This study document was prepared in response to GA-1536 which authorized the Center for Faith and Giving to prepare a Study Document on Understanding Stewardship as a Spiritual Discipline.

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A Point of Origin and Direction

This document is presented as a response to the charge of the General Assembly (GA 1536), meeting in 2015 at Columbus, Ohio, to offer for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) a study and reflection document on stewardship – specifically understanding stewardship as a spiritual discipline and its practical applications for the 21st Century.

The Center for Faith and Giving, tasked with undertaking this responsibility, presents to the General Assembly, meeting July 8-12, 2017, at Indianapolis, IN, a biblical reflection, a series of theological assertions, and some recommendations for the church to consider, along with the commitment to establish and curate resources in the long-term for the continued in-depth study of stewardship.

This document serves as a broad examination of the biblical materials that relate to the topic of stewardship, with an intent that the church become conversant with these fundamental understandings. It further provides a theological perspective which is
intended to encourage dialogue and conversation within the church about what stewardship is, and what it means to be a steward as an individual, a community of faith, and a part of God’s wondrous creation.

Assumptions are proposed regarding practical applications if the perspective of the document is followed to some of its potential conclusions. Suggestions as to how these assumption/conclusions might interface with the context of the early 21st century are offered at the end of these pages. We recognize that not everyone will share the same conclusions/assumptions of the document. That is acceptable since unity of opinion on how to be a steward in a singular way is not the primary goal. Our objective is to better define what a steward is and thus to open a conversation. We trust that the church in its wisdom will discover what a steward does in the unique contexts in which individuals and communities of faith are located.

The curation of resources is one important outcome of this assigned task and it is a logical culmination of our ongoing work given the following circumstances: 1) The sheer volume of the materials required for in-depth study cannot be contained in this type of document; 2) the changing nature of our context, requiring a more nimble ability to adjust to the contemporary social and political climate, which would appropriately dictate the tone and focus of such statements; and 3) the fact that in this age of easy access via electronic means, a more comprehensive and divergent mosaic of materials can be made available to a wider audience at little or no cost with unlimited access to those seeking the information.¹

By the church receiving this document, it is commissioning the development of additional resources from a “Disciples” perspective on all aspects of stewardship for study and reflection into the next decade.

The Biblical Witness and Theological Assertions about Stewardship

Biblical stewardship, broadly defined, is the intentional management of resources (all living things in and of the earth and their produce) on behalf of the rightful owner, who is God.

Abundance and Care for the Earth: The biblical and theological grounding for stewardship is found first in the creation stories. The poem of Genesis 1 affirms God’s delight in all that springs from the Divine imagination. Each day the conclusion is the

¹ The Center for Faith and Giving envisions an access port via our website to videos, articles, essays, curriculum, an extensive bibliography, and a conduit to other collections of stewardship-related materials. In many respects, the Center for Faith and Giving website currently operates in this regard. However, this portal can serve as a central location where connections to stewardship-related ministries within the whole church can be identified and accessed. For example, pointed connections on the Center for Faith and Giving website to the Green Chalice ministry within Disciples Home Missions can list assets and materials for those who visit the CFG site seeking earth-stewardship-related resources. A mirror index on the CFG website of these materials within Green Chalice would allow for easier access and quicker discovery. By its very presence on the CFG site, it affirms holistic and a less fragmented view of stewardship.
same, “God saw that it was good.”

In fact, on the sixth day, it is not simply good, but it is “very good.” This embrace of the material world by the God who is wholly “Other” sets the relational tone for all that follows. God and “the world” are inextricably linked. Going forward, the choices of one will in some way impact the other. This interrelatedness is a Divine prerogative – and choice will become a marker of the human creature created in God’s image, as well. This includes the choice to love God and practice obedience to God’s desires.

As the creation narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that there is an abundance within the Divine design. The text implies a wild array of living creatures (winged things that wing, creeping things that creep, swimming things that swim), and ample sustenance for all of these beings as God has “given every green plant for food.”

Further evidence that this abundance is present and intended to be a permanent condition is contained within the first portion of the Divine command/promise to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...” The abundance of the earth is self-generating and perpetual. Plants have seeds and trees have seed within the fruit for a never-ending cycle of plants weighed heavy with grain and tree branches laden with produce. There is enough. The needs of creation are attended to by Divine providence.

Concepts of abundance and the well-being of “enough,” however, do not mean that the earth can be subject to mindless exploitation. There is no sense or endorsement within the text that every want can be sustained or must be satisfied. A choice is to be made for the management of resources. The second portion of the Divine command/promise is to “…subdue it [the earth]; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Made in the image of God, the human beings are to rule in the earth in the same manner that God rules in the cosmos. God governs for the good and well-being of creation. Humans must exercise their designated power in the same manner. This is the goal of stewardship.

Stewardship, while not specifically stated in the Genesis poem, is strongly inferred. “And God said ‘Let there be...’” as well as later biblical affirmations that “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it...” remind us that we are the creation, not the Creator. The world, its produce and its inhabitants belong to God. Human beings, in exercising dominion, do so on behalf of God. Therefore, doing as God would do matters and is a form of obedience. We are stewards, not owners. Our own mortality affirms we are at best temporary tenants and shareholders of what we claim to possess. We are

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2 Gen 1:4; Gen 1:10; Gen 1:12; Gen 1:18; Gen 1:21; Gen 1:25
3 Gen 1:31
4 Gen 1:20, 1:24
5 Gen 1:29-30
6 Gen 1:28a
7 Gen 1:28b
8 Gen 1:3
9 Ps 24:1
accountable for the way we express and exercise our dominion. There are consequences for both good and poor stewardship.

In the second creation story (Genesis 2:4b-25), the concept of the human being functioning as caretaker is again expressly stated. Genesis 2:15 states that “God took the human creature and put him in the garden of Eden to protect and serve it.” The human has a vocation, and in fulfilling that labor of “tending,” the garden flourishes. Not only is this a stewardship function but it is also in the best interest of the garden’s inhabitants, including the human! There is a direct relationship between the health of the planet and the health of all living things which inhabit the earth. It was indeed paradise, but what made it so was the presence of God, not the absence of work. To act as a steward is to fulfill a part of the human calling.

**Sabbath:** The dual themes of abundance and relationship continue with the dawn of the seventh day: Sabbath. The very proclamation/observance of Sabbath is a way of stating that God has provided *enough.* Labor is only required for six days, yet there is provision for seven. This is abundance! The fear of scarcity and the anxiety of want can be laid to rest and need not drive or define our psyche.

Sabbath also expresses the nature of the Divine/human relationship. It reminds us that we are the created, not the Creator. The world does not exist solely because of our frenetic activity. It exists because of the providential nature of God. God has commanded rest and built it into the fabric of creation. To do violence to this command is to deny God’s generosity and to risk a form of existential amnesia. We forget who we are (the creation) and Whose we are (the Creator).

Several texts that pertain to Sabbath reinforce these themes. Exodus 16 is the story of the manna in the wilderness that further affirms abundance and provision. Not only is this the bread that God gives, but each household has exactly what they need. To hoard the manna (to keep it over for the next day, out of fear it would not appear or out of greed or sloth) would lead to its becoming wormy and vile – except for the day before the Sabbath, when a double portion could be collected and would not spoil. The context of the story is set over against the wider wilderness-wandering theme of trust. Will Israel believe in the God of deliverance? As the Christian Church, we of course hear, echoes of Jesus’ prayer “give us this day our daily bread” as we read about the manna. Do we believe God will provide?

The record of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 affirms that Sabbath is kept because God rested and commanded creation to do the same. It is worth noting that

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10 Translation provided by Rev. Dr. Carol Johnston, Christian Theological Seminary.
11 Gen 3:8
12 Exod 16:15
13 Exod 16:18
14 Exod 16:20
15 Matt 6:11;
16 Exod 20:8-11
all the community is to rest – including servants, sojourners [the alien], and beasts of burden. This agency is extended even to the land in Leviticus 25, though the cycle of rest for the land is in years as opposed to days.\textsuperscript{17} Everything needs rest. Provision will be made and rest can be taken. One part of creation is not to abrogate the rights of another on this issue.

An account of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5 moves us to another consideration regarding the meaning of Divine and human relationship. Here, the reason for Sabbath keeping is the deliverance from Pharaoh’s bondage and God breaking the yoke of slavery. We mention it here because it has at some level an economic significance, and stewardship is in part about money and economic systems. Some scholars believe that the Decalogue is, in point and fact, more about social-economic relationships than a moral code.\textsuperscript{18} As to Deuteronomy 5:12-15, a few salient points follow.

First, the weekly observance of the Sabbath is a regular reminder of God’s powerful act of deliverance (not simply a reminder of the Divine rest on the seventh day of creation). Slaves do not get a day off and the freedom they enjoy comes not from their own strength, but from God’s “mighty outstretched hand.”\textsuperscript{19} Second, the reason the slaves labored under Pharaoh was to create bricks for supply cities – Pharaoh’s hedge against the unreliable gods of Egypt who produce with inconsistent abundance. Third, the relationship between Israel and Egypt is economic (cheap labor enforced by the hegemony of Egypt’s military). Pharaoh is anxious about brick tallies, and Israel’s relationship to the ruler of the Nile is based solely on their ability to produce building materials.

