

# Organizing the Congregation for Stewardship

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## Introduction

“Stewardship has been kidnapped and is being held hostage by a sinister villain named ‘Paying the Bills,’” writes Charles Lane in *Ask, Thank, Tell*.

Lane continues, “I have seen too many congregations denied the joy of giving by a mentality that sees stewardship only as a way to get the congregation’s bills paid. Not surprisingly, in these congregations, serving on the stewardship committee is viewed as a duty to be endured by the poor souls that draw the short straw. I have seen other congregations where giving is understood to be an important part of each person’s faithful response to a loving God. Not surprisingly, in these congregations, serving on the stewardship committee is viewed much more positively” (p. 7).

The purpose of this resource is to help the pastor, stewardship committee and other lay leaders determine the present state of stewardship in the congregation, develop a clear statement of purpose for the stewardship team and plan for holistic stewardship education in the congregation.

## What is the Present State of Stewardship in the Congregation?

Most congregations approach stewardship education in one of three ways:

**1. The first approach is to do nothing.** In this approach, the words “steward” or “stewardship” are rarely, if ever, mentioned. The definition of stewardship is related to money and, more specifically, money given in the offering plate to support the congregation. Leaders of these kinds of congregations may follow this approach for a number of reasons. It may be the way it has always been done (or not done) in the congregation. Others may come to this approach because they believe that if the Gospel is proclaimed, the money will automatically follow. Still others believe that if the needs of the congregation are shared, they will be met. There also are those who follow this approach because they are afraid — afraid of what members might do if stewardship (read: money) is addressed head-on, afraid of the appearance of “always” talking about money, afraid because their own stewardship is lacking. In addition, there are those who do nothing because the bills are being paid, the mission commitments are being met and, at the end of the year, there is a surplus of funds in the bank.

The above reasons for doing nothing are not exhaustive; there may well be many more. Whatever the case, doing nothing has consequences. Some of the results of doing nothing are:

- › The whole counsel of God is not taught. See Acts 20:25–28. How we live our lives as redeemed children of God is very important. Stewardship is one aspect of vocation (the Christian life), and it is addressed in many places in Scripture. See Eph. 5:15–17. Money is a topic that Jesus views as extremely important. See Matt. 6:24.
- › The people in the congregation will, in all likelihood, fail to understand their vocation in the church if this is never explicitly taught.
- › The world will have an undue influence on how the child of God views his or her duties in church, family and society.
- › Congregations will struggle to find resources (people and money) for mission and ministry needs.
- › The work of the local church as well as the church at-large is hampered.

Research indicates that most churches (some researchers suggest that the number is as high as 80 percent) follow the do-nothing approach.

**2. The second way congregations approach stewardship is the program approach.** In this approach, talk about stewardship is primarily focused in a narrow amount of time each year. Stewardship consists of the use of programs designed to encourage the giving of money. These types of programs focus on a stewardship Sunday or a series of Sundays when a stewardship theme is emphasized. They often employ a pledging process. The danger here is that the program can become the focus instead of the teaching of God’s Word.

If the Word of God is lost among the details of a yearly program that is simply pulled out of the box and applied, then there will be negative consequences:

- › Stewardship will not be placed within the biblical context of vocation — managing *all of life’s resources* according to the roles God has given us to play in church, family and society.
- › It encourages members of congregations to see stewardship as a budget issue and not a spiritual issue.

- › While specific time set aside for stewardship is important and programs can be useful, no lasting changes will occur without clear teaching from the Word of God.

Program or technical approaches can be useful tools and outlines, but they cannot stand alone. The Word of God produces change in the hearts of Christians and must be the content of any stewardship program.

**3. The third way is both the simplest and the most difficult: teaching the Word of God, day in and day out, through the church year, using all of your congregation's avenues for teaching.** Stewardship, after all, is simply one aspect of the Lutheran doctrine of vocation: we have callings from God in church, family and society. Each of these callings has a claim on us and the resources God has given us. This approach offers an intentional, systematic, whole-life, year-round biblical emphasis for Christians to understand their purpose in the world and how that affects their decisions about where they put God's money.

