

Raising Generous Disciples: Shifting Our Stewardship Focus



#SEE ALL THE PEOPLE

“We cannot disciple people that we are not in relationship with. Discipleship begins with relationship.”

Rev. Junius Dotson

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www.SeeAllThePeople.org

This booklet is a companion piece to:

Developing an Intentional Discipleship System: A Guide for Congregations

by Rev. Junius B. Dotson

Introduction

When I first became the Director of Stewardship for Discipleship Ministries, my earliest encounters with church leaders seemed dominated by people whose definition of a stewardship resource person was “how are you going to help my church pay our bills.” I did not perceive fund-raising as the heart of this job when I applied; I understood a broader focus for my role in stewardship. That view seemed supported as the stewardship position was housed at the church’s discipleship agency rather than at the finance agency.

For me, stewardship involves growing disciples who live generously and faithfully with all that God has graciously given. Exhibiting gratitude, caring for creation, being compassionate and generous to those in need, living less wastefully in our use of resources, and making wise decisions about how we use the time and talent God has given us: These qualities filled my agenda. I focused on the vow we ask people to make when they join the church and acknowledge the journey of growing in discipleship: “Will you support the church with your prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness?”

I soon realized that churches needed help in both areas: funding ministry and helping shape disciples who are living generously and faithfully. Many United Methodist churches, especially in the United States, struggle to fund their mission in the midst of declining membership in a culture that is giving less attention and priority to organized religion.

Adaptive Versus Technical Leadership

Over the past decade, United Methodist leaders have been talking about the need for *adaptive leadership*. These leaders, when confronted by challenges, can offer more than technical solutions. For example, in churches where membership and income are in a decline, technical solutions may include making more appeals, listing offering amounts and budget deficits in the Sunday bulletin, slashing programs, or raising fees charged for outside group use. Adaptive solutions could include increasing the emphasis on telling the stories of individuals whose lives have been touched by the church's ministry or opening buildings to groups beyond the church to raise the visibility of the church within the community.

Responding to challenges with adaptive strategies acknowledges that what has worked in the past will not always lead to a desired future. As adaptive clergy and lay leaders, we don't necessarily discard what has worked in the past, but remain open to viewing circumstances differently to see what new solutions God may be revealing.

Photographers who use cameras with more advanced features than those of us who are accustomed to "point and shoot" know that by having control over the lens' depth of field and focus they have more control over which elements of image get our attention. A slight lens adjustment makes the foreground fuzzy and out of focus and brings the background into focus, and the photographer may reveal to us a more interesting subject.

When I speak with local church leaders about the need to find a broader focus for stewardship as an adaptive strategy to the challenges their congregations face, I often

talk about shifting the focus. I encourage a shift from one approach to stewardship to something different.

In speaking to annual conference groups across the United States, I've lifted up a variety of these shifts, sometimes as many as nine or ten. In the context of this small booklet, I've chosen three that I believe are particularly helpful for church leaders who see the importance of moving their congregations from a limited "paying-the-bills" view of stewardship to a view of stewardship that will encourage the growth of generous disciples for a world that desperately needs them.

Shift 1: From Seasonal to Continual

I list this shift first because of its fundamental nature. If you are a pastor or layperson in leadership in a congregation that talks about giving and generosity *only* when the annual campaign rolls around, you need to pay particular attention to this shift. If your church approaches the annual campaign with the attitude that "nobody likes to talk about money, but we have to do this once a year," this shift needs to be at the top of the list for you. However, if your church leadership doesn't plan an annual campaign and just hopes that somehow members will realize the need to grow in their giving each year, then this shift can really speak to your situation.

Let's be frank: A lot depends on whether we believe our church is in the business of fund-raising or the business of growing generous disciples. If your church's stewardship program focuses on raising the budget, then a two-week emphasis on giving somewhere around Thanksgiving but not too close to Christmas seems like a great solution.

However, if we assume that raising generous disciples is the church's driving passion, then we need not limit teaching about generosity to one season. Would we relegate teaching about prayer to two weeks in a season? Would we similarly relegate to a season our teaching on compassion, forgiveness, or the importance of studying God's word?

I'm not suggesting that pastors preach stewardship sermons every week or even every month. However, churches that successfully grow congregations and make a serious mission impact consistently employ a year-round strategy for keeping stewardship and generosity before the people.

