when related to the church, household depicts "the radical and comprehensive nature of Christian conversion and cohesion, the commonality of Christian values and goals, and the distinctive character of communal Christian identity."³

God's law or rule for the household is the gospel of Jesus Christ. As those who have a common Lord, a common baptism, and a common faith, the church as household is to live according to God's promises and purposes. Having received God's abundant gifts, it is to manifest God's "steadfast love, justice, and righteousness" (Jer. 9:24), as revealed in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. A stewarding community is a community of overwhelming gratitude and overflowing generosity. Such a community lives according to God's economy -- God's intent and power for life -- rather than according to the materialistic norms of today's secularized North American culture.

Participants in the Center's stewardship cultivation processes welcome the opportunity to explore a theology of stewardship. They expand their imaginations and their theological vocabulary as they discover the power and relevance of the biblical language of faith. They begin to identify

God's gifts to us as described in scripture: the Gifts of Creation (the earth, talent, time, possessions), the Gifts of Redemption (the gospel, the church), the Gifts of Sanctification (ministry, spiritual gifts). They even learn to define stewardship as the faithful, wise, and responsible management by the church as a stewarding community of the multitude of gifts God entrusts to our care.

Faithful stewardship cultivation provides opportunity for clergy and lay people to embrace the idea of the church as a "contrast community," one that is distinct from the culture around it, one that demonstrates an alternative way to be a community. Using the metaphor of the reign or kingdom of God, people begin to envision the church as a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's reign -- the sphere of life where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Within a community formed by the gifts and the fruit of the Holy Spirit, all the norms and expectations are transformed. Discovering that they are "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19), people begin to learn a new way of perceiving, thinking, and behaving.

2. An attitude of abundance, not of scarcity.

Forming a congregation as a Christian stewarding community involves helping people develop an attitude of abundance. The Old and New Testaments assume a world of plenty, where, when God's gracious righteousness reigns, there is more

than enough for everyone. Note the abundance of the Garden of Eden, richly endowed by God. Even after the Fall, God promised a land flowing with milk and honey -- abundance. The biblical view of economics is premised on this abundance: tithing, giving away a tenth of the produce, is possible even in lean years because of faith in the basic abundance of creation. Scarcity is not natural.

To embrace an attitude of abundance is not easy when one lives in a culture that assumes a world of scarcity, viewing material resources as limited, even fixed. This is especially true in times of economic crisis in North America -- and across a world that today is interconnected with the American economy. But even when the global economy is humming along, North American culture teaches that no matter how much we are able to produce, there will never be enough to go around because human beings will always want more. There are no limits on human wanting.

Assuming a world of scarcity does dreadful things to people. People become afraid. They focus on their own survival. They become selfish, competitive, and protective of their own narrowly-defined interests. These practices destroy community. They are not favorable for "household-making." They do not make room at the table for those who do not have enough to survive the day. Assuming a world of scarcity makes the members of the household less accepting, less compassionate, and less joyful.

The biblical traditions pose a radically different assumption: if we seek first the reign of God and God's righteousness (Matt. 6:33), all that we truly need will be provided. There was enough manna in the desert. A few loaves and fish were enough for Jesus to feed the multitudes. There is enough at the Lord's Supper. Scripture describes not just abundance but superabundance. God's righteousness not only gives us enough of everything, but also enriches us for great generosity, and "overflows in many thanksgivings to God" (2 Cor. 9:12).

Learning to be a stewarding community means learning to live inside the household of faith where God is glorified by obedience and generosity. Affirming the whole of life as a gracious gift and sacred trust -- "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps. 24:1) -- Christians assume abundance and exercise the "gift of giving." Empowered by the Spirit, Christian stewarding communities are communities of hospitality giving encouragement, support, companionship, offering their resources.