God’s deliverance of Israel however, is not related to what Israel can produce. It is a choice by God, having heard the cries of their oppression, to deliver them, not for what economic value Israel may possess, but rather for their intrinsic worth to God as a part of the creation. God does not deliver the people of Israel to create a new labor force.

This distinction is significant. God’s covenant will be based on relationship, not an economic contract, which will thus impact the relationships among the people themselves. Take, for example, the command to honor mother and father.\textsuperscript{20} In a social system that values life for its quality and quantity of production, honoring aging parents who cannot contribute to the production schedule becomes problematic. In fact, the entire second tablet of the law is about what makes human community possible and the character of those relationships. Living peacefully with neighbor will include the command to not covet the neighbor’s belongings. As it relates to stewardship, this will come to light when we consider financial and material goods below.

\textsuperscript{17} Lev 25:1-7
\textsuperscript{19} Exod 5:15
\textsuperscript{20} For additional consideration of this idea, see \textit{Sabbath As Resistance}, Walter Brueggemann, John Knox Press, 2014.
Stewardship as Loving Attention to Body and Mind: Jewish thought understands not that we have a body, but that in fact we are a body. The bifurcation and separation of body from spirit comes late into the church’s self-understanding and comprises only a narrow percentage of Second Testament thought. To love God with body, mind, and soul in harmony would have been familiar to Jesus as well as Paul. It is true that gnostic and ascetic movements grew alongside of and within the early church. We don’t deny that there are believed benefits from suppressing the urges of the body [flesh] in favor of strengthening the spirit. At the same time, we affirm that God proclaimed on the sixth day that the material creation (including embodied human creatures) was “very good.”

This colors our perspective on the value not only of our own bodies, but on the entire created order itself. We might further appeal to the apocalyptic biblical literature that suggests that even the “new heaven and new earth” 21 will in fact be material in nature, however perfect (not susceptible to corruption) it might be imagined. That “God’s place is among mortals”22 and that God will still “give water to the thirsty”23 further suggests a realm that is not simply spiritual and disembodied, but still somehow physical in nature. That this form would continue in an eternal state validates and affirms material being.

When Paul suggests in Romans “…to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God…”24 we know that he has moral purity in mind (this ties to his understanding that the body and spirit are intimately related so that what we do with our body impacts our spirit). But, we can also infer that to offer the body as a sacrifice entails giving God the best of what we have to offer. A body broken down by abuse and poor health habits is far from the best “living sacrifice” we might produce! Such a body cannot manifest the full capacity of its offerings and deployment of its assets. Thus, failure to care for ourselves functions as a poor steward of a magnificent gift.

The body should be honored. It contains the indwelling treasure of the gospel25 and is a temple for the Holy Spirit.26 Care for self, including rest (tied to Sabbath), renewal, and providing for the body’s good health are tethered to stewardship. When issues of quality healthcare being available to all people arise, we can understand this as being related to stewardship. Bodily health concerns, as addressed by prophets, Jesus, and the apostles view healing as God’s preference. Poor health separates one from the community, and the failure to treat curable disease denies a person desired wholeness. It follows that moving available resources in the direction of human wellness and wholeness is an aspect of faithful stewardship within the context of forming and sustaining community.

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21 Rev 21:1  
22 Rev 21:3  
23 Rev 21:6  
24 Rom 12:1  
25 2 Cor 4:7  
26 1 Cor 6:19
Stewardship and the Gospel: “You are stewards of the many-colored graces of God.” When the author of 1 Peter makes this statement it resonates with the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:1 that we [the church] are “the stewards of God’s mysteries.” Here the Greek leaves no doubt. It is not an inference but it is direct: oikonomos is translated “steward.”

We are stewards of the gospel. Those who follow Jesus, who have made a confession of faith, received the waters of baptism, and been given the gift of the Holy Spirit are stewards – caretakers of the Good News of God’s unending love for creation, a love that death itself cannot conquer. That love is present at creation and is displayed most fully in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This is the church’s ultimate story, our most treasured of entrusted gifts, and it is ours to tell as faithful stewards.

Stewardship and evangelism are related to each other. We have a light to shine and we must not put it under a bushel. The simplicity of the task and the gravity of its importance appear mismatched. We must tell our story because it has the power to transform lives. Transformed lives have the power to change the world. Failure to be a steward of the gospel not only risks others not coming to know its power, but for the story (in the particular way that we, as the Disciples of Christ, know it) to not reach beyond this generation. It is not about our own survival, yet we acknowledge that something in the wider stream of Christian thought and witness will be lost without our tributary adding to its ever-flowing river.

The Disciples of Christ tradition has long lifted the ministry of Andrew as “one who brings others to Christ”. In story after story we learn that, despite Jesus’ urging to do otherwise, those who witness his power and are moved by his teachings are compelled to share the story of Jesus with others. To encounter Christ is to encounter an experience worth sharing.

Per the synoptic gospels, upon his ascension into heaven, Jesus gives the great commission to the disciples [the church] “to go into all the world and proclaim the good news” – leaving it for us to do in his physical absence, as a steward would manage the household in the absence of the master. Prior to this, Jesus had also sent the disciples on a mission to proclaim the Realm of God. In the record of the four evangelists, when Jesus is talking to the disciples, he is talking to us [the church]. Sharing the gospel is not optional; it is our vocation as followers of Jesus.

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27 1 Pet 4:10, translation: Rev. Dr. Ronald J. Allen, Christian Theological Seminary
28 Rom 8:38-39
29 Matt 5:15
30 John 1:41
31 The cross of St. Andrew is emblazoned upon our chalice as a reminder of our Scottish Presbyterian roots; Andrew is the Patron Saint of Scotland.
32 Mark 1:28; 1:45; 2:7; 5:20; 6:56; and 7:36-37 as examples.
33 Matt 28:20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47
34 Matt 10:7; Mk 6:12; Lk 9:2
Stewardship and Resources, Money, and Possessions: We begin by noting that this relationship between ourselves and our possessions is often characterized in the bible as one of choice. "No one can serve two masters; for a slave, will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon [wealth]." It is a clear-cut choice. Money makes a powerful servant but a lousy master. We get to pick, but we must also understand the consequences of our choice. If we choose the possession of money as our source of security and place of our ultimate loyalty, it will be like trying to collect water with a sieve. There will never be enough to protect the well-being of our soul and there will always be a desire for "just a little more," and then "just this much more," and so on, in a never-ending cycle. That which is less than the ultimate cannot ultimately satisfy.

When you can give money away, you demonstrate your power over it. When you cannot, it displays its power over you. The three synoptic gospels each tell of a man (the composite picture of whom is a "rich, young ruler") who presents himself before Jesus with a question – a query about that which most of us would wish to have a clear answer: "What must I do to inherit the Realm of God?" Jesus begins by quoting the second tablet of the Law, the things that make human community possible. Jesus then, upon hearing the man’s reply that he “has done all these things,” presses him still further. “Go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor so you will have treasure in heaven, then come and follow me.”

Jesus sets before the man a choice: Divest your money and place it toward the values of the Realm (taking care of the poor) and follow me, or stay with your stuff and miss what ultimately matters. This or that. The man goes away sad, for he had many possessions, or perhaps more accurately stated, his many possessions had him. He chose poorly, selecting his lifeless wealth over the Living God. The strength of the pull of our possessions should not be underestimated.

The nature and clarity of the decision are reminiscent of the first two of the great commandments: You shall have no other gods before God; and, you shall not create an image or worship anything that is "in the heaven above, on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." The First Testament reminds us in an oft-repeated mantra that our things cannot save us. When Joshua prepares the people of Israel to cross over the Jordan and enter the land of promise, he reminds the people of the power of God that has been displayed on their behalf, and demands that they make a choice: Will they serve God or will they wander after foreign gods?

35 Matt 6:24
37 Mark 10:21
38 Exod 20:4
39 Josh 24
When in need, Israel has (at least part of the time!) chosen to trust God; and God has
(all the time) been the trustworthy provider in the desert wilderness. Now, when they
are to enter a land flowing with milk and honey, will they remember the source of their
abundance? Prosperity is as great a threat to the faithful handling of our possessions
as is being in want. When times are good, are we as generous as we might be? Are
we still aware of the ultimate source of our abundance? Or, do we think it is because of
our own hard work or other good fortune? Do we become more judgmental about those
who do not share in prosperity, perhaps believing them to be lazy? The warnings
(particularly in Deuteronomy 8) pertaining to the risk of unfaithfulness in the midst of
plenty are aimed at precisely this fact. Don’t forget the true source of your provision.

