

Financial crisis is symptom of a spiritual crisis 09/10/03

Editor's Note : The following article is excerpted from a committee report in the [Pacific Northwest Annual Conference](#) on the financial crisis facing churches.

Despite real social and economic influences, research indicates that beneath the current financial crisis in mainline Protestant churches is a deeper spiritual crisis.

"The problem lies less in parishioners' pocketbooks than in their hearts and less in churches' budgets than in clergy's understanding of the needs and desires of their members' lives. It lies in a fundamental unwillingness on the part of clergy to confront the teachings within their own confessional heritage." (Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches: Spiritual Malaise, Fiscal Woe*).

Our churches are not shaped by a strong Methodist theology of Christian stewardship. Stewardship in the Pacific Northwest Conference of The United Methodist Church is often misunderstood and misinterpreted, as it is across mainline Protestantism.

Some define it as a giving campaign that happens every year in the fall while others see it as having to do with environmental issues. Some people see it as concerning their being trustees of all that God has blessed them with, while still others see it as financial and wealth management.

The term stewardship encompasses all of these and much more.

Stewardship defines the calling and the vocation of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is the sum and substance of the Christian life. "Clergy (and laity) are not addressing the intersection between work, money and faith. Too often messages from preaching and teaching about money lack theological and pastoral attention to the idea of vocation: What does it mean to be called by God? What does it mean to follow Christ?" (Chaves and Miller, *Financing American Religion*)

Without a strong emphasis and clear definition of Christian stewardship, research shows that "secular fundraising practices have corrupted and disfigured the image of generosity and love that are at the heart of Christian stewardship." (Michael O'Hurley-Pitts, *The Passionate Steward: Recovering Christian Stewardship from Secular Fundraising*).

United Methodist churches no longer form members as distinctively Methodist Christians. In the early days of Methodism the conference was the place where vision and strategy for evangelism and mission resided. Local churches were started as mission outposts of the conference.

Christian formation of members was a life-long process in small spiritual accountability groups. Generosity and support of connectional ministries with the poor were core values in the early Methodist movement.

"Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can," was a distinctively Methodist bumper sticker before Methodists had bumpers.

Today United Methodist leaders express strong congregational loyalty, but little investment and trust in the connectional expressions of the church, and a shriveled sense that by collecting our resources we could influence the world in significant ways.