Filled with mutual giving and receiving, the stewarding community is an early taste of God's coming feast – God's vision for all humanity. Because there are different people and perspectives within the faith community there is generous giving of time to share, listen, learn, and appreciate differences. Because people are becoming "members one of another" (Rom. 12:5) they are giving of themselves to "build up each other" (1 Thess. 5:11), to "love one another with mutual affection" (Rom.

12:10), even to "confess our sins to one another" (James 5:16), "forgive one another" (Col. 3:13), they are "hospitable to one another" (1 Thess. 5:15), in all things they are seeking to "do good to one another" (1 Thess. 5:15), Finally, they are "servants of one another" (Gal. 5:13). In light of this vision of mutual giving and receiving, the sharing of money is a natural and expected practice, a primary part of Christian life rather than a secondary burden or good deed.⁴

3. A called people with a mission, not a vendor of religious goods and services.

Forming a congregation as a stewarding community involves helping it learn to become mission-centered rather than need-centered. Most congregations struggle with this issue because a consumer model has taken such a firm hold in North America. It is part of the air we breathe and the way we think about ourselves and others. A consumer model is a secular cultural model that has become increasingly popular with churches. Many congregations, seeking to gain more members, have turned to the field of marketing without examining critically the presuppositions on which marketing theories and methods are based. If unexamined and unmodified, a marketing orientation will change the rules so that rather than the "household of God," the church will become a mere vendor of religious goods and services. A vendor church caters to the self-defined and unexamined needs and wants of members. Some church leaders have become so acculturated

that they even refer to members as "customers."

Like other institutions in society, vendor churches assume that need is what drives people's lives. In order to "sell" religion, these churches must demonstrate that people "need" it. Every program offered by these church bodies is thus designed to meet some need.

A consumer model assumes a morality of needs.⁵ Because needs are thought to give meaning and order to personal lives, they play a moral function. They become a way of talking about and justifying human actions. The human person is believed to be a bundle of needs. For each bundle, different institutions exist: medicine to meet physical needs, psychology to meet needs for self-esteem, recreation to meet relaxation needs, the church to meet religious needs. If one congregation fails to do this well enough, people are free to "shop" for another.

When churches buy into a need-centered economy, they treat the consumer as god and lose sight of their unique calling to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's reign. When the marketing sciences enter the household of God, all too often God's mission gets displaced.

Furthermore, a consumer model assumes that church leaders and church members are in an exchange relationship with each other. Instead of being part of a community of solidarity and mutuality in which "if one member suffers, all suffer together; if

one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:26), they view themselves as individual consumers seeking to have their private needs met. People therefore participate in the church on their own terms rather than on the terms of the "household of God." Self-interest replaces the common good. Harmony is destroyed. People become isolated. The formation of a stewarding community, a community of gratitude and generosity, is thwarted.

The leaders of all congregations want to be responsive and responsible to their members. They want their churches to be attractive to persons who are not yet members. People are fundamentally spiritual beings and everyone, in one way or another, is on some kind of a spiritual journey. Surely church leaders must be sensitive to where people are on their faith journeys and provide them with the resources to help them grow in faith. But how are they to do this? Vallet and Zech remind us "As long as the church accepts and lives by the logic of the market society, the result, at best, will continue to be 2.5 percent of income. In fact it could go down. . . . An increase. . . will happen only when congregations become places where stewards are formed and nurtured."⁶

The issue is a matter of orientation, perspective, and spiritual formation. As observed by Vallet and Zech: "The church is good at developing stewardship programs, but not stewards."⁷ Stewardship must move from the fringe into the center of the church's life. It is essential for congregations to understand themselves first

and foremost as a people called into being by God and entrusted with God's mission, "as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1). To fulfill this mission they are empowered by God's active presence to be a demonstration community, "a city on the hill" that all can see. As the household of God, they will show the world an alternative way to be a community. This is their stewardship challenge and opportunity -- their calling.