Those things that would lure us away from true discipleship are rarely easily identified
as such. Temptation is often subtler in its appearance. Consider the choice placed
before our primordial ancestors and the nature of its presentation! “The serpent was
more crafty [subtle] than any other creatures…” Even the choice in the garden itself is
a quest for more than what was deemed to be enough – to be more than human (eat
the fruit and become like God). A choice was made to live in the world on our own
terms instead of on God’s terms, the consequences of which were/are harsh and
damaging to all the relationships in the creation. Stewardship is about rightful ownership
(it is all God’s) and thus “rightful place” (we are entrusted with its care as managers) in
the created order. It is also about contentment with “enough” in contrast to the
insatiable desire for more.

This acquisitiveness is a human condition which can undermine our trust in God, our
relationships with one another, and the faithful stewardship of our resources. It’s
connections to the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th commandments are obvious (the prohibitions
against adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting). To take or desire that which does not
belong to us, as opposed to being content with what we have, makes living in human
community impossible. To take more than we need at the expense of another or to
abuse the truth for our personal gain does violence to the neighbor and denies God’s
provision and abundance, which is for the whole of creation. To be in fear that what we
have will be lost due to the actions of another creates defensive postures, relationships
shadowed by mistrust, and self-justification for hoarding.

Jesus says, “Do not store up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and
where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For
where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Despite wanting to believe that
our money will naturally flow toward the ventures of the heart and the spirit, Jesus says
something quite different. It is more than a mere suggestion that the condition of our
heart can be seen in the ledger of our debit card statement. Find your money and you
will find your heart. Your checkbook (and the church budget, for that matter) is a
theological document.

40 Gen 3:1
41 Matt 6:19-21
Are we investing in the values of the Realm of God (storing treasures in heaven), or are we engaged in something else? Have we been generous toward those things that lead to justice, wholeness, and hope, or have we been seeking more “stuff” because our current possessions have failed to truly satisfy us?

This question of acquisitiveness is not solely for the individual. It can apply to our institutions, as well. To steward well the resources entrusted to us as communities of faith should include an examination of our property, our “reserve” funds, and all our assets (physical, human, and spiritual) that we hold in common trust. Are they all employed well in service to the mission to which God has called us? Are we clear on what that mission is? The human existential questions of “Who am I?” and “What am I to do?” are meaningful for organizations as well as individuals. They are the perpetual questions of a church that understands itself to be reformed and ever-reforming, thus seeking to know God afresh in this time and place.

We noted that the relationship with our material goods, especially our money, is presented as a choice. Wealth and resources are themselves treated as value-neutral in most biblical passages that pertain to them. The real issue of concern is, what is our relationship with these things? In what ways do we define them or allow them to define us? The author of 1 Timothy reminds us that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” When our desire is for money and material things in and of themselves, we risk potential damage to ourselves and others. Most of us need little imagination to connect this truth to the devastation left in the wake of those (both individuals and corporations) whose only pursuit in life has been the acquisition of more. Such desire can fragment relationships and exploit resources, both human and natural.

Luke’s gospel reminds us of a farmer whose land produced in immense abundance, so much so that his current barns could not hold all that the fields had produced. In a conversation he has only with himself (absent of others or accountability to God), he plans to raze his old barns, build new ones adequate for the task, and “eat, drink, and be merry for the rest of his days.” As Jesus tells the story, it concludes with “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And all those things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, but whose lives are not rich toward God.”

We would note here that conversations about legacy are important for individuals and congregations. Have we made provisions for that moment when our own lives (or the sustainable life of our institutions) will “be required of us?” Understanding our stewardship is “whole life” in nature would suggest that conversations about everything from organ donation and the way we approach a funeral (especially cost), to being intentional about leaving planned gifts for organizations that have changed our lives or the lives of others, should be important. Other non-profits have not been afraid to ask

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42 1 Tim 6:10
43 Luke 12:13-21
their donors and supporters to consider making a gift (perhaps the most generous gift a person will ever make) at the end of life; shouldn’t the church be willing to ask for the same consideration?

Instead of flowing freely into a community for the benefit of all, wealth can become concentrated among a few, and thus its blessings of assuring enough for others can be withheld at the expense of those others. Money was not originally intended to be a commodity, but rather a temporary medium of exchange. Eric Law reminds us that “when we lost sight of the original purpose of money and decided to accumulate it as a commodity, rather than keeping it moving as medium of exchange, we created economic problems.”

We see at the beginning of this century how this becomes a concern for the practice of stewardship and its impact at global level. It was reported in January 2017 that eight individuals had amassed a combined wealth greater than the total resources of 50% of the planet’s population! This staggering figure suggests a problem both in the management of resources for the greater good and for the flow of money in the wake of global poverty. It is true that several individuals of this “gang of eight” are generous with their wealth and have invested in programs that are designed to help those in desperate need. However, it is not unfair to ask, when so many go without basic essentials for life, “How many billions of dollars do you need after the first billion?” The concentration of wealth among such a few, while permitted in supply-side and free-market economic systems, appears contrary to all acceptable biblical models. How much is enough?

At issue is not solely that some are wealthy and some are not. The concern is the sanctioned systemic process whereby money is transferred to a concentrated few at the expense of others through suppressed wages, which harm the very people who produce the goods and services. It is further exacerbated when, due to insufficient earnings, people are forced into indebtedness to purchase necessary goods for survival. When lenders are unscrupulous, the rates of interest too high, or the terms of loans unreasonable, the cycle is virtually unbreakable, and even more money flows from the many to the few. Welcome the new Pharaoh! The practice of the empire in the ancient world achieved this through taxes, indentured servitude, and outright government-sanctioned theft. The prophets railed against the nation of Israel when it imitated this behavior, seeing it as a violation of the laws God had set in place, and the prophets believed that such actions contributed to the downfall and subsequent exile of Israel.

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44 Dr. Eric Law, Holy Currencies; Chalice Press, St. Louis, MO. 2013 p. 133ff
45 ibid
46 Reported by Oxfam and CBS Evening News on January 17, 2017. Bill Gates, $75 billion; Amancio Ortega, $67 billion; Warren Buffett, $60.8 billion; Carlos Slim Helu, $50 billion; Jeff Bezos, $45.2 billion; Mark Zuckerberg, $44.6 billion; Larry Ellison, $43.6 billion; Michael Bloomberg, $40 billion. This is said to equal the economic power of 3.6 billion people, or roughly one half of the world’s population.
47 Amos 2:6-7; 5:10-12; 6:3-7, 12; 8:4-6; Is 2:1-11; Micah 2:1-5; 6:9-15
That said, the church also has an obligation to be in ministry with the wealthy and to
tend to their spiritual needs, rather than to dismiss them as evil or worthy only of
condemnation. While scholars within the church have clearly pointed to God’s
preferential option for the poor,\(^{48}\) that is not meant to counter the well-being of the rich.
Jesus says that “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the
rich to enter the Realm of God.”\(^{49}\) Therefore, it is incumbent on the church to educate
the wealthy on their responsibilities toward those in need and their opportunities to lift-
up the human dignity of each child of God. Naming the dangers of wealth and its: 1)
ability to insulate one from the suffering of another, and 2) the reliance on money
instead of God, is part of our vocation in proclaiming the whole gospel.

To suggest that God loves the poor more than the rich would be to deny both God’s
love and God’s grace to each individual person. Rich and poor alike and together have
both spiritual and physical needs to which the church has equal responsibilities. At the
same time, we acknowledge that to the one to whom much has been given, much is
expected.\(^{50}\) Those who have wealth are often concerned about how it should be used.
They are also aware of how it can label or identify them in confining ways uniquely
similar to how the lack of money defines and limits the identity of those who are poor.

**Stewardship and Generosity:** The model upheld for the people of God is one of
sharing resources. Both Testaments leave little doubt that economic protections for the
poor and the vulnerable are not to be ignored. These prescriptions include laws that
pertain to gleaning,\(^{51}\) to what may be held as collateral,\(^{52}\) the charging of interest,\(^{53}\) the
fair payment of wages,\(^{54}\) the canceling of debts,\(^{55}\) and generosity toward the poor
(which include the widow, the orphan, and the alien/sojourner).\(^{56}\)

\(^{48}\) Catholic Encyclicals dating back to 1891 *Rerum Novarum* take up the cause of the poor. Most recently Pope
Francis’ *Laudato Si’* links the suffering of the poor to the environment devastation we have unleashed upon the
earth and its impact on the impoverished who suffer from its effects on their land (climate change) and within
their bodies (pollution). All of this is within a sound condemnation for unbridled consumerism and its effect on
both spiritual and physical wellbeing. Disciples should note in our own history in this area of concern that includes
**GA 8735** “Economic Systems – Their Impact on the Third World – A Beginning Study” which contains a section on
Christian Affirmations: *The Judeo-Christian tradition emphasizes special concern for the poor* and further states *A
Christian will require any economic system to give and account of how it will improve the lot of the poor.*
(Paragraph 39)

