



STEWARDSHIP 101

To Start With . . .

Stewardship 101 is an overview of the various aspects of the roles and dynamics stewardship activities play in your daily life. As a stewardship leader, how do you determine what are the issues, concerns, tools, and opportunities that you need to address in leading the stewardship ministry in your congregation? This section of MAKE IT SIMPLE provides you some beginning answers.

What “Stewardship” is All About

Stewardship is about more than money. But it is about money. Your use of money and your other possessions are an important part of your discipleship as followers of Jesus. The word “steward” comes from the Anglo-Saxon term “sty warden,” the person who took care of the pig sty! The term has evolved to describe anyone who is the keeper of another person’s possessions. (To read more about the term, see the following section, “More about Stewards.”) Steward describes your relationship with God the creator. It helps you to see that God has “created me and all that exists” (Luther’s *Small Catechism*, Apostles’ Creed, explanation of the First Article). And all that we are and all that we have, come from God as blessing. It is your responsibility to take care of and use wisely these blessings. They include your time, attention, physical health, energy, talents, possessions, attitudes, relationships, and money. That includes the sharing of your financial resources to support the ministry of the church.

Stewardship ministry has a long history in the life of the church. It has often been the place in the life of a congregation where the financial needs and realities of the organization are addressed. In many congregations this broad-based way of thinking has become focused only on the congregation’s budget. And so there can be a sense of not having enough to pay the bills. What this leads to is conversation about meeting the budget. Thus limited, these conversations use only fund-raising language and can lead you away from a healthy understanding of what stewardship ministry can be for you as disciples of Jesus.

When your use of language about stewardship is centered on the need to meet the budget of the congregation—the need to raise sufficient funds to cover the bills—you can lose sight of what it means to be good stewards. You might begin to think more about the total needed and “How much is my fair share?” You might find yourself wrestling with what you think you can afford to give in light of the rising costs of everything else in your life and how much you have left over. And for some people, decisions about giving can become based on whether or not they agree with the pastor, the congregation council or some other group or individual within the church. One way to start to reverse this trend: Separate fund-raising language from stewardship conversations. Think how stewardship colors all of life’s decision-making, how an “attitude of gratitude” might prosper in your congregation, or how congregation members can inspire each other with generosity.

More about Stewards

The term “steward” has its most direct etymological roots in the Anglo-Saxon *stygywaerden*, the sty warden noted earlier. But the concept behind the term goes back into the first century to the Greek word, *ekonomos*. In the world of the writers of the New Testament letters, the *ekonomos* was the servant or slave who served the owner of an estate as the chief caretaker of almost everything the owner called his or her own.

This caretaker was more than an obedient follower of “the household rules” (as some translators have rendered the term). Instead, the *ekonomos* knew the *economia* of the owner, the over-all plan for the entire estate, both short-range and long-range. In a sense, knowing the *economia* of the owner was almost like knowing the mind of the owner, the deepest intentions and greatest hopes of the owner.

This became important when the owner was absent, and the steward/*ekonomos* was entrusted with the day-to-day affairs of the entire estate, including just about every aspect of well-being for the property and people in the owner’s purview. Knowing the owner’s *economia* was the bedrock foundation on which the *ekonomos* made decisions rather than merely following rules. Thus the *ekonomos* could be trusted to make value judgments, manage with shrewdness and careful consideration, look ahead, and stay focused. Whatever the circumstance, then, the *ekonomos*/steward was therefore well-equipped to serve the will of the owner in all things!

Just think of it, when you invite people into “stewardship,” you’re inviting them into the will of God for the world, as revealed in the Scriptures and especially in Jesus.

What a privilege!

Stewardship as a Disciple of Jesus

Stewardship is an important daily activity in the life of a disciple of Jesus. He spoke throughout the Gospels about money and possessions. (See Luke 12 as an example.) Mostly he warned about the power and ability of possessions to separate you from your relationship with God. Your possessions have the power to get in the way of your relationship with God. You might look to them for security, put your trust in them, and therefore treat them as idols worthy of worship.

Your possessions may be joined in this idolatry by your work, your recreation, or your use of time. In his book *Work, Play and Worship in a Leisure-Oriented Society*, Gordon Dahl challenges our American attitudes. He writes, “We worship our work, we work at our play, and we play at our worship.” What he critiques here is how society has come to misplace its priorities and focus. When you put in 60-80 hours a week in the office and come home on Friday with a briefcase full of work for your weekend, maybe work has become a form of worship. If you force yourself to exercise, what has happened to your sense of play? And when you describe your worship experience only in terms of not getting anything out of it, what is your focus on the purpose of worship?

