

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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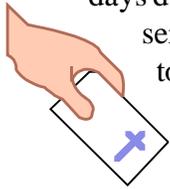
BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Money talk—taboo for churches but not for God

According to the gospels, Jesus said a lot about money. In fact, it was one of the subjects he said most about. The Old Testament prophets talked about it a lot, too. To me that means God must consider how we spend money very important.



When anyone makes the slightest mention of money in the church, however, many members complain. Many deliberately stay away on the few Sundays during the year when they expect to hear sermons or announcements about giving to the church, and they clearly don't want to hear advice about how to spend their money otherwise. Many say that churches talk too much about money.



It seems to me that churches talk far too little about it. At least we don't talk much about it in the ways that God evidently considers most important. During annual pledge campaigns we talk about giving to support the church, but we rarely mention money otherwise. We say almost nothing about what the Bible says Christians' priorities in the use of money should be. Let's look at some of those.

God commands paying to the church

Throughout the Bible God repeatedly commands people to pay to support their religious communities or institutions. Early in the Old Testament God tells people to give a tithe (a tenth) of their income to the temple treasury, and to bring

**Will anyone rob God?
Yet you are robbing me!
... In your tithes and offerings! ... Bring the full tithe into the storehouse ... see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.**

—Malachi 3:8-10

Can a gift be too big?

Should church members limit their gifts to the size that most other members give, even if they can give more and want to? You may think the answer to this is obviously "No!" However, a member once told me that giving a much bigger amount than most other members is wrong. It keeps smaller gifts from being appreciated, he claimed, and may even keep them from being given.



[Jesus] looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

—Luke 21:1-4



That makes no sense to me. Jesus praised a poor widow's tiny gift, but he didn't say the rich people should have withheld their large ones, and many scriptures tell us to give in proportion to what we have received.

Disproportionately large gifts are harmful, it seems to me, only if church

leaders let the largest givers control the church in order to keep those givers from discontinuing their gifts, or if the large givers demand a disproportionately large voice in church decisions.

Evidently God doesn't think a gift can be too big.

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

—Luke 12:48



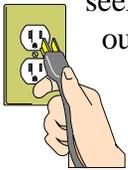
one of their best animals for sacrifice at the temple by the priests. Later we find God warning people who are trying to get by with giving less than their best. In the New Testament we read about God berating some of the people who claim to be the most religious, for merely doing the required tithing while failing to treat people with love and justice.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. ...
—Matthew 23:23

We're still offending God in those ways, it seems.

Logical as well as spiritual reasons

The accepted way to talk about giving to the church seems to be mentioning only the spiritual benefit that givers get. I know that's important, but I'm not even discussing it here because it's well covered in church publications. It seems to me, however, that even if members didn't care about spiritual benefits they'd feel obligated to help pay for the church programs they use. Refusing to do that seems as unreasonable as refusing to pay for our homes' electricity. And the electric company isn't lenient like the church is. Even if we're late in paying, the electric company threatens to cut off our electricity.



Some church members who rarely attend evidently think they don't need to pay because they don't use the church's services. However, if these members' marriage collapses or their teenager gets put in jail and they want the pastor to be their counselor or character witness, they seem to expect those services or even demand them.



I'd think they'd be willing to pay for having such services available, if for no other reason, for the same reason that they presumably buy insurance. If their house burned, no insurance company would pay unless the person had insurance with paid-up premiums. There are valid reasons for the church to provide ministries to some people who don't pay for them, but I don't see those reasons applying to people who are well able to pay but choose not to.



Should we control our gifts' use?

Some churches no longer ask members to pay to budgets that include all of the church's income and expense. Now many churches ask for contributions to specific projects instead. Is this what God wants? Or when we give to the church, should we give without expecting to say what the gift must be used for?

I'm not sure. Maybe we should simply put our gifts into what scripture calls "the storehouse" and let the church's official decision-making system say how all the storehouse's contents are used. Yet letting our gifts be used for purposes we consider wrong seems sinful.



What about giving endowments for a specific church building or program? Endowment income may continue indefinitely, but needs for buildings and programs change, so endowment gifts probably shouldn't include restrictions on their use.

