

A Brief History of Stewardship

“Stewardship” is a word created by leaders in the Protestant churches of North America in the late 19th century. At that time it was a way of talking about money for the church and especially missions in the West and missionaries abroad. The concept developed in response to the separation of church and state, which meant churches were no longer funded by the state. By necessity, the American church had to find a way to raise money for congregations and missions. Over the last one hundred years, there have been three periods or stages when stewardship has taken a high profile. By the late 20th century, stewardship was commonly used both inside and outside the church.

1. The Beginnings of American Stewardship 1890 - 1918

- This first period linked stewardship with law and connected it with the tithe.
- Churches were not supported by taxes and needed to find their own way of gathering funds.
- Early methods of fundraising included renting or selling pew space, subscription lists, church suppers, church socials, raffles and lotteries.
- Special collections were taken in support of missions in the rapidly expanding West and for other parts of the world.
- At the turn of the century, envelope giving offered privacy.
- Churches began to adopt unified budgets.
- A rising middle class began dealing with the “burden of affluence”.
- The enthusiasm for mission collapsed with the loss of idealism in the United States. By the 1920's many congregations took to erecting new church buildings rather than giving money to benevolences or missions.

2. The Flowering of Stewardship 1945 – 1965

- The second period connected stewardship with the Gospel and began to see money as only a part of a broader understanding of stewardship.
- During the post World War II period, there was a religious boom. The United States entered an era of unprecedented and increasing affluence.
- American life was changed by suburbia, the interstate highway system, better automobiles and television.
- The situation was ripe for the church to respond to the needs of the people.
- In contrast to the atheism of communist nations, Americans were “God-believing church goers”.
- Church membership as a percentage of the total population grew from 49% in 1940 to 63% by 1960.
- A renewed interest in stewardship brought forth the three “T's” – Time, Talent and Treasure. This elicited a positive response in campaigns.
- Denominational loyalty was strong. In 1957, 96% of Americans cited a specific religious affiliation.

3. The Globalization of Stewardship 1980 – 2000?

- The current period joins stewardship with the care of this world and often does not mention money.
- A broader definition of stewardship includes a lifestyle of working for the environment, justice, peace and the integrity of creation.
- The word “stewardship” became more popular in secular circles than it was

- secularization is taking over society.
- Focusing stewardship on the finances of the church is not legitimate because the emphasis should be on the needs of the whole world.
 - In the words of Douglas John Hall (1990),
"Now the church can assume its proper place as a servant to the world, rather than trying to maintain its own power and position within society. It has an opportunity to act as a steward (servant) and can now take stewardship seriously."

Reflections on the History of Stewardship

- We learn that we are not masters living in a world that we own and control, but we rather are stewards of what has been entrusted to us.
- Christian stewardship is rooted in God's gift of Jesus Christ to us, and we are entrusted with sharing this gift.
- Through God's grace, we freely receive God's gifts and have permission to use these gifts.
- Stewardship has to do with every aspect of living out personal faith, including creation, lifestyle, gifts, finances and callings/vocation.
- Churches are increasingly dependent on lay members to assume their rightful place of servant leadership, using their gifts to participate in God's work in the world today.

(This brief history is summarized from "A History of Stewardship" by Dr. William O. Avery of Gettysburg Seminary, and was published by the Lutheran Laity Ministries for Stewardship.)