\(^{49}\) Matt 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25
\(^{50}\) Luke 12:48
\(^{51}\) Deut 24:19-22; Lev 19:9-10
\(^{52}\) Deut 24:6, 10-13
\(^{54}\) Deut 24:17-18; James 5:4
\(^{55}\) Deut 15:1-11; see also Lev 25:10
\(^{56}\) Deut 14:28-29; Deut 26:12. In addition, the following texts (among others) emphasize the importance of giving
to the poor: Prov 19:17; Prov 22:9; 14:21; Prov 21:13; Is 58:7-8; Heb 12:16; Matt 5:42; 1 Tim 5:8; Luke 3:11; Jas
1:27
Concern for the poor is stated most emphatically in Deuteronomy and the appeal to 
“…not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather 
open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. … Give 
liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will 
bless you, your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be 
some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and 
needy neighbor in your land.’”57

The faithful keeping of these laws will have its own economic impact on the people, for 
God promises that if the commandments are kept, there will be life and prosperity. For 
Israel, and the land it is about to occupy, failure to do so will result in the blessing of 
God being removed, which will end in death and alienation.58 The ideal behavior for the 
church to aspire is one where all things are held in common, so that there is no need 
within the community.59 This is not to be understood as an imposed economic system 
(such as socialism), but rather a way of living that is truly egalitarian in nature, brought 
about through the reconciliation of all things in Jesus Christ. Further, within the church, 
there is to be no partiality shown between the rich and the poor, for to do so is to 
commit a sin.60 In fact, to fail to address the needs of the neighbor is to be in 
possession of a faith that is dead.61

Such a way of being in the world is an outgrowth of discipleship flowing from the people 
outward, rather than imposed by authority or compulsion. The Jerusalem offering and 
Paul’s appeal for its collection is one model of this behavior within the Second 
Testament. There is a need among the “saints” in Jerusalem, and Paul has agreed to 
seek financial assistance from the gentle churches in Asia Minor and Greece.62 We first 
learn of this offering at the end of the First Epistle to the Corinthians,63 as Paul instructs 
the church gathered there to prepare for his coming. He encourages the Corinthians to 
approach this offering with intentionality and discipline. Each week they are to set aside 
something, so that when he arrives they will have the gift ready. That this gift is being 
received over time suggests it is indeed a generous offering to meet a substantial need. 
The idea that an offering is given with thought and preparation is worth noting as we 
consider our own approach to such an act in our own congregations. Indeed, taking 
time to be prepared both to make and to receive the offering is worthy of our best 
efforts.

57 Deut 15:7-8, 10-11; This text is also restated by Jesus in Matt 5:42.
58 Deut 30:15-20
60 James 2:1-10
61 James 2:14-16
62 It is not completely clear if this offering is specifically for the poor in Jerusalem proper, or if this offering is to be 
received by the Jerusalem church which will serve as a clearing house for the distribution of this money. If it is the 
latter, one could argue the idea of a common mission fund, such as Disciples Mission Fund, has its origin in scripture. Either way, the idea of a disciplined and intentional offering for those beyond the immediate context of the local community yet done in partnership with other communities of faith is compelling for the Christian Church which understands its mission to be “From our doorsteps to the end of the earth”.
63 1 Cor 16:1-2
In Second Corinthians (chapters 8 & 9) we learn the details of Paul’s case for support of the Jerusalem saints. It is important to note that Paul does not use guilt, though he certainly appeals to the Corinthians’ sense of pride by encouraging them “not to be outdone” by the churches of Macedonia. While remarking that the Corinthians have excelled in many things, he now wants them to excel in generosity. He does not want them to give beyond their means, but he does expect them to give liberally. There is a call to a careful examination of conscience and an honest appraisal of individual capacity. Paul suggests a balance between the Corinthian’s abundance and the need in Jerusalem, with the possibility of a reciprocity in the future. Paul refers to the story we explored above in Exodus 16 regarding the manna in the wilderness. “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.” Abundance has not come at the expense of another. In this case, the one who has given to the one who has not, so that all have “enough” and no one goes without.

That this gift should be generous is made clear in Paul’s reference to Jesus Christ, “who though he was rich became poor for our sake.” This further affirms the idea that the gift itself is meaningful and offered with thought. Generosity looks like Jesus. It is not without cost or sacrifice. As disciples, we, too, are called to give with liberality. To sow sparingly is to reap sparingly, cautions Paul, so we are to sow bountifully with an expectation to reap bountifully. And here, Paul sets the giving as an act of the will – a choice. We are to give without reluctance or compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver! Your discovery that you have something to give should bring thanksgiving – you have enough and then some! That what you give will make a difference in the world on behalf of the Realm of God – what could be more satisfying? Knowing that someone will eat a meal, have warm safe place to stay, be comforted or be made well – it does stir deep joy from within us!

There is confidence in giving because God provides, says Paul. You can give believing that, if sometime you have a need, God will provide for you in the same way that you are providing for others. This giving is based on God’s trustworthiness, and when the gift is given there is a sense of doxology. “You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us.” In the thanksgiving of those who receive the gift, God is praised. In an age of full basements and storage units that we never visit but that we cling to because we might need that stuff someday, we are assured that we can let it go and we will be okay. God does provide, whether it is a ram in the thicket or the unexpected kindness of a good Samaritan. We can trust the future when we live on God’s terms of a community that shares and practices generosity.

64 He will later stake own reputation on their ability to practice generosity along with their pride. 2 Cor 9:3-5
65 Exod 16:18
66 2 Cor 8:9
67 2 Cor 9:7
68 2 Cor 9:11
Paul sees the work of generosity as an extension of the gospel proclamation and a manifestation of God’s grace. The economic partnership (koinonia) being forged on behalf of the Jerusalem saints by disparate people and cultures affirms a unity in Christ transcendent of those differences (what could be more different than Corinth and Jerusalem in the first century CE!).

For Paul, the manifestation of generosity is a fruit of the spirit.\(^{69}\) It is part of the evidence that an individual is alive in the faith. Extravagant generosity is a Spiritual gift which contributes to the benefit of the whole body of Christ.\(^{70}\) Contributing to the needs of the saints is among one of many virtues Paul encourages as a mark of the faithful disciple.\(^{71}\) This is true for the church in every age.

Generosity is celebrated in a host of ways in the biblical witness. Joseph of Cyprus, who was also known as Barnabas, is reported to have sold a piece of property and given the entire proceeds to the early church. He is named as one among many who, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, sold land and houses and laid the gifts at the feet of the apostles, the result of which was “that there was not a needy person among them.”\(^{72}\) The generosity of the community sustained the community and it propelled the witness of the gospel.

The Book of Acts also tells the resurrection story of the disciple Tabitha.\(^{73}\) That she was “dedicated to good works and acts of charity” should not escape our notice. When Tabitha dies, it creates a crisis in the church at Joppa and the apostle Peter is summoned with urgency. Peter arrives to find the grieving widows, whom Tabitha had helped in her lifetime, gathered around her lifeless body, now prepared for burial. They display the garments she had woven for them, as she was a lifeline in a culture that had no direct support for the vulnerable, save their own families or the generosity of others. The story reaches its climax as Peter, after having everyone leave the room, prays and then looks at the body of Tabitha and says, “Tabitha get up” – and she does!

As careful readers of scripture, we know that Luke (the author of Acts) wants to make it clear that while Jesus has physically left the building (ascended into heaven), his life-giving power remains present via the Holy Spirit. But beyond that, we also see an intentional affirmation of the vocation of charitable work. It could have been anyone who died and whose being raised to life proclaimed the power of Jesus at work in the apostles – but it was not just anyone. It was Tabitha, one whose life was dedicated to helping others, reminding the church that we cannot be the church without this same work. Generosity is life-giving.

\(^{69}\) Gal 5:22  
\(^{70}\) Rom 12:8  
\(^{71}\) Rom 12:12  
\(^{72}\) Acts 4:34-37  
\(^{73}\) Acts 9:36-43
Recent studies have shown that generosity increases happiness, health, and a sense of purpose in those who practice it. There is a correlation between generous behavior and a personal sense of well-being, according to research conducted by Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson. They point out the truth found in the proverb, “One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly but ends up impoverished.” Generosity is good for you.

To look at Jesus is to see generosity incarnate. From the soaring prose of John 1 to the magnificent hymn of Philippians 2, the Second Testament affirms that to see Jesus is to in some way catch a glimpse of God. The nature of God is abundance and generosity, and that is on display in the ministry of Jesus. In the presence of Jesus, there is always enough. The gospels present a ministry of Jesus that has enough power to overcome illness, enough grace to overcome alienation, enough compassion to provide comfort, and enough love to overcome death itself. If we believe this to be true and we believe that Jesus is still present in the church, this should lower our anxiety about having enough resources to do the mission we have been called by God to do.

In the Gospel of John, there is a familiar story of Jesus at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. We recognize that all stories in this gospel have layers of meaning and that, primarily, the changing of water into wine is a miracle meant to reveal the Divine character of Jesus and to point toward his glorification in death and resurrection. However, one cannot dismiss the volume of the wine produced! It is more than enough for the situation at hand – it is an abundance beyond what is necessary.

