

Strengthening Leaders

Stewardship embodies giving from the heart

by Marcia Hahn

Doran Zumbach remembers the conversations 25 years ago when his church, Peace Lutheran, Ryan, began to change its attitude about giving. “We were a typical congregation at the time, with special appeals, special funds, and people marching forward with pledge cards, but we still had the same financial woes as when we started,” Zumbach recalls. “Pastor Rohde challenged the trustees to come up with a new and different idea, and we did.”

Following the example of the disciples sharing a common treasury, Peace Lutheran did away with its special funds and chartered a course for the future. Members quit using weekly giving envelopes and approached giving in a broader sense, with an emphasis on annual, quarterly or monthly

giving. As a small congregation, Peace Lutheran members decided that their mission giving would have more impact if it focused in one direction, so they chose World Hunger.

“It took a giant leap of faith to change from where we were to where we were going,” Zumbach says. “We all got caught up in our little givings and wants, and putting name plaques on everything. We had to get people to think about their giving on a broader basis and not on a weekly basis because if a person didn’t come that week, their offering was never given. Our financial woes evaporated.”

When major projects have been needed, such as the addition of an entryway and elevator in the 1980s, Peace Lutheran leaders educated and updated the congregation about the project over several months and set aside a special Sunday for giving, when as much as

“You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.”

—2 Corinthians 9:11

70 percent of the funds would come in. “We never talk about amounts, only our desire to give,” Zumbach says.

Today, Peace Lutheran has one of the highest percentages of budget in the synod for what they give toward mission support. Pastor Nancy Larson, ELCA Director for Evangelical Mission, credits that success to the congregation’s belief that they are not there just for

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Doran Zumbach and Pastor Tim Miller

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themselves in Ryan, but also for the broader church in the synod and ELCA. "They developed a history and heart for seeing themselves as something beyond, that it's not all about them," Larson says.

"Their attitude about stewardship here has been wonderful," says Pastor Tim Miller, who has served Peace for almost a year and a half. "They can see where their money goes and they have a focus of reaching out beyond the walls of Peace Lutheran. They live it out daily in their lives and as part of the worship service."

Miller says the members are doing their own education, talking about stewardship formally in church and informally among themselves. He believes that it's important to talk about stewardship and to listen to people's stories. As part of his sermons, Miller will ask people to share how they are feeling that day and how the Lord has multiplied their blessings after they have given something away to somebody else.

"They talk about the wonderful gifts God has given them," Miller says. "I listen and remind them how God has blessed them and let them open the door for how they can be a blessing to others."

Larson says that moving toward stewardship, rather than fundraising, strengthens a congregation in the long term. A congregation may need to host a pork roast dinner or other fund-raising project to meet an immediate financial crisis, but for long-term stability, Larson recommends that congregations look beyond the needs of the church and embrace stewardship as part of a bigger mission.

"Stewardship is about the heart," Larson explains. "It's about our needs, as disciples of Jesus, to reflect God's generosity through our gratitude and our generosity of how we live, how we serve, and how we give. It begins with recognizing that what we tend to think of as ours, is not really ours. We have been called upon by God to manage the resources we have, not own."

Larson recognizes that in today's broader culture of fear about the financial health of the economy, people tend to hang on to more, to take care of themselves first to make sure they will have enough. People look at their resources as a pie with a limited number of slices in it and when it's gone, it's gone. When people look at scripture and see the abundance of God's grace and blessings, Larson says they will see that it's not a matter of being a pie, but a globe filled with a never-ending store of God's goodness and grace.

"God doesn't promise to only take care of those who take care of themselves, he promises to be with us in all circumstances," Larson says. "Our faith as disciples of Jesus pushes us to trust God and to respond not out of a sense of scarcity, but out of the reality of our abundance."

Educate, invite and inspire to strengthen stewardship

Getting the stewardship message out is an ongoing process of educating people, inviting people, and inspiring people. The Northeastern Iowa Synod offers a number of opportunities for rostered leaders and lay members to learn how to grow stewardship in their congregations.