The results of such an approach are:

- › The child of God grows in faith as the Holy Spirit works through the Word.
- › The Christian learns that God has roles for him or her to play in church, family and society and sees God's purpose in his or her life. This approach is designed to change the stewardship culture of the congregation.
- › The approach focuses on reintroducing biblical stewardship and vocation education to the leaders first and then to the members of the congregation because leaders are to model what it means to be faithful stewards.
- › God's children grow in their ability to discern the difference between the voice of the world and the voice of the Holy Spirit in the Word.
- › God's children are joyous and generous in sharing the resources God has entrusted to them as they use these resources according to their vocations.
- › Congregations have the necessary resources to accomplish the mission and ministry God places before them.

The stewardship committee, task force or ministry team charged with stewardship education in the congregation should use both program and adaptive approaches.

An additional resource to help the congregation stewardship committee determine the present stewardship condition of the congregation is a stewardship assessment. One example of a stewardship assessment is found in the Stewardship Primer located at [www.lcms.org/stewardship](http://www.lcms.org/stewardship).

## What is the Purpose of the Stewardship Committee?

In *Ask, Thank, Tell*, author Charles Lane writes:

What is the mission statement of your congregation's stewardship ministry? As your stewardship committee gathers to do its work, at what goal are you aiming? Let me suggest a goal for you to consider:

The goal of our stewardship ministry is to help God's people grow in their relationship with Jesus through the use of the time, talents, and finances God has entrusted to them.

If your congregation is like many congregations, this goal hasn't exactly been on the front burner as you have thought together about stewardship. My hunch is that most congregations haven't thought about a Stewardship Mission Statement but, based on how they function, it would be something like:

The goal of our stewardship ministry is to raise enough money to pay the bills next year.

I hope you see the difference. The first goal focuses on the individual giver's relationship with Jesus. It understands that the way the individuals use their time, talents, and treasure has a huge impact on their relationship with Jesus. The second goal focuses on the institution, on the congregation, and its needs. The magnitude of this difference cannot be overstated. (pp. 11–12)

Knowing the purpose of your stewardship committee is important because it determines the direction you will take together. Since only the Word of God changes hearts, the purpose of your committee should be to learn and share the Word.

Lane continues, "Let me say it as clearly as I can: Your congregation's stewardship ministry is first and foremost about making and growing disciples. You need to be about the business of helping God's people grow in their relationship with their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

The following issues will be a part of a stewardship education process that focuses on making and growing disciples:

- › Helping God's people grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.
- › Understanding the biblical meaning of vocation.
- › Understanding the difference between being an owner and being a steward.
- › Helping all stewards in the congregation practice spiritual disciplines like:
  - Daily prayer;
  - Daily Scripture reading;
  - Weekly worship;
  - Generosity;
  - Serving others in Jesus' name; and

- “Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (I Peter 3:15)

- › Living life in community.
- › Living in obedience to God’s Word.

## How Do We Plan for Stewardship Education in Our Congregation?

As you plan for stewardship education in your congregation there are some important elements that should be considered.

The first element is the need for the stewardship education process to be based on sound theology. This will necessitate that the pastor and leaders of the stewardship effort in the congregation spend time in the study of God’s Word together to understand and apply what God says about being a steward and living out one’s stewardship. The specific piece of theology that applies here is the Lutheran doctrine of vocation: How do our callings in church, family and society make a claim on the resources God has given us to manage?

An additional element is the importance of an adaptive stewardship education approach.

Adaptive stewardship education is a process that impacts the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of the Christian steward. Adaptive stewardship education requires continuous learning. Adaptive stewardship education happens as the Holy Spirit works through the Word.

1. Adaptive stewardship education must be **intentional**. To be intentional is to be done on purpose. The Christian steward matures as the Word of God is brought to bear on his or her life in an intentional way.

2. Adaptive stewardship education must be **comprehensive or whole life**. To be comprehensive is to be complete, including all or nearly all elements or aspects of something. The Christian steward is responsible in every relationship that God entrusts to him or her. Again, we are talking about vocation: the callings that God has given each person in church, family and society.

