

REDISCOVER MACEDONIA

A spirit of gratitude and generosity



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

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, and the life of your congregation. As a stewardship leader, how do you determine what are the issues, concerns, tools and opportunities you need to address in leading the stewardship ministry in your congregation? The following paragraphs provide an approach using the resources offered by “Rediscover Macedonia.”

What “stewardship” is all about

Stewardship is about more than money, but it is not only about money. Your use of money and all your other possessions is an important part of being a follower 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. 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 blessings. As a follower of Jesus Christ, it is your responsibility to care for and use these blessings wisely. This includes your time, relationships, talents, passions, energy, lifestyle, the environment and money. The money part includes the sharing of your financial resources to support God’s work through 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 often focused only on the congregation’s budget. In many congregations this nurtures an understanding that stewardship is about having enough money to pay the bills. This often leads to some very challenging conversations about money and how to talk about it. These conversations often use only fundraising language and can lead people away from a healthy understanding of what stewardship ministry can be for you as a disciple 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 congregation.

One way to start to reverse this trend is to separate fundraising language from stewardship conversations. You may invite people to think about how stewardship colors all of life’s

decisions, how an “attitude of gratitude” might prosper in your congregation, or how congregation members can inspire each other to grow in generosity.

More about stewards

The term “steward” has its most direct etymological roots in the Anglo-Saxon “styrgwaerden,” the sty warden noted earlier. But the concept behind the term goes back into the first century to the Greek word, “economos.” In the world of the writers of the New Testament letters, the economos 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 economos 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/economos 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 economos made decisions rather than merely following rules. Thus the economos could be trusted to make value judgments, manage with shrewdness and careful consideration, look ahead, and stay focused. Whatever the circumstance, then, the economos/steward was 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. Jesus 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 cellphones, 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 you have lived in a culture where talking about money in specific terms is 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. There are often two places for these conversations to take place — your home and your congregation.

Based on conversations with people across the country, it has been found that families rarely talk about their financial situation. More often, family members are expected to learn about managing money by discretely watching others or outside the household. And, it is even less likely to talk publicly about these matters. In many places it is a social taboo. Recently there has been more discussion about how financial tools and money work in this culture. However, these discussions rarely include conversations about giving. This is considered even more personal, even though Jesus considered this a basic spiritual practice. For many it is a challenge to think that stewardship and personal giving is a spiritual issue, not a financial issue.

How do you begin to address these issues? Your congregation can help.

Stewardship ministry in the congregation

As a faithful steward in your congregation, you are called to listen to God's word and put your faith into practice. This includes telling others what Jesus taught his followers about money and possessions. Through the "Rediscover Macedonia" resources, individuals are invited to rediscover the spirit of gratitude and generosity described by the apostle Paul that he found in the people of Macedonia. This story is taken from 2 Corinthians 8:1-7. Within this text are seven key principles of stewardship – gratitude, sharing, sacrifice, commitment, generosity, giving freely and abundant joy.

These principles are the foundation of the "Rediscover Macedonia" materials which provide three ways to develop healthy stewardship in your congregation:

1. Engage in conversation about your personal stewardship journey, and especially your steps toward a tithe and beyond. Look at the financial tools provided for preparing a budget and balance sheet of assets and liabilities. The conversation about money can be guided through a Personal Money Autobiography or the 10-10-80 Conversation Guide. It may also be helpful to look at how your congregation has shaped the understanding of members through the Congregational Money Autobiography.
2. Equip leaders to be faithful steward leaders. This involves understanding the perspectives, practices and skills that form a steward leader. The Competencies of a Well-formed Steward Leader serve as a framework. The How-To Guide can help congregations engage, discern and shape a path to form these leaders.
3. Developing members who are comfortable making a "relational ask" is a way to build confidence and invite others to participate in and support God's work. This does not take the form of a brief letter, but focuses on developing a deeper relationship with people. The actual "ask" may be for time, the use of specific talents or dollars. Learning how to make a "relational ask" can be a long-term asset for your congregation and the church.

As you reflect on these principles and consider these steps, remember the formation of faithful stewards is an ongoing year-round ministry. It is both a spiritual discipline and a mark of discipleship. The "Rediscover Macedonia" resources can help you help your congregation grow as disciples and good stewards of God's blessings.

May God bless you in that endeavor!

— Adapted from Stewardship 101 as found in "Make It Simple"