Pastor Nancy Larson

The synod's Mission Support Consultation Rotation connects with each congregation over a three-year period through conference

gatherings, stewardship mailings, and trained visitors who attend church council meetings in the fall. According to Larson, the visits are a way to thank the councils in their local settings for their ongoing ministries, to listen to their stories, to share information about ministries in the synod and ELCA, and to challenge the councils to grow mission support beyond their congregations by a half percent annually.

"We continually work to strengthen stewardship leaders—rostered and lay—from across the Northeastern Iowa Synod," Larson says. "The end result is a stronger sense of connection between the congregation, synod and churchwide, and stronger commitments financially to ministries beyond the congregations."

Congregations can build stewardship teams and develop ongoing stewardship ministries through the four-part "Ventures in Growing Stewards" workshops. The Ventures workshops, sponsored by the synod, equip leaders to create enthusiasm and excitement for stewardship, build a foundation in their congregations for stewardship education and financial response, and develop a vision and plan for year-round stewardship ministry.

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When the steeple at Peace Lutheran, Ryan, was re-shingled this spring, the cross was removed and repainted, and congregation members were invited to write their names or prayer requests on it. Now perched 90 feet high, the cross serves as a time capsule in the sky where people can look up and say their names are on that cross.

A number of congregations in the synod have strengthened their stewardship practices through the Consecration Sunday Stewardship Program. This spiritual growth program, originally developed by the Rev. Herb Miller, takes place over a six-week period to move people one

step closer to tithing through stewardship as part of a Sunday worship service, rather than as part of a fund-raising project. The program invites congregation members to give based on what God is calling them to do, rather than what is needed to pay bills.

Pastor Kurt Hansen of New Hope, Farley, says his congregation achieved a 29 percent increase in pledge support as a result of the Consecration Sunday his church held nearly two years ago. Hansen appreciated the program's affordability and structure, which includes a timeline and sample letters to take the guesswork out of what to do and how to do it. "It's a pretty tried and true stewardship technique that was developed 25 years ago," Hansen says. "It has a spiritual basis and gives real information about mission and the congregation's connection to it, and that causes people to think differently."

This fall, the Northeastern Iowa Synod will launch the ELCA Macedonia Project as a way to grow stronger stewardship across the synod. Funded through a \$10,000 ELCA grant, the Macedonia Project emphasizes education, engagement and evaluation to strengthen the connection and partnership between congregations, the Northeastern Iowa Synod, and the ELCA. This two-year project is based on 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, where Paul writes about the eagerness of the Macedonians to give, even though they live in poverty.

"Paul writes that the Macedonians suffered a great affliction and shared their joy; they lived in poverty and showed a wealth of generosity," Larson explains. "They begged for the chance to give. It's so different from how most people look at stewardship."

The Macedonia Project will be introduced during the fall rotation visits to congregations and during the Lutheran Youth Organization mini stewardship events. A stewardship fair planned for summer 2013 will feature a guest speaker and series of stewardship workshops. The project will reach out to congregations through a team of lay members and rostered leader visitors who will say thank you to congregations and share the mission story at congregational annual meetings.

"Macedonia is expanding the idea of 'we are the church' in our setting and beyond," Larson says. "We are in mission for Christ. What we do in the congregation as part of the bigger picture can inspire and energize us."

Follow Youth events online



Families and friends can follow happenings at the ELCA Youth Gathering and WIYLDE (Wholly Iowa Youth Leadership Discipling Event) on Facebook, Twitter and the synod website.

Some 663 youth and adults from the Northeastern Iowa Synod are attending the 2012 ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans, July 18-22. Photos, first-hand reports, links to videos, media coverage, statistics, and more can be found on the synod Facebook page, Twitter account, and website. Happenings from WIYLDE, set for July 27-Aug. 1, will also be posted. People do not need accounts with Facebook or Twitter to view updates. Links to these websites are available on the synod website, www.neiasynod.org.

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