As a disciple of Jesus, you can find a broader role for stewardship in your daily life. You are called to be the body of Christ in the world—to do God’s work, share your blessings received from God, do God’s will. That understanding of stewardship is both corporate and individual. How do you take care of all that God has blessed you with? How do you use those blessings to accomplish God’s will for the world? This might mean tending to your health, your relationships, your work, your possessions, your finances, your recreation, God’s creation, your congregation, your community, or your faith life.

Stewardship in a Culture of Hyper-Consumption

Stewardship can be a difficult topic for discussion in the current culture of hyper-consumerism. You experience pressures to over-extend and find yourself over-scheduled, over-worked, over-spent, and over-committed. In these times, focus on activities that give fulfillment and meaning. You may long for a slower-paced calendar, for simpler times, for less busy-ness.

If your world is framed by “instant,” you may be left frustrated and wanting—looking for instant news, constant contact, unlimited access, or your meals provided with no waiting in the drive-through lane. You might seek instant gratification; abhor silence, and get constant stimulation by your MP3 players and portable DVD devices.

Your personal life may be dominated by cell phones, credit cards, and keys. These things might make you instantly available, scheduled for every opportunity, able to buy without price, and protective of your stuff. And perhaps worst of all, you might fail to notice the point in time where your possessions begin to possess you.

How do you talk with others about stewardship in a culture of hyper-consumerism? How might you think about the possibilities of tithing to God's mission in the world when your credit cards are maxed out, your debt is burying you and your life is measured from paycheck to paycheck? How do you create a simpler life where you can focus upon your relationship with Jesus, grow in your discipleship practices, and learn to be a better steward of all that God has blessed you with?

What does Jesus say? Can you hear Jesus speak about God's abundant blessings for you? The most important question may still be this: Who will you trust? When you recognize God's abundant love, grace, and blessings you realize that God has provided you with everything you need. Jesus calls you to put your trust in him, to grow in faith through living as his disciples. That helps you to put your possessions back into proper perspective—to possess them and not be possessed by them. Jesus invites you to put your trust in God's abundance, not in your possessions. When you see the motto on your money—"In God We Trust"—it can be a reminder that your trust is in God! That solid truth may help you to gain some perspective in today's culture. Perhaps then your conversation regarding stewardship can take on a more vibrant flavor.

Stewardship Conversations Where Money Talk is Taboo

Perhaps until recently, you have lived in a culture where talking about money in specific terms may have been taboo. Every day you probably heard a lot about the economy, possessions, financial markets, and the price of things. But when it came to your personal finances, that conversation may have been deemed unseemly. In these times, however, the necessity—and opportunity—for that kind of talk may be growing, and your congregation may be the best place for those heartfelt conversations to take place.

In the past, it has been rare that families would talk about their financial situation; to talk publicly about these matters would have been a social taboo. Up until the recent past, there may have been little discussion about how financial tools and money work in this culture. And families may have rarely, if ever, had any conversation about their giving. Again, these times may offer or require families to have these conversations. Your congregation can help.

How about you? How in these times might you help people break through this barrier to have healthy conversations about their stewardship? How might you teach your children (and in some ways yourself) to have better stewardship conversations and practices?

Stewardship Ministry in the Congregation

As a stewardship leader in your congregation, you are called to implement the congregation's stewardship ministry. This includes an annual response opportunity, as well as a plan for year-round stewardship education that has a clear focus on stewardship practices throughout life.

The annual response is a focused period of time when the life of your congregation is centered on a stewardship response program. Often this takes place in the fall (pre-Advent) or spring (Lent), but it can be done at other times of the year. The annual response includes an opportunity for congregational members to indicate through a Commitment Card what their anticipated giving, based on the blessings they have received from God, will be to support the ministry of the congregation for the coming year. The purpose of the annual response is to encourage the congregation members to consider, prayerfully and mindfully, their stewardship of the blessings they have received.

Stewardship education is the ongoing year-round ministry that focuses on stewardship as a mark of discipleship. This ministry includes a variety of activities such as Bible studies, book study groups, sermon topics, adult forums, and congregational events.

MAKE IT SIMPLE Stewardship Resource

This entire resource can help you help your congregation grow as disciples and good stewards of God's blessings. The materials focus on heartfelt conversations, prayerful reflection and practices for living more simply, trusting in God's promises and abundant blessings, and sharing generously the blessings we have received.

The biblical themes, congregational activities, Bible studies, worship resources, children's resources, and response methods engender creativity in your congregation. A variety of resources are included just a few keystrokes, scrolls, or mouse clicks away.

The focus of stewardship ministry in your congregation can be about growing as disciples of Jesus, strengthening the faith practices of those who participate and together encouraging generosity in the faithful stewardship of God's abundant blessings.

May God bless you in that endeavor!