All four evangelists record the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Here, in the face of need, Jesus provides more than what is required so that there are baskets full of left-overs. What is important here for the church to recognize, beyond the provision itself, is that Jesus, when confronted about the need for food, looks at the disciples and says “You give them something to eat.” While there are many aspects of this story that can be lifted up, we choose two: 1) Jesus expects the disciples [and thus, the church] to accomplish fulfilling the need at hand; 2) when the disciples place into the hands of Jesus what resources they have (however insufficient they may appear), it becomes more than enough. Generosity and abundance. A Divine human partnership that changes the world.

There is also generosity that is offered in response to generosity received. While elements of the story are somewhat unclear relative to who she is or what her motivation might have been, all four gospels tell the story of a woman who anoints Jesus with a fragrant ointment. Details are lacking about number of things, but all four writers are certain that the value of the perfume is great – worth an entire year’s salary.

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74 The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose, Christian Smith & Hilary Davidson, Oxford Press, 2014.
75 Prov 11:24-25
76 When Jesus addresses the disciples in the gospels, it is understood that he is likewise addressing the church.
77 Matt 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6: 5-15
The act appears to be out of gratitude. The gesture expresses extravagant generosity. It prompts a question to the reader – to what would you give a year’s salary and what could possibly motivate you do so? A serious reflection about the depth of our own gratitude for Jesus calls us to consider the nature of our own generosity. Grateful people are generous people. God’s people have a reason to be thankful!

Gratitude is a part of our stewardship response, centered in the belief that all we have come to possess is, at its core, a gift. When Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to participate in the offering for the Jerusalem saints, he makes it clear that the gift they are giving is not one of obligation. At the same time, he underscores the reality that knowing all they have received from God in Jesus Christ, how could they be anything but generous? Throughout scripture, there is an urging to rejoice and give thanks to God. Whether it is the humble return of a cleansed leper,78 the fresh obedience of a penitent sinner, or the saying of grace at the evening supper table, gratitude is the seedbed for generosity.

A favorite story for many a stewardship sermon is that of the widow’s mite.79 At face value, it is a tremendous story of generosity and faith, her giving two copper coins – all that she possessed – to the temple offering. Told in both the gospels of Mark and Luke, this story tells us that Jesus, who has been observing the gifts that people have been making to the temple treasury, sees her gift and calls attention to its true value. Her contribution was not out of what she could spare, but was all she had to secure her sustenance. Stated as such, it is indeed an extravagant offering which displays great trust in God to provide. The gifts of the wealthy, though considerably larger in amount, pale in comparison. Would, that however impractical it seems to us, we could give so freely!

However, there is a caveat in reading that text with regard to its placement within each gospel. The passage which immediately precedes the story in both Mark and Luke warns about the religious class – those who love the trappings of piety and privilege. “They devour widow’s houses” Jesus says. “They will receive the greater condemnation.”80 The church cannot prey upon the generous, nor can it ignore the needs of those in its midst by catering to the desires of the wealthy. While needing to encourage generosity among its members, it must also practice it on their behalf and in their best interest.

**Stewardship and Judgment:** Stewardship-related themes are also to be found in stories about judgment, as our choices to act or not to act faithfully have consequences. In a story given to us only by Luke, we see the harsh punishment that awaits a rich man who has ignored the beggar at his gate.81 It is a narrative of stark contrasts, as the wealthy one is dressed in purple (a sign of significant wealth) and who dines...

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78 Luke 17:15  
79 Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4  
80 ibid  
81 Luke 16:19-31
sumptuously every day. The poor man (named Lazarus – which means “God helps”) sits at the gate begging for scraps off the table and is covered in sores which the dogs come and lick. It is unlikely that the rich man was unaware of Lazarus in his daily denial of the poor man’s plight.

The nature of their situation is highlighted further when you consider that in the ancient world, the poor had bread, the middle class had bread and sauces/vegetables, the rich had bread and sauces and meats, and that the very wealthy had such an excess of bread they could use it like a napkin to clean their hands. Lazarus desires what is essentially just the napkin of rich man to stave off his hunger!

As Jesus tells the story, both men die, and in the afterlife, Lazarus is in the bosom of Abraham while the rich man is in Hades suffering torment. The great reversal, so prevalent in Luke, governs their fate in the afterlife. The rich man now seeks comfort from Lazarus, who is unable to provide it. In great concern for his five brothers left behind, the rich man appeals to Abraham to send Lazarus to warn them of the fate they, too, will suffer if they do not change and consider the poor. Abraham responds that they have Moses and the prophets, and if they have not listened to them, why would they be convinced if someone returned from the dead?

To reflect on this story is to wonder what their fate would have been (specifically the rich man) in the afterlife had there not been such an unmitigated disparity of their circumstances while in this life? If the rich man had extended generosity toward Lazarus, would his punishment have been so extreme? There is a change coming. For people who have both the “law and the prophets” and “one who has returned from the dead,” it would be hard to deny we have not be warned.

In a word about the final judgment in Matthew’s gospel, we hear a story with a similar refrain. Known to many as the parable of the sheep and goats (or the Judgement of the Nations), the scene is set as the final reckoning and adjudication between those who will see the Realm of God and those who will not. The distinction between the fates is clear, once again affirming the power of choice related to our employment of resources, our compassion, and our sense of justice. “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Here, in what is the essentially the longest discourse in the Second Testament about the criteria that qualifies one for entrance into heaven, what matters most is seemingly not doctrine or right belief, but it is having assured the basic human needs for others.82

82 Matt 25:34-37
83 While there is some indication in the Greek that would suggest that this applies specifically to the community of the church, there is no stated restriction that would keep such a practice from being extended to the entire community. The tradition in Deuteronomy, as an example, includes all in who are in the land related to issues of justice, care for the poor, and Sabbath observance.
The failure to do so warrants eternal separation from God. “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. Then they will answer, ‘Lord when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’”

The text needs little commentary. Part of our stewardship is the care for one another. In seeing to the needs of the least of these, we bear evidence of and participate in the coming Realm that is both present and yet to be fulfilled.

When it comes to judgment, we must also address the honesty and integrity of our approach to giving and being in community. Immediately following the magnanimous gift of Barnabas in Acts 4 comes the story in Chapter 5 of Ananias and Sapphira. They also make a gift from the sale of land; however, they conspire together to withhold a portion of the proceeds for themselves. When this is revealed by Peter, he tells Ananias that he [Ananias] was not compelled to sell the land or to give the entire proceeds from the sale to the community. Instead he [Ananias] has lied, claiming the gift to be more generous than it was, and by so doing has not lied only to the church but to God. Upon hearing this truth - Ananias falls down and dies! Further, when Sapphira shows up hours later and she is questioned, she too lies (not yet having learned of her husband’s fate) and she also falls down and dies!

Hard as it might be to accept that God would strike down these two for lying about their gift, there is a deeper message here for the church to consider. The fact that they lied about the proceeds reveals that their entire heart was not dedicated to God. While saying otherwise, their actions demonstrate that they were not fully invested in the work of the Holy Spirit within the community. They simply were not “all in.” Faithful stewardship is about being “all in” on what God is doing in the world and being an agent of the Realm so that the world as we know it is transformed into the world as God desires it to be.

Stewardship may be considered a life-and-death issue when we examine what is at stake regarding the impact of our whole-life discipline of practicing it, and the difference such a commitment makes to the world in which we live. When teaching discipleship – what it means to follow Jesus - we must be honest about what such a decision demands. “No one who has put their hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.”84 In the Book of Revelation there is a similar warning issued to the church at Laodicea: “I know your works; you are neither cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm I am about to spit you out of my mouth,”85 To be a true disciple is to be truly committed.

84 Luke 9:62
85 Revelation 3:15-16 Here “cold or hot” is not so much a matter of enthusiasm as it is a level of commitment.
**Stewardship and the Tithe:** It may surprise the average person to know that the tithe (when compared to money in general) is seldom addressed in the Bible, aside from the instructions for its collection by the priests in Numbers and Leviticus. The first mention of the tithe is in Genesis 14 when, following a successful battle, Abram is blessed by King Melchizedek and Abram offers him 1/10 of everything.\(^{86}\)

The most detailed discussions of the tithe are found in Deuteronomy, and it may not sound like what you thought you remembered! “Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly form the field. In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose as the dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.”\(^{87}\) This is a potluck supper celebration! The tithe is brought in and the people rejoice that earth has produced once again for their benefit.

Whether you have a little or a lot, you bring in 10% of what you do have and the entire community benefits. This serves as a reminder as to the source of the blessing. “So that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always” takes us back to the assertion in Genesis 1 that we are the created, not the Creator. This offering proclaims that God is the source of the abundance that sustains us. It has not come simply from our own endeavors, however good our farming and animal husbandry skills might be – it begins with God. We can plant the seed, but only God can make it grow!

The text goes on to speak of what to do if the journey is too far to take your produce. You can turn it into cash and when you arrive at the Temple, purchase whatever party supplies you want (including wine and strong drink!). The tithe is about gratitude and honoring God for what we have. And it is to be shared – shared within the community and with the priests (who do not have an allotment of land) and [every third year] with the sojourner [resident alien], the orphans and the widows. They [those in need] are to eat their fill – because there is plenty enough for all.

