

Teaching the Stewardship of Time

IN THE LUTHERAN CONGREGATION

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A trip to your nearest bookseller or book-selling website will show you the subject of managing “our time” and becoming more effective at it is a subject that receives a lot of attention. Time management has been written about since the early days of modern business, but it was already there on the pages of Holy Scripture. Most people complain that they never have enough of it. They feel frustrated when time passes by too quickly. The members of our congregations are no different when it comes to the subject of time management or specifically being a steward of the time that God has given to them.

In the church, we have done a fair-to-good job in teaching about financial stewardship, but we fail often when it comes to talking to people about the use of their time across the various vocations God has given them in the home, church and society. When we ask members to use their skills and talents in the church, we often get excuses of job, family and other commitments. Oftentimes, these same members will offer the gift of money to replace the request for spending time living out their vocations in the church. Many members feel they can always make additional money to replace what they have given away. They know they can never replace time once it is given away. We in the church fail to teach and demonstrate that it is God who is the Owner and Giver of each and every minute of the day. Therefore we should manage our time with God’s purposes for us in our various vocations in mind.

This resource will provide an overview of the subject of time management for the lay leader as well as the professional church worker. It also will provide suggestions on classes that could be provided to members so that they might learn how to be better stewards of this precious resource that God provides them for His purposes.

A working definition of time

In many time management classes that are taught across the country, the common question asked of the participants is, “What is time?” Often the participants will describe what time is by speaking of how it is measured. For the sake of providing our working definition of time, we will use the Franklin Covey definition used at many of its workshops: “Time is the passing of events one after the other.” Covey coaches tell participants that in order to get control of time, they must get control over the events they allow into their lives.

This is an appropriate definition since when we control our events by what we say yes or no to, we limit or eliminate the things and activities that would take us away from what we want to do in our lives and the things we value. God has given us roles to fill in the family, the church and society — and each of these vocations has a claim on our time. Since our vocations are always multifaceted, we must be intentional (and wise!) when it comes to managing our time.

Breaking down the elements of time management and stewarding time

Read Ps. 31:14-15 and Eccl. 3:1-2. What do these passages say about the use of our time?

Some interesting facts and figures about time management (from www.balancetime.com) include:

- › The average person uses 13 different methods to control and manage his or her time.
- › The average person gets one interruption every 8 minutes, approximately seven an hour, or 50 to 60 per day. The average interruption takes 5 minutes, totaling about 4 hours or 50 percent of the average work day. Eighty percent of those interruptions are typically rated as “little value” or “no value,” creating about three hours of wasted time per day.
- › On an average day, there are 17 million meetings in America.
- › By taking 1 hour per day for independent study, 7 hours per week, 365 hours in a year, one can learn at the rate of a full-time student. In three to five years, the average person can become an expert in the topic of their choice by spending only 1 hour per day.
- › Ninety-five percent of the books in this country are purchased by 5 percent of the population. Ninety-five percent of self-improvement books, audio tapes and video tapes purchased are not used.
- › Ninety-seven percent of workers, if they became financially independent, would not continue with their current employer or in their current occupation.
- › Twenty percent of the average work day is spent on “crucial” and “important” things, while 80 percent of the average work day is spent on things that have “little value” or “no value.”

- › A person who works with a messy or cluttered desk spends, on average, 1-1/2 hours per day looking for things or being distracted by things or approximately 7 ½ hours per work week. “Out of sight; out of mind.” When it’s in sight, it’s in mind.
- › The average reading speed is approximately 200 words per minute. The average working person reads 2 hours per day. A speed reading course that will improve the reading rate to 400 words per minute will save an hour per day.
- › Ninety percent of those who join health and fitness clubs will stop going within the first 90 days.
- › Nine out of 10 people daydream in meetings.
- › Sixty percent of meeting attendees take notes to appear as if they are listening.
- › Forty percent of working people skip breakfast. Thirty-nine percent skip lunch. Of those who take a lunch break, 50 percent allow only 15 minutes or less.
- › It takes approximately 30 days to establish a new physical or emotional habit.
- › The average worker sends and receives 190 messages per day.
- › The average American watches 28 hours of television per week.
- › Seventy-eight percent of U.S. workers wish they had more time to “smell the roses.”
- › Forty-nine percent of U.S. workers in America complain that they are on a treadmill.
- › Angry people are twice as likely to suffer a heart attack as people in better control of their emotions.
- › Seventy-five percent of heart attacks occur between the hours of 5 a.m. and 8 a.m., local time.
- › More heart attacks occur on Monday than on any other day of the week.
- › Ninety-five percent of the things we fear will occur do not occur.