Within this demonstration "household," people will engage in practices which build up the church as a stewarding community of gratitude, generosity, joy, hospitality, and service. By the power of the Holy Spirit, these practices conform people to Jesus Christ -- the most fulfilling experience of all. Among these practices are breaking bread, baptizing, forgiving one another, binding and loosing, making peace, telling the truth, bearing each others' burdens, welcoming the stranger, caring and sharing generously, making decisions together, discerning God's vision for their life and ministry.

Congregations that are becoming more fruitful stewarding communities make significant changes in their orientation. Their focus changes. They establish standards for evaluating all of the church's life and work so that all activities and programs are designed to help people understand and participate meaningfully in these Christian practices. The questions they are learning to ask about every activity offered by their church become: (1) "Does this activity equip people for life inside the household

of God?" (2) "Does this activity enable the church to demonstrate a redemptive way of life that shows the world an alternative way to be a society?"

4. What does it take to cultivate a stewarding community?

Another reason most church stewardship programs fall short is because they do not take the change process seriously. They do not recognize the community-forming power of congregation-wide processes of study, discovery, and growth. In today's North American market-driven culture, the understanding and acceptance of the biblical idea of stewardship requires a major reorientation of imagination, mind, and action -- a U-turn -- *metanoia* -- conversion. Quick-fix budgeting-and-pledging programs may raise a little more money than last year but they won't cultivate a stewarding community. They don't go far enough or deep enough. They are too often experienced as a burden. They lack excitement and energy. They do not stimulate the imagination or the willingness to live by the household rules of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

"Stewardship means our incorporation into the being and work of the One who came to serve and not to be served, the chief steward Jesus."⁸ Being incorporated into the community of Jesus Christ, a stewarding community, means becoming a "living stone" (*oikos*) that is built into the household of God, *oikonomia tou theou* (1 Peter 2:5). This involves a spiritual journey by entire congregations, clergy and lay people together, over time, as they begin to dream,

to think, and to act in this way.

Cultivating stewarding communities is, or should be, a primary goal of every pastor and church leader. Quick-fix fund-raising programs are insufficient for this task.

Spiritual formation methods are required:

- (1) processes of immersion in scripture and the expression of a theology of Christian stewardship.
- (2) training of clergy and other church leaders to equip them with the perspectives and skills to lead their congregations on this transforming journey of faith.

(3) continuous reinforcement of learnings as congregations are formed and transformed as stewarding communities of gratitude and generosity.

(4) congregations learning to become "contrast communities," a people living within the "household of faith" as "good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Peter 4:10).

(5) conversion!

When such conversion occurs, enormous energy is released. Time and money are shared generously. And people speak of "rediscovering the excitement of the Christian faith."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This essay is one of a series of articles by the staff of the Center for Parish Development and is based on the Center's research and experience of guiding church organizations through processes of planned strategic transformation -- major and profound change grounded and rooted in the Christian tradition. Since 1968 the staff of the Center has been developing the theological, theoretical, systemic, and other foundational and process resources to help North American church bodies make their way from their former dominant position as part of the "cultural establishment" into becoming "missional churches" in today's post-establishment missionary environment.