In Deuteronomy 26, the tithe is detailed again, and this time the focus is on the liturgy related to the making of the offering.\(^{88}\) At the center of the liturgy is both God and the Land. When the gift is placed on the altar, the following statement is to be made: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and

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\(^{86}\) Gen 14:17-20  
\(^{87}\) Deut 14:22-24  
\(^{88}\) Deut 26:1-15
he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me. “89

This liturgy is the rehearsal of Israel’s salvation story. It acknowledges, at an even deeper level than the previous text, that God is the source of every blessing. It is not just what the land produces, but the fact that they are in the promised land itself. Their freedom to live in the land has happened by the providential action of God. It is a prayer of great thanksgiving, not unlike the moment of the Eucharist for the church, where the main actor is God and those Divine actions on our behalf are remembered with awe and gratitude. To apply this to the church, it would be like repeating our confession of faith when we make an offering. “I believe…” and so I respond. To make an offering is to worship God, and the ground of that worship is thanksgiving.

Here again, the inclusive nature of the gift and its recipients is repeated. “Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and your house.”90 There is enough for everyone to share because of God’s abundance. Hospitality is extended beyond the normal boundaries of tribe and race because there is sufficient supply. This is not simply a nice thing to do, but a command of God.

When the question is raised about the tithe and its value for the church, these understandings should not be overlooked. The tithe establishes a community norm that is viewed as obtainable by all. Church members often wonder what is an acceptable gift? “How much should I give as an offering?” The tithe sets a benchmark; it is a starting place.91 The tithe, when understood as worship, creates a moment to remember the source of blessings, our own salvation history, and an opportunity to respond to the grace we have received.

In some circles there is debate about whether a tithe should be made “on the net” or “on the gross.” For Israel, there was only “the gross.” However, if God’s people would do either with faithfulness, there would be plenty of resources so as to make such a question moot! When the tithe is discussed, others want to maintain that we pay taxes that support many programs for the poor and thus “our share” should be adjusted accordingly. It is good to recall that beyond the tithe, which was done annually on the total produce of the land, that each male was to come with an offering [different from the tithe] three times a year. No one was to come empty-handed! This offering was made at the festival of unleavened bread, the festival of weeks, and the festival of booths. The size of the gift was determined as each was able to give based on how they had

89 Deut 26:5-10
90 Deut 26:11
91 We say a starting place because it is clear, that at least within ancient Israel, multiple offerings were made beyond the tithe. This would make the tithe “the floor” rather than the ceiling! At the same time, 10% may seem to great a sum for people not in the regular practice of giving. In such a case, the tithe becomes a “first goal” toward which one might grow, perhaps a percent or two at a time.
been blessed. On top of this expectation was the practice of alms-giving. These were gifts that did not count in either the tithe or the offerings, which suddenly makes 10% instead of seeming like too much, look like a bargain! Generosity was/is expected of God’s people.

Is the tithe (which is viewed by some as “under the Law”) required by the church (which views itself as living “under grace”)? Nowhere does the Second Testament suggest that we are to do anything less in our giving than what was required prior to the arrival of Jesus. Paul advises in giving to the Jerusalem offering, each one should give according to how they have been blessed (reminiscent of the three annual offerings mentioned above), but nowhere do we read that this replaced the tithe. To consider the tithe “law” is to not fully appreciate its intention (provision for the entire community) or recorded practice (celebration and gratitude). We do not serve our cause well if we equate expectations with burdens, demands, or obligations. That in many congregations we have established low expectations regarding giving, worship attendance, education, or other forms of participation and investment may well be related to an experience of decline in those same communities of faith. While the tithe cannot be fully argued as being required of the church via Second Testament citation, the benefits of teaching the tithe seem to out-weigh any potential liabilities.

Stewardship and the “Prosperity Gospel”: The tithe is also mentioned in the book of Malachi. Here the prophet, on behalf of God asks the question: “Would a man rob God?” The prophet answers that indeed the people are robbing God by their failure to give the “whole tithe.” The indictment is followed with this promise: “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the lord of hosts: see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”

We understand this to be a specific statement to address a particular situation. During a time of famine, the people (out of fear) withheld their full tithe offering, creating a self-imposed shortage in the very system that was designed to assure their sustenance. The problem (the presence of locusts) was not that God did not love them or care about them, but that they had failed to trust God, choosing instead to cling tightly to what they individually possessed. Rather than establishing a quid pro quo [give and you will get], the statement “test me” is a call to action to give the full tithe – the result of doing so will be that there will be enough for all of the people. Indeed, there will be an abundance so that no one is without. The “test” is to trust the system God established of the tithe, which, when faithfully practiced, assures provision for all.

92 Deut 16:16-17
93 Alms giving is referred to in the deuterocanonical books of Tobit and Sirach, as well as being mentioned in Matthew, Luke, and Acts.
94 For further reflection on the potential resources created by teaching and practicing the tithe, see Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don’t Give Away More Money; Smith, Emerson, Snell. Oxford Press, 2008.
95 Mal 3:8 (KJV)
96 Mal 3:9-10
However, this passage has been used by some to suggest that the “test” is to give in such a way so as to entice God into giving more to the giver as a reward for giving. By giving, the individual is assuring wealth and prosperity for themselves. We see this as a difficult rendering of the Malachi passage and challenge the church to explore whether such an understanding is appropriate. Given both the communal nature that pervades the biblical texts regarding blessing and salvation as well as the understanding that it is God’s nature to give without provocation or human endeavor, we find this approach fraught with difficulty.

There has been a growing movement since the middle of the 20th century, primarily within certain Evangelical and Pentecostal streams of Protestantism, which seeks to use this text as foundation for understanding giving as a way of getting more.97 Best identified as “the gospel of wealth” or “the prosperity gospel,”98 a key component of this theological position is that it is God’s will to be physically well and financially well-off. Further, proponents believe that such wellness and increase of wealth can be secured by strong faith (right belief), positive thinking/speech, and giving to religious causes.

Poverty and illness are understood within this school of thought to be the result of sin and/or spiritual forces. Because of the cross, the belief is that there is no reason to be sick or poor. The Bible is viewed almost as a contract that implies if a person does certain things certain ways (such as to tithe), God has to bless that person with health and prosperity. While an over-simplification, the point becomes clear – within the prosperity gospel there is a quid pro quo: do this, then God will do that. Give and God will bless you with greater wealth. Giving in this belief system is not based on gratitude or response, but is motivated by a desire to increase personal [not communal] power or position.

We would not dispute that to give is to be blessed! The very fact that one has something from which to give is a sign of God’s provision. Further we can affirm that it is the nature of God’s economy that in giving, we do intrinsically receive more than what we have offered. However, to suggest that God’s actions to bless are to be mandated based on our activities denies the very sovereignty of the Divine. We cannot accept a position that teaches a collection of “magic words” or finding the “exact formula” of dollars to be given to charity that will cause God to bless any individual at the expense or in place of another. Additionally, we take exception to the restriction of God’s blessing to be seen only in the physical act of healing or via the increase in material goods. The church should be suspicious of a belief system that seems to sanction the

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97 Additional texts often sited include Luke 6:38; Luke 11:9; James 1:5, among others.
98 It can also be named the “health and wealth gospel” or “gospel of success”. Earliest proponents can be traced back into the late 19th century, but the more prominent purveyors of this ideology arose during the 1950s within the Pentecostal healing traditions. Oral Roberts, Rev. Ike, A.A. Allen, and Jim Bakker were key figures in the later half of the 20th century. Early in the 21st century, Joel Osteen, Bruce Wilkinson, Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland, Bishop Eddie Long, Joyce Meyer, and Creflo Dollar are among many names that have risen to prominent association with this theology. Leaders of this movement have even been the subject of a congressional investigation regarding a possible conflict between their lavish lifestyles and the organization’s tax exempt status.
acquisitiveness of the culture and which places achieving material success ahead of service to others.

It creates tremendous theological issues as to what exactly is the nature of a god who would personally see to it that one can live in a mansion and drive a Rolls Royce while the neighbor goes without shelter or food. We don’t deny the reality that this happens, just the belief that God sanctions it to be so. It is inconsistent with the gospel and antithetical to the way the early church lived out its faith by seeing that no one among them had any need.

We affirm that our giving is a response to having already received. In much the same way that the author of 1 John states that “We love, because God first loved us,”\textsuperscript{99} we give because God first gave to us. We understand our giving is not an attempt to manipulate God to act in our favor, but rather an acknowledgement that God has already acted in our favor [for the whole of creation], and we are grateful. Further, as disciples who hope to see the Realm of God break deeper into our world, we see our giving as an agent of change and transformation – a sign of the spirit of God at work within us.

