



Privacy of Financial Giving

by George C. Engelhardt

Financial giving in the church should be kept private, but *not* secret! An early stewardship mentor of mine once observed: "If money is a matter for secrecy in a congregation, then money has become too important to that church!" Almost always, secrecy about members' financial giving is a symptom of unhealthy, poor giving. Secrecy is really a cover for individual or collective shame about how little we give. Embarrassment about giving reveals a congregation that has not reached the point of being generous, joyful givers, alive in discovering the gospel truth that in giving, we receive.

Giving should be *private*, but not *secret*. *Privacy* means that our financial commitment to our local church ought not be a matter of public record. *Not secret* means that we should feel comfortable knowing that information about our gifts is available to those within the church who have reason to know. At least two — and possibly four — parties fall into that category.

The financial secretary must know.

No one disputes that the financial secretary must have information about the giving patterns of members. Keeping accurate records is an important ministry of the local church. Accurate record keeping is a responsibility of any institution that receives funds, including the church. Effective financial secretaries inform members and friends of the church about the status of their financial giving at various times throughout the year.

The financial secretary plays an important role in financial planning, which is crucial for a faithful response to the vision of ministry God gives every congregation. The vision has global, local, ecumenical, denominational, and congregational dimensions, all of which draw upon the financial resources and resolve of the local congregation.

Finally, the financial secretary often is able to inform the pastor about individuals and families who need pastoral attention. In multiple-point charges or in congregations served by part-time clergy, the role of the financial secretary is even more crucial. Indeed, it may be that the financial secretary, in congregations where the pastor is not continually present, is the one who mobilizes pastoral care to those in apparent financial need.

The pastor should know.

Jesus spoke extensively about money. What we do with our possessions — the "attitude of ownership" we entertain about our resources — is spiritually significant. Consequently, it makes as little sense to advocate that pastors not know what parishioners give as it would be to advocate that pastors not be involved in providing support, advice, and counsel about the prayer life of parishioners. Our use of money is spiritual and is of legitimate concern to pastors.

Pastors commonly voice reservations about having access to information about parishioners' giving. They fear the knowledge will bias their ministries; namely, that generous financial givers will receive preferential attention. They worry that the knowledge will taint their ministry with those who give less.

Several questionable assumptions underlie such pastoral reserve. One unspoken assumption is that money is a "tainted" subject that clergy ought to leave to the world, while they concentrate on "spiritual" matters. Another questionable assumption is that financial stewardship is purely a lay responsibility, falling outside the sphere of ordained ministry. Clouded here is the distinction between inviting people to share in supporting the ministry of

the church (which is a ministry of the laity) and nurturing a biblically sound understanding of the requirements and blessing of being faithful stewards. This latter function is a vital aspect of pastoral ministry. Pastors who understand this distinction offer strong biblical preaching and teaching about stewardship.

The above assumptions ignore the emphasis that Jesus placed upon material resources — especially money — in his teaching about people's spiritual well-being. Jesus rejected the artificial separation between accountability for the use of our possessions and our spiritual wholeness. Discipleship involves the purse as well as the heart. Jesus made money a spiritual, therefore a pastoral, concern. The pastor's responsibilities in ministry require knowledgeable selection of leaders in the congregation who model faithful discipleship, including financial discipleship.

The fundamental factor in a pastor's willingness to know the giving of parishioners, however, is that pastor's feelings about his or her own giving. The pastor's own stewardship commitment, more than anything else, will shape and nurture a congregation's attitude about money and financial stewardship.

The finance committee may know.

In capital campaigns and in the annual stewardship campaign, it would be helpful for financial coordinators and visitors to know the giving profiles of those whom they visit. Such knowledge would allow compatible visits to be arranged so that people could converse with their peers about Christian giving. We should not ask others to give, proportionally, more than we ourselves give.

The congregation may know.

One of the most effective ways of nurturing financial stewardship happens through the witness of those who have already discovered the joy of giving. Personal testimonies need not be thought of as bragging, anymore than testifying to the reality of answered prayer in our lives is boastful. Both witness to the goodness of God, and both offer encouragement to others. Those willing to address publicly (in worship, in small-group gatherings, or in mailings) the joy they have found in giving become blessings to others who need reassurance to become generous, joyful givers.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

In meetings within the local church:

- Is money "too important" in our congregation?
- Are we overly concerned about secrecy? Who knows the giving records of individuals within the parish?
- Do we keep accurate records of giving?
- Could we make better use of our financial secretary?
- How would our congregation feel about the pastor having access to giving records? How do we establish permission for the pastor to have this information?

For pastors to reflect upon and discuss with one another:

- Am I comfortable with my own use of money and satisfied with the amount I share with the church?
- What messages about money and finances have shaped my attitudes and my ministry?
- How has my knowledge about the giving of parishioners influenced my ministry with them?
- How might my ministry be enhanced if I took a more active role in the financial life of parishioners?
- What steps should I take to become more involved in the giving of parishioners and the finances of my congregation?

Written by George C. Engelhardt, Superintendent, Connecticut Central District, New York Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.

