

Dr. John Bodenman Testimony at Shares of Ministry Workshop Transcription

Thank You.

Good afternoon. As Pastor Gary mentioned, my name is John Bodeman. I am the chairperson for the Finance and Stewardship Committee at Wesley United Methodist Church, Bloomsburg, Pa.

I am here before you this afternoon to share how we are currently teaching stewardship at Wesley, as well as to overview for you how, in part, we arrived at the understanding of stewardship that we are teaching today.

Just a bit of my background. I'm currently serving in my second year as chair, and actually became chair at the tail end of some significant budget restructuring. Restructuring that included changes in staff and staffing responsibilities. The loss of our associate pastor, the change in our senior pastor, and having served on the committee for several years before becoming chair, I can tell you that the meetings leading up to these significant changes were not fun, to say the least.

Hand wringing, lots of split votes, and seemingly all of our time, effort, and energy focused on the budget and finance side of finance and stewardship.

How could we raise revenues to cover our expenses? How could we minimize painful cuts? How could we meet the budget?

Certainly all important business, but looking back over my notes in preparation for today, I was reminded that I was part of far too many meetings that were not in any way uplifting, encouraging, and/or faith-developing. I can recall vividly several conversations where we asked ourselves, 'How could any of this in way be a part of God's plan? Where had we gone wrong?'

So back to that in a minute.

On a slightly different tangent, but certainly relevant to this afternoon's focus on Shares of Ministry, were some of those budget discussions here at Wesley. In short, during our many, sometimes heated discussions, Shares of Ministry became any easy target.

Wesley had a long-standing record of paying 100 percent of our Shares of Ministry. But several years ago, it became a kind of meet the payroll versus Shares of Ministry budget problem debate. And we were forced to carefully examine our commitment at Wesley to Shares of Ministry. And the discussion by leaders turned into several church-wide discussions in question-answer sessions focused on our dollar contributions to Shares of Ministry. The result, lots of great discussion regarding how our Shares of Ministry are calculated, where the dollars go, what percentage is spent on overhead and salaries, etc. And hands down, the most common complaint, and/or misperception as a better term, that we heard — can you guess — the common complaint — that our Shares of Ministry are based on the number of members on our church rolls. And thus, that we were paying for members that were inactive or not attending, and therefore, not contributing to our church's budget needs in any way, shape, or form.

This sentiment, then, led to some serious purge the roles discussion, and a subsequent all member visitation campaign.

Now we all know that there are some very good reasons to carefully examine the membership status of members listed on the rolls, but doing so to save dollars toward Shares of Ministry under the current formula is not one of them.

In short, the sessions led to questions and to serious discussions about who we are, and who we are not, and what it means to be United Methodist; to live out and celebrate connection. To celebrate that we are much stronger and effective in our ministries and impact for good in this world when we are connected as church families. Stronger and more effective than we would ever be, and/or could be, if we were by our self.

Wesley United Methodist Church in Bloomsburg is not a stand-alone, independent, pastor driven, super suburban, mega church with lots of parking! We are a beautiful — a beautiful — downtown church with a wonderfully rich history and a tremendous legacy of good works and active ministries in the Bloomsburg area. With lots of opportunities for much needed ministry right here in the neighborhood, and in close proximity to our building. Circumstances that we need to embrace and celebrate.

The result in what was a very difficult year [was that] we paid 100 percent of our Shares of Ministry, and in the process strengthened our understanding of who we are as a member of the greater United Methodist Church. And in so doing, renewed our commitment to always pay our Shares of Ministry in full. Which we do monthly by the way; it makes it easier.

And Pastor Gary has made it very clear from the start. As a matter-of-fact, in our very first meeting together, that as an ordained member of the United Methodist Church, his loyalty is to the United Methodist Church, and not to our individual Wesley congregation. That if we couldn't honor our commitment to pay our Shares of Ministry in full, he would have to ask us to move on.

My immediate reaction — praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! We are on the same page.