Churches run into a similar problem with major church furnishings. When furnishings are given in memory or in honor of a person or group, getting rid of those furnishings sometimes brings a barrage of complaints from the giver or the giver's descendants, yet keeping a furnishing that has worn out or no longer meets a church need seems unwise. Expecting our gifts to be kept and used according to our wishes forever is probably neither wise nor faithful.



We don't hold each other accountable

In many churches today, revealing individual members' incomes and the amount of their gifts is a big no-no. In the early church, however, holding

A man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. With his wife's knowledge he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ... Peter asked, " ... How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. ...



—Acts 5:1-11



members accountable for failing to give an appropriate proportion of their income seems to have been standard operating procedure.

Holding each other accountable for the use of money was standard in early Methodism, too. In its weekly class meetings, leaders checked on what each class member was giving, and reported to leaders at the next higher organizational level. Imagine what would happen if we asked our members to report their incomes and their gifts to a church group today, or even to the pastor or anyone else in a church leadership role. Most members would be outraged.

The leaders in early Methodism were expected to be models of regular and generous giving. Shouldn't we, too, expect leaders to show commitment to the church in this way as in all others? Yet most of today's members would be appalled if even the pastor knew which members weren't giving in proportion to their income, and if he or she asked the church nominating committee to avoid letting these members hold leadership positions.

What about giving to the poor?

Throughout the Bible we're told to give to the poor, but knowing how to give to the poor isn't easy today. (More about that in next month's *Connections*.) It's not easy, either, to know when we're justified in spending on what seem to be luxuries instead of directing all our gifts to the poor.

That problem arises when we build church buildings or buy their furnishings. In a way, having costly church buildings seems unnecessary and maybe even sinful, but maybe it's not. We can meet with other Christians and worship God in any kind



While [Jesus] was at Bethany ... as he sat at the table a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. Some ... said to one another in anger, "Why was this ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold ... and the money given to the poor." ... But Jesus said, "Let her alone. ... The poor you will always have with you, ... but you will not always have me. ..."

—Mark 14:3-9

of surroundings. Yet beauty—even extravagance—is characteristic of much of what God creates, and beauty can help us to become aware of God's presence and to worship God.

The meaning of Jesus's statement about the woman with the expensive ointment probably went beyond the question of the ointment's material value and whether or not it was wasted. However, that statement

may tell us that extravagance is justified when its purpose is worshiping God or letting others know the unique importance of Jesus Christ.

Gifts are more than money



Everyone who joins the United Methodist Church promises to support it with their prayers, presence, gifts, and service. I'm afraid we too often assume that this commitment of our gifts refers only to money. Church leaders would be delighted if every member even took the commitment seriously with regard to money, of course,



but we also need to take it seriously in a larger sense. I believe the statement means not only money but also spiritual gifts, talents and skills, and whatever other resources we may have. Though money is important, I suspect

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

we go astray when we focus only on giving money and ignore other kinds of gifts.

A hard question for Christians



How should Christians use money? That can be a hard question to answer, especially when we try to answer it for a concrete situation. It's clearly a question that God wants us to ask, however, and to me that means we need to address it openly and often in our churches.

In next month's *Connections* I'll address another aspect of using the money that we have. It's the question of deciding how to use money in accordance

with God's will when we have more money that we need for life's necessities. You may think you have too little money to be concerned with that question. Yet it seems that almost all of us have more than we actually need, especially when we compare our living standards with those of most other people in the world. Besides, even if you aren't able to make big money gifts, you're affected by the decisions of the people who are, in the church and in the world. Let's look at what God's standards for making those decisions may be.



Barbara

If you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust, the true riches?

—Luke 16:11



Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.



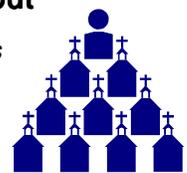
—Matthew 6:21

“The silver is mine, and the gold is mine,” declares the Lord Almighty.

—Haggai 2:8

A subject I'm not writing about

United Methodist *Connections* readers often ask me to write about the UMC apportionment system—the system in which each UM congregation must pay a proportionate amount of money to help support UMC programs and administrative costs above the local-church level. I'm not going to write about that subject, for two reasons.



First, although I'm well aware of the importance of the financial side of the church, it's an area where I have little experience, talent, or interest.

Second, many *Connections* readers aren't United Methodists, and I don't think those would want to read a discussion of the UMC apportionment system.