For an example of what this might look like, download the booklet, "A Twelve-Month Plan for Stewardship" from:

www.umcdiscipleship.org/about/resource-booklets

A year-round strategy (or even a multiyear strategy) will allow your church to explore the breadth and depth of what it means in our present day to be faithful stewards of all God has entrusted to us. A year-round strategy offers opportunities to begin conversations in areas such as the following:

- Environmental stewardship
- Economic justice
- Stewardship lessons for children and youth
- Exploration of the dangers of "buy now, pay later"
- Consumerism, and the messages that bombard us from marketers about what will give our lives meaning, make us popular, pretty, successful, or loved—in contrast to Jesus' teaching
- Legacy and planned giving
- Learning to live faithfully in our giving and in our keeping

Shift 2: From Church-Centered (Budget-Driven) to Donor- Centered (Mission-Driven)

In its simplest form, this shift moves from a focus on the church's need for money to the disciple's need to give. Although this seems simple, it is a seismic shift for many churches and church members.

Many of United Methodists I've met in my travels long for the "glory days" of the church when pews were filled and Sunday school classrooms bulged at the seams. Recalling those images from the '50s and '60s, they also remember that the church had a monopoly on charitable giving. Social scientists now tell us that the golden age of the mainline church was a historical aberration. The generation that came through the Great Depression and went off to fight the Second World War returned to a nation where society pushed people into churches as a testimony to the virtue of the American way of life (that so many had given their lives to preserve) and in response to the new, growing threat of "godless communism." In simpler terms, an ethos in our US culture stipulated church or temple attendance for "good" people.

During those glory days, people placed great trust in the church and its leaders. People gave money to the church fully confident that the church would be better informed to use it the right purposes. Giving to what I call the "big bucket" of the church made provision for a better world and satisfied individuals' needs to look after their neighbors, here and abroad.

Many churches still operate out of the outdated model of a day when churches were still the presumptive recipients of the charitable giving of good people in the society. They assume that members still place that same confidence and trust in the church. If the church's budget increases by two percent, the members' giving will increase as well, and the church's needs will be met. In reality, we live in a world that offers people many other opportunities for charitable giving and—more specifically—giving opportunities that match their passions.

Churches can no longer simply make a case for the 2 percent budget increase. The present challenge is fourfold: First we communicate to people our mission which their giving supports and explain how lives are being transformed. Second, listen to where their passion lies. Thirdly, we help them see the joy that comes with generous giving and how growth in generosity will shape their growth as disciples of Jesus Christ. Finally, we communicate back to donors the impact their giving has made and offer thanks for their generous gifts.

While United Methodist churches still have people raised in and motivated by the early paradigm of “giving because the church needs money,” younger generations find this motivation much less appealing. I often hear church leaders say, “Our older members are dying, and our younger members don't give like the older ones did.” Sometimes they look to me for ways to “fix” these younger members.

I do not believe that generosity is lacking in these rising generations. Church leaders have not always listened carefully enough to what motivates our younger members to give, and we have not communicated the stories that reveal the kind of impact that gets them excited.

Shift 3: From Numbers to Narrative

My wife fondly states, “There are two kinds of people in the world: Word people and Excel people.” But the world’s complexities do not allow the delineation of its inhabitants by two applications in the Microsoft Office software bundle!

However, in the workshops I lead, I acknowledge that some hearts beat faster in the audience when I put a spreadsheet on the screen. Then I break the news to those folks that not all of us experience that same response to the sight of a relentless column of numbers. Some of us lack motivation until we hear the stories behind the numbers. Perhaps that confession supports my wife’s point of view. I’ll have to give that more thought.

If your church promotes fund-raising, dollars and cents will be your currency. If your church focuses on growing generous disciples, then stories will be what affects your bottom line.

I’m not suggesting that church leaders abandon spreadsheets and traditional budget and finance reports. They are important tools for financial stability, accountability, and transparency. However, if we see the importance of sharing a vision of how the church can transform the world through making and deploying disciples, then stories of impact are needed alongside our spreadsheet budgets to move people to generous giving in this present day.

I spoke at an annual conference laity session about the power of stories. I shared with them a story related to the campaign in The United Methodist Church to provide bed nets in African communities to prevent childhood deaths from malaria. I told the story of Domingos, a little boy who

contracted the disease and lost his life. At the end, I said something like, “Who in this room, after hearing that story, wouldn’t give ten dollars to buy a bed net and save a child’s life?” I went on to my next point in the talk; after about ten minutes a hand went up in the back. I called on the man, and he asked, “When are you going to let us give our money for the bed nets? I have twenty dollars here, and I know others here are wondering the same thing.” He brought the twenty dollar bill down and placed it on the edge of the stage; people started following him and doing the same. Person after person laid bills on the stage, more than \$1,500 total. In twenty-two years of preaching sermons, I had never been interrupted by a spontaneous call for an offering. That’s the power of stories.