That God desires wholeness for all of creation is a given. That the death and resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate testimony to God overcoming the power of death and conquering evil is unquestioned.\textsuperscript{100} However, the Realm of God, while revealed, is not yet fully manifest among us. Powers contrary to the work and will of God still hold influence in individuals and within structures that abuse and misuse material and human resources. Systemic racism, for example, continues to oppress an entire class of people based on the color of their skin, denying opportunity and locking generations into crushing poverty and oppression. It is not for their own lack of faith that people of color suffer in this system. It is not because they fail to practice generosity that resources do not flow into their lives and neighborhoods. This is where the “gospel of wealth” ultimately fails and where a different understanding of what it means to be a steward is needed for not only the sake of the church, but the world. Stewardship is related to justice, as its faithful practice moves resources to promote and enable systemic changes toward that which affirms and secures human dignity.

\textbf{Stewardship as Transformation: } We affirm that it is God’s good intention to bless the earth and all that is within it. God’s desire is for all of creation to flourish and the human creatures have been entrusted with the responsibility to make it and keep it so. When we have failed at this task, God has held us accountable through the admonitions of the prophets – and those same prophetic voices have simultaneously continued to hold out a vision of how the world is supposed to be. The reward for living in the world on God’s terms is the very blessing we desire and God seeks to bring us abundance. The consequences of choosing our own terms results in the brokenness and scarcity we fear most.

\textsuperscript{99} 1 John 4:19
\textsuperscript{100} Col 1:20
Our world is broken – but we also believe that it does not need to stay that way. We believe that in the power of Jesus Christ, the in-breaking of the Realm of God has begun and cannot be turned away by any power or principality. The question is, will we choose to be participants in its coming to fullness? That God is at work on behalf of the poor, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized is without exception. Luke proclaims, while Jesus is still in the womb, that through his ministry, “His [God’s] mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

The way things are is not the way they are supposed to be and - because of Jesus - they are not going to stay that way! God’s intention is going to be fulfilled. When John’s disciples come to Jesus with their inquiry on behalf of their imprisoned teacher, Jesus answers their question as to whether or not he [Jesus] is the one or should they look for another with a simple statement: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news preached to them.” The transformation is not just a promise for some distant time – in the ministry of Jesus it is becoming reality now.

In each of the synoptic gospels, Jesus commissions the disciples to do these same things. John’s gospel tells us that Jesus promised his followers would “do even greater things.” The work of the disciples, and thus the work of the church in any age, is the work of Jesus. By our actions, the Realm is further revealed and comes closer. The Books of Acts demonstrates the ideal vision of the church operating under the full influence of the Holy Spirit. A group that could best be described as fearing for their lives suddenly becomes emboldened by the Spirit on Pentecost, and they find their voices to proclaim the gospel (an act of stewardship). Those who hear and respond to the message, now powered by the Spirit, forge an egalitarian community in which the worship of God, the adherence to the apostles teaching, the breaking of bread, and prayer are the hallmarks of their new life together.

The community demonstrates the presence of Jesus, both by the signs and wonders done by the apostles and by their “holding all things in common.” Most importantly, they share from their resources: …they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day...

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101 Luke 1:50-53
102 Luke 7:22-23
104 John 14:12 We should note that this does not necessarily mean they would be more powerful than Jesus, but rather by the sheer multitude of “realm agents” turned loose by the multiplication of disciples, more [greater] work would be accomplished.
day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.105

This is a word of encouragement to the church as it pertains to stewardship. When the church proclaims the gospel and engages in sharing of its resources for the benefit of all, the church grows! In a time when the church is seeking to find its place in a shifting culture, reclaiming stewardship may be the best way to find our footing going forward. We can point people beyond the mere acquisitiveness of self-indulgence endorsed by our society to instead use their resources to transform not only their own lives, but the world in which they live.

After Thoughts:
Sources vary in their count, but most agree that the bible talks about money and related financial terms/issues about 2,300 times! Many Second Testament scholars suggest that Jesus talks about money (and uses related financial terms/issues/examples) over 60% of the time. To say that this topic is important within the Canon is no doubt an understatement. To believe that we can cover this topic thoroughly in this document is wishful thinking. We have attempted however, to give broad coverage, spanning both Testaments, from which we can draw some solid conclusions and offer direction for the church.

Because of the sheer volume of texts that relate to this topic, it may seem odd that the church in the last 50 or more years has attempted to keep the conversation about money and faith in separate, seemingly unrelated domains. Beyond that, in yet another arena of taboo, the church has also intentionally segregated the necessary political ramifications of these teachings and their raw, unsettling power as they interface with empire and impact community.

Our faith tradition has long practiced a “confession of faith” in Jesus Christ that is an intimate expression of our aspiration to be in a reconciled relationship with God, and God’s provision in Jesus Christ to affect such a desire. We in no way dispute, disparage, or disregard the nature of a personal relationship with Jesus! However, a faith that is solely privatized is contrary to the actual biblical portrayal of faith as practiced within community in both the First and Second Testament, and seems to be the antitheses of the early church as described in the Book of Acts. Private faith must still have public expression and significance beyond the individual.

The Christian faith of the contemporary Western world has, in some places, been distilled to a very individual and personal experience, disconnected from communal accountability, rendered devoid of any social welfare responsibility (which we might refer to as the "common good"), and segregated from certain material aspects of life. This is counter-intuitive to the practice of stewardship, which sees the individual as a part of a larger network of relationships. For the Christian steward, the world is viewed through the wide-angle lens of “the whole” and the tangible benefit of community.

105 Acts 2:45-47
The church should consider the value of reemphasizing the communal nature of the faith that we share. We recall that in both Testaments, salvation and blessing generally come not to individuals, but to communities. The prayer of Jesus repeated every Sunday in most of our congregations makes this distinction. “Our Father…Give us this day our daily bread…Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us…Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” The hope for the Realm to come and the petitions for sustenance, faithfulness, and protection belong to the collective whole, not just the individual. Whether it is the promise made to Abram that “…in you all the families of the earth will be blessed”\(^{106}\) or the cosmic Christological claim in Colossians “…and through him [Jesus] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross,”\(^{107}\) the workings of God benefit individuals by their association with/in/through communities.

There may be substantial benefit for both the local congregation and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to think more clearly about ways to articulate and claim the necessity of being “members of one another” for authentic discipleship and true spirituality. As we see worship participation shrinking in the beginning of the century and the definition of “regular” church attendance dropping from nearly four Sundays a month to less than two Sundays a month, we are clearly at risk of being less connected within congregations and across our covenantal relationships. Are there ways we can encourage more interaction between members across our communities of faith?

**Stated Assumptions:**

Stewardship is a spiritual discipline, not a religious-sanctioned shorthand term for fundraising. It is as essential to the process of faith development as study, worship, prayer, and service to others. The biblical understanding of stewardship is that it touches every aspect of our lives and is grounded in the abundant love and provision of God.

Stewardship is about choices, many but not all of which have financial implications and a connection to our possessions. It is also about living in gratitude, understanding that all we have come to possess, share, and know is ultimately a gift from beyond our own individual capacity or agency. Stewardship embraces the concept that life itself is a gift and measure of grace.

Understanding oneself as a steward is fundamental to Christian discipleship, indispensable to the creation of healthy communities, and necessary for fulfilling the practical command to love both self and neighbor. Expressions of stewardship may be found in the intentional care for creation, the observance of Sabbath, the loving attention to our minds and bodies, the sharing of the gospel, and the appropriate management of our material resources. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather instructive and an entry point into deeper dialogue.

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\(^{106}\) Gen 12:3  
\(^{107}\) Col 1:20
A church body that can only embrace a narrow view of stewardship as it relates to funding budgets, maintaining church property, and the operation/survival of the organization/institution will be self-focused, less able to freely share, and thus hindered in its efforts to fully love the neighbor, welcome the stranger, advocate for (and share with) the poor, and not as likely to break away from cultural norms that may diminish others. Such a community is driven by the anxiety of scarcity, which often leads to hoarding and withdrawal from the neighbor and the stranger for fear of not having “enough” for itself. Its prophetic witness is moderated by the risk of alienating its members [contributors], who may find varying levels of comfort in the current culture and have investment (knowingly or unknowingly) in maintaining the status quo.

In contrast, a church body that is committed to the holistic practice of stewardship will, as a fruit of that devotion, not only be a careful manager of its resources, but also will be a witness to justice, a builder of community with the neighbor, a gracious place of welcome, an advocate for the poor and disenfranchised, and by nature, will find itself opposed to culturally-imposed definitions that delineate any human being as something less than a child of God. Such a corporate body acts with confidence in speaking truth into the culture because it believes in the abundance and provision of God without the fear of scarcity. It boldly lives out its mission and ministry.

It should not surprise us to learn that many recent studies confirm that within the marks of growing, healthy, and thriving religious communities the focus of ministry is directed “outward,” toward the neighborhood and larger circle surrounding the congregation’s context. Likewise, one consistent characteristic of struggling communities of faith is that their focus is almost entirely “inward” and self-serving (not necessarily with malice or intent) within the literal walls of the specific congregation or organization with an eye toward survival. We ignore this correlation at our own peril.