And his reminder in meetings and from the pulpit has certainly made my job as the chair of finance and stewardship much easier. No longer do we debate our dollar commitment to Shares of Ministry; instead we embrace and celebrate it.

Now back to stewardship and how we teach stewardship at Wesley church; truly one of my favorite topics. I used to find it hard to talk about dollars and giving and stewardship, but not anymore.

First of all, we have made use of, through teaching and small group studies and various contexts, lots of great resources that are readily available through the United Methodist Church and the conference.

Lots of materials in the form of books, pamphlets, and brochures. Some really great stuff. And I encourage you to really seek and read these materials. It's good stuff.

In addition, we have used many excellent books and studies, like Bishop Schnase's "Extravagant Generosity," Joiner's "Creating a Climate for Giving," and Adam Hamilton's "Enough." And all the focus is on giving, not on meeting the budget, not on giving to meet the budget. But giving as a sincere form of worship; truly giving back to God what is already his.

John Wesley taught that giving is an important spiritual discipline; that giving is absolutely fundamental to whom we are as Methodists.

So back to my earlier question — where and how had we gone wrong during our earlier budget struggles?

Looking back, we discovered that we had fallen into the trap of allowing budget and finance needs to drive our stewardship campaign. In seeming desperation, we allowed our need for dollars to hijack our message on giving.

And guess what — it didn't work very well. We had a spiritual problem, not a dollar problem.

And I took it out of my script, but Pastor Jay and Pastor Jane, our former pastors, had planted that very seed, but it took saying goodbye and losing them to actually, I think, get the congregation to really truly understand it.

So they sat through all the hard meetings and didn't get to see kind of benefits that I am going to share with you now that have come out of this.

So we changed the way we used time at our meetings. Beginning last year we committed to spending as much time, if not more, on stewardship and stewardship education as we previously had on finance. And committed, in particular, to better educating ourselves, the finance and stewardship committee.

The focus: giving as a spiritual discipline, as a form of worship.

Our goal: to make serious strides toward becoming a tithing church, where all are committed to tithing and are moving toward a tithe. And as leaders, to set an example to the congregation in our giving through our prayers, time, talents, gifts, service, and witness. We are extremely fortunate, therefore, as well to have a pastor that preaches giving and stewardship from the pulpit, as well as in meetings and small groups. Again, it has certainly made my job easier and the blessings have started to flow.

With lots of enthusiasm and excitement we self created and designed our last stewardship campaign, which we titled, "Commitment to the Future of Our Church." A six-week celebration of our many ministries at Wesley church, made possible by our congregation's many gifts. In terms of prayers, time, talents, financial gifts, service, and witness in the name of Jesus Christ.

We celebrated our stewardship through heart-felt testimony given by Wesley members that have been wonderfully blessed by their giving.

Looking back over my words in a letter to the congregation, I wrote:

"Amongst the many wonderful ministries at Wesley United Methodist Church, I have personally been encouraged by the tremendous energy and giving spirit exhibited by our youth during recent UMYF events. The excitement and desire to grow in their faith and to be the hands and feet of Christ in our community and in the world around us is a wonderful testimony to God's word. The energy, excitement, and desire to be a giver, not a taker, are a vital part of our faith. For Scripture is clear, blessings flow in, through, and out of individuals and congregations that are generous givers; for God loves a cheerful giver, and we are all at our best when we rise up to the challenges and opportunities we find before us. Over the next several weeks as we celebrate the commitment to the future of our church, please think and pray about your giving to Wesley United Methodist Church."

Suffice it to say we had a very successful fall 2012 stewardship campaign. And just to keep our planning and meetings exciting and fresh, we're going to mix it up and try for the first time a spring stewardship campaign during Lent — lots of exciting possibilities, indeed.

And finally, meetings have become almost, dare I say, fun. And certainly much more encouraging, much more uplifting, for it is always more fun to dream and talk about how to spend an additional five thousand dollars toward new ministries than, of course, it is to have to cut five thousand dollars from a budget of existing ministries.

But most importantly, we know that God is smiling, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Thank you.