If you can see the value in making the shift from a “church-centered, budget-focused” approach to a “donor-centered, mission-focused” one, you understand the power of stories. I believe with all my heart that humans beings deeply desire and often desperately need to experience the joy of being on the giving end of generosity.

This understanding of the power of stories reaches far beyond preparing a narrative budget. Many churches (I hope) send donors quarterly statements of their giving. What a great communication opportunity to tell a story of a place where the church’s ministry is making a positive impact! What a great way to make those statements feel less like a bill (or collection notice) and more like a sincere thank-you and a report of how giving is making a difference in the world! (For more information on improving quarterly statements, check out this short piece: “Send Quarterly Statements That Make the Right Statement” at www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/send-quarterly-statements-that-make-the-right-statement).

Finally, another great opportunity for storytelling comes each Sunday morning in the midst of worship: that “golden minute” when the entire gathered congregation awaits

the invitation to participate once again, to support the mission and ministry of Christ's church. With every mind and heart focused on the act of giving, it becomes an awesome time to share a brief sentence or two about lives touched and transformed by generosity. You will find a great piece titled "The Offering Moment" at www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/the-offering-moment.

Closing Words

As I travel across the church and I share these three shifts (and several others) with church leaders, I remind them that you don't have to tackle all the shifts at once. I believe the best way to get traction on any of these shifts is to have less formal conversations with persons who might be interested, to build some momentum and achieve what Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Tipping Points* refers to as critical mass. You'd be surprised what a difference that can make.

It's hard to lead people through change, especially in a world where change comes at us so quickly. Many of our members long for the church to be an area immune from the change that reshapes the rest of the world. Traditions can be respected, without deluding ourselves that we can be insulated within the walls of the church.

Maybe that's where we find the answer, in realizing that the church Christ calls us to be is not within the walls of our buildings but outside those walls, meeting and getting to know neighbors, listening to their needs and longings, and finding ways to reconnect those same people to the God who longs to be part of their living and growing, part of their search for a full and abundant life.

Discipleship Ministries has three strategic priorities for our work in The United Methodist Church:

- An intentional disciple-making process in every church;
- Engagement with people currently outside the church;
- Cultivating local (contextual) resources around the globe.

We realize that the first step to making this a reality is to encourage people inside the church to move outside their walls and see and meet the people who are all around them. This is embodied in a new campaign and website to resource United Methodists for this work: #SeeAllThePeople. Sign up for free, downloadable resources for your congregation by visiting **www.SeeAllThePeople.org**.

Finally, remember that you are not alone. We are a connectional church and there are people in your conference and in the worldwide church who are committed to helping you be the church Christ needs you to be in this present age. If there is any way I can help you or connect you to others locally or globally to strengthen your church's witness, please let me know.

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About the Author



The Rev. Dr. Ken Sloane is the UMC's Director of Stewardship & Connectional Ministries, housed at Discipleship Ministries (GBOD) in Nashville, TN. He is a clergy member of the Greater New Jersey Conference, where he served 20+ years in local church ministry (including a successful new church start) and 5 years as the Director of Connectional Ministries. In 2006 he was appointed to serve as Director of Communications Ministry at United Methodist Communications, and traveled extensively across the denomination doing presentations on how to interpret connectional giving to our local churches. He moved into his Stewardship role on October 1, 2011, and additionally is the general agency staff person for the Association of Directors of Connectional Ministries.

Ken's work supports local church leaders in the areas of stewardship and finance. He travels to conferences and districts to do workshops on topics such as growing generous disciples, digital giving, best practices for handling money and how to do church audits, interpreting connectional giving to congregations, and many more. He does 6 to 8 webinars a year that are available to leaders from around the globe and are provided without charge thanks to your church's support of the World Service Fund. The schedule of webinars coming up as well as past webinars that have been recorded and can be watched at your convenience can be found at **www.umcdiscipleship.org/webinars**.

Find a variety of resources on the stewardship webpage at **www.umcdiscipleship.org/stewardship**, and you are invited to become a part of UMC Stewardship Facebook community at **www.facebook.com/umcstewardship**.



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The United Methodist Church

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