It is easy to see that the American society is truly “chasing the wind” as King Solomon said. Which of these facts and figures did you identify with the most? How many people in the pews of your congregation can relate to one or more of these? Each member in your congregation has the same 168 hours per week to use for God’s purposes across their vocations. Our job as steward leaders is to show our members how they can use the time that God has given to them more effectively in His service in the family, church and society.

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Teaching opportunities

Time management classes can be taught in any number of settings. Some congregations have offered time management Bible studies during the corporate Bible study hour on Sunday mornings. Others have chosen to offer special workshops during the week or on Saturdays. In either case, the basic components of teaching time management include (in order of importance):

- › Understanding our vocations
- › Identifying values
- › Setting goals
- › Weekly planning
- › Daily planning

Helping members (and professional church workers) identify their vocations and values will help them allocate their time to those things they hold dear. What are the roles God has given us to fill in the family? In the church? In society?

How does each one make a claim on our time? In many cases when attendees of time management workshops are asked to track the time they spend on various activities, things that matter most to them and things they truly value suffer at the hands of what matters least. In the process of helping members identify their values, it is paramount that the members spend time to write a sentence or two to clarify what that value is and how it relates to their vocations.

Helping members to identify values

To help the members within the church identify and order their values, it is helpful to give them 10 small square pieces of paper (3-by-5-inch cards work well). Ask them to write down one value on each card without a description of what that value means or how it looks when it is lived out in their lives. After participants have finished writing their values down, ask them to participate in the following exercise:

All participants are asked to picture themselves as passengers on a lifeboat in the North Atlantic in the middle of winter. As the lifeboat is moved away from the sinking ship the lifeboat becomes heavier with ice and water that has come into the boat. Every 2 minutes tell the participants that, because of the extra weight of the ice and water, they must get rid of one value that they have brought on board the lifeboat (for expediency at times you can have the participants rid themselves of two values at a time. They should

also stack the discarded values). When the exercise is complete the members will be holding onto their No. 1 (most important) value. As most participants have completed this exercise, the value that comes up most often is “faith” or “God.” “Family” and “friends” often is the second most named value.

This makes sense as two of our vocations are in the church and the family. We are called to be Christians with certain roles and responsibilities in the church. We also are called as family members with roles and responsibilities there as well. Our work in society — whether that is a career, volunteering or simply being a good neighbor — makes up the third area of vocation.

After the exercise is completed, have the members share their decision process for selecting their No. 1 value. At this time, the participants can be challenged to review if they are spending enough time nurturing their No. 1 value. Members can be asked if they are making time for church each week, and daily prayer and Bible reading. In addition, they can be asked if they are spending enough time in service to the church as they review the use of their time. The same process should be repeated for their vocations in the home and in society as well.

Helping members identify their vocations

How should all this time be arranged according to their vocations? Once the members of your congregation or participants in your time management class have identified the values they hold dear, it is important for them to identify the roles that these values play in their lives. In his book, *Body by God*, author Dr. Ben Lerner encourages people to “paint solid yellow lines around those items in their schedules that help them to live out the roles that they have been given.” Lerner’s point in encouraging his readers and patients to “paint solid yellow lines” is, much like the solid yellow lines on highways that keep us safe from passing in dangerous areas (which can lead to fatal errors), painting solid yellow lines around the activities that help us accomplish and fulfill the roles that we play is equally vital to our survival in these areas.

It is best for the leader of the group to provide examples of the role that he or she lives out so that the group can process the roles they have. For example, if I was leading the group, I would say my roles are: husband and father (my vocations in the family); member of Trinity Lutheran Church and stewardship leader (my vocations in the church); and marketer, budget administrator and friend (my vocations in society toward my neighbors). After identifying these roles, I would then look for activities that help me to add value or to accomplish a task or responsibility in relationship to that role. Activities might include: attend daughter’s dance recital and attend parent’s night at the school (under my vocation as father); and complete time and talent survey, help with calls for the nominating committee and attend voters’ meetings (for my vocation in the church). It is best to take a few minutes in the class to allow participants to identify the roles they have in their lives and then to review how those roles impact the use of their time.

