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Money: A Spiritual Matter

by David Langerhans

"For many pastors, money is more difficult to talk about than sex," says Robert Wood Lynn, former executive with the Lilly Foundation. "Perhaps it is because they don't want to be called 'money-grubbing preachers,' which may reflect a long tradition in this country of not trusting ministers who are overly concerned with anything so worldly as money," suggests Lynn.

If Lynn is correct, then many pastors are not prepared to deal with an issue that occupies their parishioners' thoughts--and their own thoughts--much of the time, a subject of vital importance to the financial health of the local church and the church's whole mission.

The pastor is often excluded when congregations discuss money matters--either the raising or the spending of funds. This often occurs by the congregational leaders' design or by the pastor's desire. In either case, the pastor's theological understanding is not asked for or offered when significant decisions are made concerning the funding of the church's ministry and mission.

When the pastor is excluded from the financial ministry of the church, it is impossible for him or her to have a whole ministry to either the congregation or its members individually. Money is a major part of life. The pastor must have something to say about money, values, and giving as part of the whole Christian life.

For example, when pastors have premarital conferences with couples, the issue of the power of money and its use in relationships needs to be addressed. If this subject is not discussed, the pastor may officiate at the wedding only to find the couple back in a few months, having trouble at this very point in their marriage.

Some clergy fear dealing with money because it does have a very seductive power, which "spiritual matters" seemingly do not. So a pastor may err on the side of the spiritual, believing it to exclude money matters, rather than risk being thought of as a "money-grubbing preacher," in Lynn's words. But the fact is that a person's use of money is intimately connected to his or her values and spiritual life.

Jesus made the connection quite clearly in the Sermon on the Mount: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Here Jesus connects money and spirit very directly. He did not separate money and spirit as we do but saw the two as inseparable. He further said that the way money and gifts are handled has a direct relationship to how we honor him: the admonition to care for the least of those among us is well known.

Making clear the connection between religious values and attitudes toward money is part of the pastor's job and all the more reason ministers must be involved in the financial side of the congregation's life. In the church, without the influence of a good theology of money, money can become the idol at whose feet the leadership of the church comes to worship. In many ways in our society, the corner bank has

displaced the corner church as the place to turn when the chips are down. In John Steinbeck's *Winter of Our Discontent*, Ethan, a grocery clerk, describes the following scene:

"Morning, Ethan" said Mr. Baker, the banker. "Can you wait a minute? Come on into the bank." I followed Mr. Baker and it was just as Joey the teller said, like a religious ceremony. They practically stood at attention as the clock hand crossed nine. There came a click and buzzing from the great steel safe door. Then Joey dialed the mystic numbers and turned the wheel that drew the bolts. The holy of holies swung stately open and Mr. Baker took the salute of the assembled money. I stood outside the rail like a humble communicant waiting for the sacrament.

If we believe that money is the ultimate definer of worth, the final provider of security, then we stand in awe of money, we worship mammon; in fact, we treat money sacramentally. Luther wrote, "A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God."

The pastor has an opportunity to "de-sacramentalize" money and help people see it for what it really is: a means of exchange of value to be used by the church and its members for good. Money is never to be thought of as an end in itself. It is not that money does not provide the essentials for living, because it does in our society. Neither is money, in itself, evil. The effects of our attitudes toward money can become demonic, however, when money's purpose is distorted and we come to believe that it gives meaning to and defines worth in life. Money can be a demon when we live our lives seeking from money that which it cannot provide.

How people use the money they have and how the congregation collectively uses its money tells much about the condition of the heart, the values that are held sacred. It has been said, "Show me a person's check stubs and I will tell you what the person really believes." This can be said of the church's budget as well--and both should be the concern of the pastor who really wants to approach stewardship as something much more than just "raising the budget" by any means possible.

Stewardship is the process by which people are enriched as they learn to deal responsibly with what they have and what they give. People grow through their giving. They grow in the understanding of what the faith means in very concrete terms. They set goals, establish priorities, and achieve good ends as they work with others to achieve their mission as a church.

Giving does not take away from the giver, it enhances the giver. That's why the scriptures talk about the blessing of giving. This can be experienced only in the doing, and to take this away from people by depriving them of the opportunity for giving is to limit their potential growth in faith. Generous congregations--like generous people--tend to be happy congregations and people because they are making a difference in God's world. They are happy because they are using money and skills to reach out beyond themselves to others. They are happy because they care and give.

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"Christian ministry must include not only the prayer book, but also the pocketbook, and not only the pocketbook, but how people understand the careers that subsume most of their energy, the money they make (or wish they could make), their material possessions, and their views of the poor. That is a tall order. Too often, it is easier to stay mute on these issues or to treat them with nervous humor. It is much harder to get people to talk frankly about their money and to relate their faith to that part of their lives.

--Robert Wuthnow, from an address to the North American Conference on Christian Philanthropy, September, 1994.

The Discipline of Offering

"Let us offer ourselves and our gifts to God." Both offerings are important. Our gifts may include bread for the sacrament, food or blankets for those who need them, and money. One of the clear, specific, and, I would venture to say, countercultural practices to which the church has invited me is significant financial giving. Without the encouragement of this community I doubt that I would have formed a pattern of giving away a significant percentage of my income. In a culture that glorifies material affluence, one of the ironies is the steady drumbeat of the choruses of scarcity and greed, "not enough, not enough." I have learned to recognize this as the tempter's voice, and to discover that one of the ways we win some measure of victory over these fears is, paradoxically, by giving wealth away. We may also come to see our resources differently as we practice the discipline of offering. But this is not simply "giving." It is offering. It is ourselves we offer to God. Our gifts may be symbols of our daily labor and our weekday life brought to the altar on Sunday, but they are also symbols of ourselves, which we offer to God trusting that God will use us to serve and fulfill God's purposes.

--Anthony B. Robinson, *The Art of Faith: A Worship-Centered Approach to the Disciplines of Faith* (1995, United Church Board for Homeland Ministries). Anthony B. Robinson is senior minister of Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC, Seattle, Washington. *The Art of Faith*, an excellent 16-page booklet, may be ordered by calling toll-free 1-800-537-3394.

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