

NHUMC Theology of Stewardship

“The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it...” Psalm 24:1

What is Stewardship and Christian Giving?ⁱ

Gift giving is at the heart of the Christian faith. The biblical record chronicles the activity of God as a gift giver and demonstrates how people of faith have responded with gifts of their own. This understanding of our giftedness, which is the heart of Christian stewardship, provides a powerful motivation for giving—both current and deferred. The fundamental task of planned giving in the church is to enable people to expand their vision of stewardship to encompass their wealth as well as their income.

The very first message of the scriptures is that "In the beginning, God created. . ." God's ownership of all is implicit in God's creative work. As people who have been gifted, we appropriately are called to give. The Old Testament account makes it clear that God's people must be prepared to recognize the temporal nature of possessions. What we have has been given to us and will pass to another. The faithful take care that some of this is given back to God.

Leviticus 25 describes the charge to pass on property each 50 years. Quite clearly, 50 is intended to be a symbolic number that corresponds closely with the lifespan. The Year of Jubilee, when all ownership would be dramatically reoriented, is a powerful symbol of planned giving through one's estate. We do not have the option of true ownership, and we can't "take it with us." Accordingly, our only faithful alternative is the thoughtful distribution of our property in accordance with our faith.

Jesus emphasized money and possessions as important means for living out citizenship in the kingdom of God. The full appreciation of the kingdom always had a future orientation. Wealth and possessions were not to be seen as the end of one's labor, but as yet another manifestation of God's grace. The parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30) demonstrates a powerful stewardship principle regarding wealth and possessions. Property and other wealth are no more than means to a larger end. Those who fail to grasp this distinction are judged rather harshly, but those who see the greater utility of building for the Master are praised and rewarded. There is a hopeful dimension to the parable, as the vision of building a kingdom yet to come is brought into clearer focus.

St. Paul contributes a helpful word regarding special gifts and endowments in his instructions found in I Timothy 6:17-19 (NIV):

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

As a wealthy and gifted people, we are called to invest in the kingdom yet to come, establishing a "firm foundation" for the coming age.

Makarios People

The Greek word “Makarios” is often translated as “blessed,” meaning prosperous and favored by others. In Matthew 5, Jesus tells us who are blessed: the poor in spirit, the grieving, the humble, those who seek what is right, those who show mercy, the clean-hearted, the peacemakers, and those oppressed for God’s sake. In all of these circumstances, we receive the abundance of God, and as recipients of God’s abundance, we live out a daily faith in connection with Christian community.

As such, we are “Makarios” people: those who respond to God’s abundance by becoming stewards, administrators, and ambassadors of God’s kingdom here on earth. Our defining political and economic system is first and foremost that of God’s kingdom, where the greatest is called to be a servant, the last will be first, and Christ is Lord over all. Our politics and economics are marked by the abundant provision of our Creator, the grace, strength, and humility of Jesus as our Lord, and the profound, holy love from God’s Spirit that shapes, guides, and transforms us as we, in turn, transform the world around us.

As “Makarios” people, we continually learn from God and others, and we seek to be caretakers of money, possessions, land, resources, status, and influence: every part of our lives is a place where God calls us to be Makarios—blessed—as we reclaim and integrate all things within our charge into God’s kingdom.

Tithe, Offerings, and Legacy

Tithe: The Bible puts forward a baseline standard for giving, the “tithe,” or giving ten percent of our resources to God. “Tithing” is an expression of Christian discipleship. In part, it is a form of accountability, a way of “putting our money where our mouth is” as we declare Christian discipleship.

While giving ten percent of our personal income to a church seems very radical in today’s society, it is simply an act of faith. If we truly believe that God created the heavens and the earth “ex nihilo,” out of nothing, then ten percent is not an unreasonable expectation. God can and will provide what we need.

The tithe is also a form of worshipping God, as we express our gratitude, faith, and love for others. It is an expression of living a Makarios lifestyle, taking God’s abundance as our starting point, and aligning our personal resources with God’s economy as we trust in God’s abundance and provision more than in that of the world.

Offerings: As Christians we believe that Jesus has satisfied the atonement purpose of Old Testament offerings as justification into God’s righteousness. However, not all of the offerings were for atonement.

Offerings were sometimes given to strengthen ties between persons in the community as an opportunity to come together in fellowship. Burnt offerings were given as an act of devotion to God, as an expression of being “all in.” Grain offerings were often given in conjunction with other offerings as a voluntary expression of praise to God.

There are many reasons why Christians today may wish to give resources to the church above and beyond the tithe, and for this reason we continue to include offerings as a part of our worship at NHUMC—it is an expression of praise and appropriate to include as an act of worship.

Legacy: As mentioned earlier, “We do not have the option of true ownership, and we can't ‘take it with us’... our only faithful alternative is the thoughtful distribution of our property in accordance with our faith.” This is true. Estate giving can at times be a sensitive topic because it forces us to face our mortality. At the same time, it only makes sense that the posthumous distribution of our estate be an extension and expression of our Christian discipleship.

It also expresses our belief in the eternal. Paul offers this teaching in 1 Corinthians 3:11-16 (NIV, excerpted):

... By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light... Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?

Paul's primary point here is that we, God's people, are God's temple. Investment in the church as a temple of people might actually be one of the only material investments that we can “take with us” in some sense, precisely because it is of eternal value.

Conclusion

Our mission as Northern Hills UMC is to be a community that reaches others for Jesus, teaches the ways of Jesus, and loves the world for which Jesus died, so that God is glorified through His Son. We believe in that mission, but it is important to clarify one point: it is God's mission, not ours. Rather than saying that our church has a mission, it is more accurate to say that God's mission has a church.

As part of the community of faith at Northern Hills UMC, we urge you to consider how God is calling you to participate and invest your resources into God's mission at Northern Hills. Blessings to you.

ⁱ Section 1, “What is Stewardship and Christian Giving,” is excerpted from “A Theological Basis for Planned Giving in the Church,” UMC Discipleship Ministries (<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/a-theological-basis-for-planned-giving-in-the-church>)