



central conference of the evangelical covenant church

Sacrificial and Generous Living and Giving

Congregations discovering their own vitality almost always notice an increase in giving. One of the difficulties in talking about the 10 healthy missional markers is the tendency to treat each one as distinct and not truly interactive with each other. This is encouraged by the “quick fix” culture we find ourselves in. We believe if we can isolate our deficiencies we can fix them without too much inconvenience. This thinking is short sighted and never really engages the idea that it is the heart, or the culture as a whole that needs to change. And this challenge is never as clear as when we deal with money.

A couple years back, I received an email from my daughter Miriam who explained that she was in a biblical reflection group which met weekly around lunch at her company. She worked for a well-known financial analyst firm here in Chicago. They were discussing the story of Jesus feeding the 5000. “The loaves and fishes bit” as she called it. “Some of us discussed the reason we have difficulty giving our money away has to do with the struggle to believe that there will be a day when we won’t need it for ourselves, that we won’t be taken care of when the time comes. (My whole job is helping people save up for their future financial needs.)”

I’m thinking about this as I’m writing. It is a challenge for me personally to live with confidence that God desires to meet my needs, in spite of years of evidence to the contrary. And if you add my name to the list of many in our congregations who operate with long term financial anxiety, we have the creation of a “deficit” culture rather than a “generous” culture. A culture obsessed with survival as opposed to one focused on vision and mission. A congregational culture consumed with what it doesn’t have rather than grateful for the unique ways that God has gifted it.

Miriam continues, “So, it occurred to me that because of your ministry and how you were paid as we were growing up, I’ve already been “taken care of” financially. Everything we had (or 2/3 of it) was through the generosity of those who believed in what you were doing and decided to support your work. This was an interesting inversion from the “if I give this away will it come back to me down the line?” kind of thinking that I’m used to. I’ve already received more than I can give – a humbling thought.”

I exist in a generous culture... the church. I grew up witnessing story after story of God’s abiding faithfulness. Like my daughter, I too have been “taken care of” by our gracious and generous God. I know when we talk of sacrificial generosity we are not simply talking about money. People sacrifice generously of their time and talent as well. But, we are talking about money. Over the last couple of years, our churches and denominational entities have taken a hit through the recession. Many of us have had to adjust and these adjustments have been deeply painful. But, even in the midst of these struggles I have watched several congregations work through the anxiety to find new places of hope. Correspondingly, the new found hope is creating a climate of generosity, not just more money but a renewed emphasis on an asset base that God has given each church.

My prayer for all our congregations is a culture of sacrificial and generous living and giving which will further God’s mission in the world.

Peace

By: Rev. Peter Sjoblom, Director of Congregational Vitality