- › What benefits has God given me in the church? What is my role in the church? My duties?
- › Likewise, what are the blessings, roles and duties I am called to in family and society?

3. Adaptive stewardship education must be **systematic**. To be systematic is to have, show or involve a method or plan. Much of stewardship education in the church (where it even exists) has been

haphazard at best. Plugging in a different stewardship program each year to meet the budget is the most many congregations do. A systematic approach to stewardship education involves a plan to form the Christian steward in accordance with the Word of God.

4. Adaptive stewardship education must be **continuous**. To be continuous is to be uninterrupted in time without cessation. Adaptive stewardship education is ongoing. It doesn’t just involve a one or two week emphasis focused on finances. It involves a curriculum developed to teach people how to live in a godly way according to the vocations God has given them; to manage all that God has entrusted to them in accordance with these callings.

Another element to consider in a stewardship education process is that leaders are supposed to lead. Leaders in the congregation understand biblical stewardship and model biblical stewardship principles in their lives. This leadership begins with the pastor. He is the chief steward in the congregation, and it is important that he not only be involved in the stewardship education process (leading and learning), but that he models what it means to be a Christian steward. The same is true for the lay leaders of the congregation. Leaders are supposed to lead, and they do this by word and deed.

Still another element needed is the understanding that stewardship is a spiritual issue. Too often stewardship is relegated to buildings, budgets and salaries. It is seen as only an institutional issue. Seeing stewardship this way does a great disservice to the biblical understanding of stewardship. Again, our stewardship is simply an aspect of vocation — living out the callings that God has given us in the church, family and society. We are talking about God’s purpose for our lives in each of these spheres and how our callings in each sphere put a claim on our resources, whether of time, money, prayer, attention and so on.

The work of the stewardship committee is vital to the health of the congregation. Dick Towner suggests that most people who go to church are struggling under two competing ideologies: God’s Word and materialism. People who go to church have an increasingly difficult time discerning the difference between the voice of the world and the voice of the Holy Spirit in the Word. One of the important responsibilities of the stewardship committee is to help members discern the difference by bringing the Word of God to bear.

Towner also suggests that this issue is incredibly important and extremely difficult to deal with. The question then becomes: **Will importance win over difficulty, or will difficulty win over importance?**

Planning the work of the stewardship committee takes time and effort. It is not an easy or simple task, but it is vitally important. The following six-step planning guide can assist in this needed work.

**STEP 1:** Assess the Congregation. Use the *Stewardship Assessment for Congregations* in Appendix 1 of the *Stewardship Primer* or another stewardship-assessment tool.

**STEP 2:** Define your goals. How can we help the members grow in their understanding of their vocations in church, family and society and the “claim” each vocation makes on the resources God has given them to manage?

Refer to the congregational assessment for areas to address.

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**STEP 3:** Define your needs. What elements need to be changed in the congregation’s stewardship culture?

Review the *Five Pillars of Congregational Stewardship*.

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**STEP 4:** Select the resources that will help accomplish goals and address needs. What program solutions are needed and what adaptive/teaching solutions are needed?

Additional resources are available at [www.lcef.org](http://www.lcef.org) and [www.lcms-foundation.org](http://www.lcms-foundation.org). See also the Congregational Stewardship Workbook available at [www.lcms.org/stewardship](http://www.lcms.org/stewardship).

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**STEP 5:** Implement the plan. How will the Chief Steward (pastor) and Stewardship Champions (lay leaders) work together to see that the plan happens?

Map out the action steps and those responsible for each step.

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**STEP 6:** Evaluate what happens. How can we make stewardship education in the congregation better? What do we need to stop doing, continue doing or start doing?

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Helpful Resources:

- › Lane, Charles R. *Ask, Thank, Tell: Improving Stewardship Ministry in Your Congregation*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.
- › The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. “Building an Effective Committee” from *The Congregational Stewardship Workbook 2000*.
- › The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. *Stewardship Primer*.