It follows that churches and communities of faith who understand and live into a holistic sense of stewardship, including the practice of confident generosity, are likely to have resources for the mission that God has called them to perform. They will also have the capacity to share resources (human and financial) with their covenantal partners across all expressions of the church to jointly enact the larger vision that God has given all of us: To be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

For Consideration:

1. We should not be afraid to have high expectations about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The church must take seriously the study of holistic stewardship and teaching stewardship as an act of discipleship to its leaders, its members, and its affiliated partners.

2. Pastors, elders, and elected officers should commit to growth in the personal practice of generosity, to lead by example and with integrity.

3. The church, in all its expressions, should engage in an audit of its practices as they relate to environmental concerns. Consumption of energy, water, the use of

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renewable resources, the practice of “reduce, reuse, and recycle,” and efforts to
tread more lightly upon the earth should be evaluated, and conservation
measures put into place. Congregations modeling such practices can then more
effectively teach their members to do the same.

4. The church should be encouraged to reflect about the acquisitive nature of our
culture and the consequences of continuing to consume resources in ways that
are not sustainable, and, in some cases, harmful to the environment and our
brothers and sisters. How might we change our own expectations and behaviors
around what is “enough”? What is our prophetic responsibility to give voice to
this issue in this time and place?

5. Congregations should commit to a practice of generosity, and consider
establishing a minimum goal of 10% of operational receipts to be invested
beyond the immediate needs of the congregation. If we are going to teach the
tithe, we must also practice it.

6. Understanding that clarity of mission is essential to enlisting successful resource
support, congregations and related organizations are encouraged to establish or
reevaluate current plans for ministry to be certain they are still applicable to the
congregation’s capacity and context. People give their time and money to
organizations that they believe are making a difference and are responsible with
their finances.

7. As a matter of achieving financial wellness (and creating an environment of
trust), congregations and related ministries of the church should invest in
understanding industry-agreed-upon standards for the handling of money and
financial resources. Known as “best practices,” issues of transparency, internal
controls, audits, the creation of budgets, and the published reporting of all assets,
liabilities, and fiscal policy should be followed and periodically reviewed
(regardless of the size of the congregation or its annual receipts/expenses!).

8. Because money often creates anxiety that impacts individuals and family
systems, congregations should consider providing personal finance classes that
teach the effective management of money and increase the capacity to practice
generosity.

9. The church should actively engage in teaching children, youth, and young adults
about the power, proper use, beneficial aspects, detrimental risks, and effective
management of money, as one portion of a deeper commitment to teaching
biblical stewardship as a critical part of the faith development curriculum. This is
a mission for the entire church, as the proper use of our resources (natural,
human, and economic) is essential to the long-term health and well-being of the
earth and all parts of God’s creation that call it home.

10. Congregations might consider a year-round method to the stewardship
conversation. Rather than seeing the annual campaign as a three-week sprint
(and the only time the word stewardship is often mentioned), a more circumspect
approach that keeps all aspects of stewardship in play over time may prove to be
more effective.

11. Communities of faith should consider the importance of having discussions with
members about the importance of having a will and the congregation should
have clear policies in place that would make receiving a testamentary gift a true
blessing rather than a point of contention! Teaching stewardship, including stewardship at the end of life, could make receiving such gifts the norm rather than a surprise or rare occurrence. Such gifts can expand the ministry and mission of the congregation or church-related institution well into the future. Until Jesus comes again, there will always be a need for the gospel and its related ministries of care and compassion.

12. Congregations and other church-related organizations who hold assets should consider their own legacy plans and have clear polices in place as to how their mission and ministry will continue, should it becomes necessary to cease its visible presence.

13. Prayerful reflection is needed on what it means to be a covenantal partner in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), with attention to the financial support of these common ministries we share that extend from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth. What is the nature of our relationship and how do we support each other so that our shared witness can reach its fullest expression?

14. Mission and ministry priorities should drive financial decisions. Budgets should serve the church, not the other way around. All organizational structures with fiduciary responsibilities across the church should be encouraged to adopt this as an operational policy and cultural practice.

Practical Applications of Stewardship in Our Time and Place in the 21st Century

A Broad Perspective of Stewardship in Context: Recent shifts in the socio-political spectrum draw attention to the need for holistic understandings of stewardship as the church seeks to negotiate its way in this changing landscape of the early 21st century. The rise of separatism in Western Europe, incursions by governments into the south China Sea, and the trend toward a political climate of nationalism in the United States all suggest global trends toward more isolating and greater privileged positions (economic power) being sought by nation states in competition (rather than cooperation) with each other. This ultimately undermines values witnessed to in both Testaments as signs of the presence of the Realm of God because: a) it is contrary to the radical welcome of hospitality (because nationalism raises the fear of the stranger from outside our boundaries), and; b) the sharing of economic gain by the whole community is abrogated due to a concentration of wealth to be controlled within a nation’s government and/or powerful elite.

Historical perspective suggests that as nations become more parochial and less cooperative across real and ideological boundaries regarding resources and the control of economic factors, the risk of conflict is heightened. These circumstances often marshal resources toward non-life-giving purposes and, in escalated conflict, lead to the loss of life and damage to the environment. Whether the conflict is “cold” or develops into a fully-waged war, such conditions usually impact the poor and the marginalized in disproportionate ways.109 “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every

109 At the most basic level, resource allocation to the military/industrial complex in times of international conflict directs resources away from meeting basic social needs of the poor including nutrition support, health care, and housing. But it is not only the poor. This redistribution of economic priorities also impacts those things that enrich life for the mainstream of the country including parks and recreation, the arts, general infrastructure, investment in
rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”

If biblical stewardship suggests (and we believe it does) an alternative reality relative to the establishment of the beloved community, as well as the proper use of possessions for the sharing of wealth generated by the earth’s resources so that none are in need, then the church is necessarily an interested party with a needed voice in this context.

**A Specific Example of Engaging a Social-political Issue Based on Stewardship**

**Concerns:** Potential impact to both the environment and the further overt concentration of wealth within the United States exists, as evidenced by a subtle rule change to the Congressional Budget that was passed with little public notice on January 3, 2017. The rule relates to reporting the cost of transferring federal lands to local control. This seemingly innocuous piece of procedural legislation, while not doing so directly, makes it possible for future legislation that can place lands (currently held in the public trust as a legacy for all United States citizens) for sale to developers and to industry, creating privatized access and the potential for the land’s resources to be exploited for private gain. The church that is concerned about stewardship both as care for the earth and as proper management of resources for the common good will be compelled to speak to this issue. It is one example how streams of stewardship issues converge - in this case, economic interests and care for the earth - and how they have political implications.

These are two simple ways that suggest practical applications regarding the relevance of stewardship in this time and place. The number of examples that may be cited is legion. We offer these in the broad and narrow sense as a starting place for a future conversation within local, regional, and general expressions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

**Final Comment:** The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) seems to be uniquely fitted for this time and place, especially as we seek to reach “the next generation.” Study after study suggests that those who make up the generations we refer to as Millennials and Gen X have been turned off by religions that they see as banal, bigoted, and boring. Our method of reading scripture implies you don’t have to have bad science to have good religion. Our assertion of the radical welcome of God at the Table speaks boldly to a generation that wishes to rise above bigotry and the marginalization of people based on what they believe are tired and irrelevant social classifications. Our structure, as one that is covenantal, fits with generations seeking authentic relationships over and against joining institutions. Our freedoms, as expressed in local autonomy give rise to worship, spiritual formation, and mission that fit contexts in the unique non-military research, and education. When the conflict becomes a war, those civilians caught in the wake of battle as “collateral damage” are left homeless, without basic resources, and become refugees, often at the mercy of foreign governments to provide aid and comfort.

110 Attributed to Dwight D. Eisenhower, 34th president of the United States.
112 This is further exacerbated in a political context that seeks environmental deregulation in mining, forestry, and other heavy industry because it is perceived to increase cost and limit production.
communities in which congregations are located. At our best, we can be relevant and adaptive.

The truth of the matter is that we should be growing in this century, and we assume one of the reasons we are not doing so is the failure to effectively invite others into our story. We are hiding our light under a bushel! Along with teaching the importance of faithful financial generosity to sustain the Church’s mission of reconciliation, in the 21st century we must rediscover our evangelistic zeal and fully embrace what it means to be a steward of the gospel. This seems particularly important in a time of deep cultural division, which is where the church finds itself now when this document is presented for consideration. We possess a great treasure of hope that calls people beyond anything that might separate us from the truth that we belong to God and thus to one another.

This vision of the prophet Isaiah (Chapter 55) is offered as a closing reflection:

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
    come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
    come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
    without money and without price.

2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
3 Incline your ear, and come to me;
    listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
    my steadfast, sure love for David.
4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
    and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
    for he has glorified you.
6 Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
7 let the wicked forsake their way,
    and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

12 For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.  

The General Board recommends that the General Assembly ISSUE GA-1732 for study by the Church.

(Discussion time: 12 minutes)

\[113\] This, and all scripture citations in this document, are from the NRSV @1989 National Council of Churches of Christ.