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Goal setting

Once members of the class have identified values and vocations, it is appropriate to have them begin to learn how to set goals. The members should be taught the concept of S.M.A.R.T. goals. S.M.A.R.T. is an acronym for “Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timed.” Participants should understand that goals need to be more than generalities. They have to be vivid, actionable or, as Webster’s dictionary defines it, “the end toward which effort is directed.” A goal of fitness can’t be, “I want to get into shape this year.” A *specific* goal would define what fitness looks like, either in pounds lost, the ability to run a certain race or waist size reduction. Doing so also makes the goal *measurable*.

Many people fail to set goals because they have created outlandish goals in the past, which were never achieved. To prevent this in the future, participants should be coached on how *attainable* goals must have steps that can be met. For example, a weight loss goal has to be a goal that is healthy (not too much lost too fast or a great amount that cannot be achieved within the time frame of the goal). This, of course, adds to the *realistic* and *timed* elements of the goal. *Attainable* goals are often times *realistic* when the time element allows for ample time to complete the goal. So to conclude with our example of weight loss, a S.M.A.R.T. goal would be along the lines of, “I will lose 20 pounds (*specific* and *measurable*) by June 30, 2014” (for a goal set on Jan. 1, 2014), which makes the goal *realistic* and *timed*.

As you talk about goals with the participants in the class, it is good to talk to them about goals they have in relationship to their vocations in the church. Ask the participants how setting faith goals impacts the roles they listed in the earlier part of the class. By asking these questions you reinforce that the members are stewards of the time that God has given to them as a precious gift. Time is one of the “life’s resources” that is to be used by the child of God for God’s purposes.

Teaching weekly and daily planning

Once the participants have identified their values, roles and goals, you can begin to teach them about weekly and daily planning. One of the key aspects of doing effective weekly planning is to plan activities at the same time of the week on the same day. This will vary between each person. Some will find it better to plan the week ahead on Sunday night. Others may find their best planning time to be Friday before they go home for the week. Still others may find Saturday morning the best time. The real key is to make sure that it happens at the same time and schedule 20 minutes for the activity. During this time, the planning should include a review of their

vocations and the goals that have been set under each vocation. As these roles and goals are reviewed, time should be added to the schedule for fulfilling these roles and goals. As Covey would say, these are your “Big Rocks,” those vital things that have to be included in life for it to be full and productive. For the child of God, these “Big Rocks” should include time to be in the Word and receive the Sacrament. They also should include service to the church, according to our gifts.

Daily planning is done in much the same manner as weekly planning, but the scope obviously is on the particular day. Like weekly planning, daily planning should be done at the same time each day. The items put on the daily schedule are those that move the participants toward their goals. Items that are placed on the “to-do” list for the day during daily planning should allow for work on tasks that will result in proactive planning. The activities should be activities that prevent projects from becoming urgent and crises. Author Steven Covey called this type of planning “Quadrant II” living. Focusing on the important but not necessarily urgent activities of “Quadrant II” makes the vital difference in personal and organizational effectiveness.

“Quadrant I” activities are driven by crises. For example, firefighters often live within “Quadrant I,” but they improve their odds by spending time on prevention and education aimed at preventing a crisis. Staying in the “Quadrant I” mode too long leads to stress and burnout, based solely on crisis management and putting out fires.

Individuals should ideally spend 60 to 65 percent of their time in “Quadrant II” and 15 percent in “Quadrant I.” A “Quadrant II” approach ultimately leads to the greatest success. The results include vision, perspective, balance, discipline, empowered people and few crises. The result of this perspective, balance and discipline, should allow participants to discover time to serve the church and to use the time given by God for use in the kingdom.

Small group teaching leads to higher accountability

Research has shown that it takes 21 days to develop a new habit. Planning and time management are no exceptions. Instead of simply teaching the participants in your congregation, it is advisable to form small accountability groups to encourage the participants to put what they have learned into practice. It is recommended that the groups meet every two weeks to review how they are planning the use of their God-given time according to the roles God has given them to play in church, home and society. Groups should meet three times after the classes close to review and hold each other accountable for putting their learning into practice.

Conclusion

God has given us as gifts to one another in the church, home and society. He wants us to bless one another by fulfilling the roles He has given us to play in each of these spheres of life. But we can't be there for our families, our churches and our neighbors unless we make intentional plans to manage the time God has given us to fulfill these roles. The church is the right place to learn how to do this more effectively.