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CONTRASTING UNDERSTANDINGS OF STEWARDSHIP

| Dimension | To Maintain the Church | To Cultivate a Stewarding Community |
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| Definition of Stewardship | The processes of raising funds to underwrite the church's budget and recruiting volunteers to fill the various offices and positions in the church's organizational structure. | The faithful, wise, and responsible participation in the "plan" or "economy" of God: " <i>a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth</i> " (Ephesians 1:10). |
| Assumption | Stewardship is something one does by giving money, time, and talent to the church. The church viewed as a worthy voluntary association that does good works. Individuals join who want to participate in that work. Stewardship is a <i>functional means</i> to the end of maintaining the church and its program and services. Stewardship is responsible giving. | Stewardship indicates our distinctive Christian identity -- <i>who</i> we are and <i>whose</i> we are. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we become "children of God" and thus "joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17). As members of God's household, we are called and empowered to participate in God's redemptive mission in the world. Stewardship is responsible living. |
| Change requirements | Tuning and adapting changes only. Requires convincing people to be more dutiful, to remember those who have less than they do and need their help. In service to a good cause, members are asked to be more generous, to give more regularly of their money, time, and talent. | Major reorientation required: not obedience but transformation; not simply kind deeds, but new life. Rather than depending upon the good intentions and good will of human persons, stewardship is the recognition that all of life is dependent upon the life-giving, life-saving, and life-fulfilling activity of God. Participation in God's household of freedom, love, and joy signifies major change: " <i>If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!</i> " (2 Cor. 5:17) |
| Methodology to bring about the change | Annual <i>Budgeting-Selling-Pledging</i> processes that only impact people's checkbooks. Drawing upon the processes of secular fund-raising, money is raised with little or no congregational interaction, study and discernment, change of heart, or lifestyle required. | Biblically-grounded and theologically-sound Christian formation processes are used continuously to help people learn the language of faith, become liberated from spiritual and financial bondage, change their values and priorities, alter their lifestyle, examine their use of money, support one another in learning to live as " <i>members of the household of faith</i> " (Gal. 6:10). |

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| Results | <p>Church members give 20% of their income to the church, congregations struggle financially.</p> <p>Churches are indistinguishable from other voluntary organizations in which 25% of the members give 75% of the money and 100% of the leadership, while 75% of the members make token gifts or none at all. The church is experienced as a burden to be carried, an obligation to be fulfilled.</p> <p>Churches must gear up every year with new gimmicks and ideas to raise money to meet the budget.</p> | <p>A distinctive Christian stewarding community comes into being. Embodying a lifestyle of overwhelming gratitude and overflowing generosity, the church becomes exciting and challenging. Knowing who they are and whose they are, people are more articulate about their faith.</p> <p>Manifesting the gifts of grace in service and the fruit of the Spirit in love, the church becomes more inviting and more relevant. Financial support for the church increases as a result of transformed visions, changed attitudes, and altered lives.</p> |
| Comments | <p>"Stewardship typically has been turned into a yearly campaign for funds and an attempt to get people to devote their service to the church by teaching in the church school, singing in the choir, being on the vestry, or assisting in the liturgy. A yearly pledge of time, talent, and money, based upon programmatic budgetary needs to run an institution, is a strange understanding of stewardship."</p> <p>(John H. Westerhoff III, <i>Building God's People in a Materialistic Society</i> [New York: Seabury Press, 1983].)</p> | <p>"Celebrating the gift of new life in Jesus Christ, through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, those who are stewards of the household of God will be <i>faithful</i> because of converted hearts, <i>wise</i> because of enlightened minds, <i>responsible</i> because of obedient wills."</p> <p>(Inagrace T. Dietterich, <i>Stewards of the Household of God</i> [Chicago: Center for Parish Development, 1996])</p> |

END NOTES

1 The Center for Parish Development, since 1971, has conducted research projects in the area of stewardship cultivation. Answers are sought to these questions:

- (a) How can congregations recover the rich theological and biblical meanings of the stewardship image?
- (b) How can immersion in these meanings lead to deepened commitment and excitement in congregations?
- (c) How can congregations become liberated from spiritual and financial bondage, change their values and priorities, alter their lifestyle, examine their use of money, support one another in learning to live with a spirit of gratitude and generosity as "members of the household of faith?"
- (d) What change processes, learning experiences, leadership, and structures are required to bring about this kind of conversion, while also financing the church?

2 M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 3.

3 John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 223.

4 In 86% of the congregations participating in the stewardship cultivation experiments, significant increases were reported in financial support. In one congregation giving increased more than 900%. Even those congregations that, for whatever reason, began but did not complete the process showed modest increases.

5 Tony Walker, *All You Love Is Need* (London: SPCK, 1985), p. 6.

6 Vallet and Zech, p. 150

7 Ibid.

8 Douglas John Hall, *Thinking The Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 249.