

GIVE FIRST

Rev. Chick Lane, Director of the Center for Stewardship Leaders
Luther Seminary

I recently had two very interesting conversations on the same day. The first was with a pastor who asked, "Why has stewardship work gotten so much more difficult in recent years?" The second was with a different pastor who reported a conversation with a parishioner this way, "I was talking with a woman in the congregation recently, and she brought up her giving. She reported that their family was giving \$20 each week to the church and she felt this was about all they could afford to give. Their household income is well in excess of \$100,000, so they are giving less than one percent of their income, and they feel they are maxed out."

Obviously, these two conversations are connected. One reason stewardship work has gotten so much more difficult is that our culture of consumerism has enticed many people to make long term financial commitments that render generous giving almost impossible. For someone to report that giving less than one percent of their income has them maxed out, is, of course, absurd. What people should acknowledge is the choices they have made about the house(s) they will live in, the cars they will drive, the clothes they will wear, the lifestyle they will live. After all these choices have been made first, then there is nothing left to give to God's work in the world.

William T. Cavanaugh writes powerfully of this in "Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire". In two particularly powerful sentences, he writes, "Rather than turning away from material things and toward God, in consumer culture we plunge ever more deeply into the world of things ... One can always send a check to help feed the hungry, but one's charitable preferences will always be in competition with one's own endless desires."

There are two responses congregations might consider that will help people navigate the waters of consumerism and generosity. The first is to provide opportunities for congregants to consider the intersection of faith and finances, toward the goal of making long-term financial decisions that reflect their faith and values. In work done this past spring at Luther Seminary, over one thousand members of healthy congregations took an online survey. One learning from this has been that congregation members would welcome help with their financial lives from their congregation, but don't feel that such help is available.

A second response might be to stress the importance of giving to God first, and living on the rest. In the face of our culture of consumerism, if people give what they have left after they have taken care of all their needs and wants, generous giving will simply never happen. The Bible speaks clearly of the importance of giving to God first. When Moses is on Mount Sinai (for the second trip), God says, "The best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the Lord your God." (Exodus 35:26) Just before the people enter the promised land, God says to the people, "When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name." (Deuteronomy 26:1-2)

I'm not naive enough to suspect that stewardship work in congregations is going to get any easier. However, if we can help people on the front end of financial decisions by encouraging faith-based financial conversations and by inviting first fruits giving, then maybe it won't just keep getting more and more difficult.