Study Guide to Accompany

Why the Stewardship Conversation is Necessary – Now More than Ever

Introduction

On May 29, 2008 the Reverend Karl Travis, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Fort Worth delivered a theological reflection on Stewardship for the meeting of Grace Presbytery. The leadership of the presbytery has posted Rev. Travis’ paper on the website. To accompany the paper, the Reverend Dr. Michael Waschevski, Associate Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Fort Worth, TX was asked to provide a flexible Study Guide that could be used in a variety of settings.

The importance of the Stewardship Conversation is apparent to leaders in our congregations: elders, pastors, stewardship committee leaders, etc. As Reverend Travis states in his paper, it is also a primary spiritual issue for members of our congregations. The overall goal of engaging the Paper is to increase honest, faithful conversation about this important topic.

The Study Guide could be adapted for several uses:

- Session Education
- Stewardship Committees
- Adult Church School Classes
- Youth Church School Classes
- New Members Gatherings
- Stewardship Education Series
- Preaching

The Study Guide, in seeking to meet the goal of conversation, includes three objectives. At the end of the study, participants will:

Be able to name three reasons the stewardship conversation is so important today.

Identify and reflect upon one of the three reasons as personally relevant to their own growth as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

Provide at least one useful resource for their congregation’s on-going stewardship conversation.

For simplicity, the Study Guide will be organized into three parts/conversations. You might choose to engage in all three parts/conversations in one setting or on three separate occasions. The Study Guide will work best if people have had an opportunity to read through the Paper in advance. For those who have not been able to read in advance, specific quotes from the Paper will also be supplied throughout the Study Guide. As it is impossible to plan for specific settings in one brief Study Guide, you are encouraged to take what is useful and create what is needed for your setting.
Part One/Conversation One – Stewardship as a Foundational Spiritual Discipline

1. Begin the conversation by briefly providing background information about the paper. (See Introduction.) Share that the goal of your experience with the paper is to engage in focused conversation on stewardship. Offer a prayer for your time together, that it may be faithful and fruitful.

2. Reverend Travis shares personal experiences with the issue of stewardship in his own life. In order for participants to experience this as a conversation, take time to allow (in pairs or small groups) an opportunity to get to know one another using this for reflection: Reverend Travis shares his spiritual struggles with money. The struggles pitted between “what I need and what a merely want, between a culture of acquisitiveness and a Gospel of giving up, between materialism and the God of whom the Psalmist brags, ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Give the pairs or small groups time to answer these questions:
   - Do you also find yourself experiencing the same spiritual struggles?
   - Of the three struggles specifically mentioned, which is most present in your life?
   - Are there other spiritual struggles you face in relationship to money and its uses?

3. Reverend Travis offers three reasons the stewardship conversation is so important for us today. On a whiteboard, PowerPoint, or separate handout, list the three reasons.
   - Disciplined and intentional generosity is a foundational spiritual discipline.
   - Stewardship is more properly about the individual’s need to give rather than the church’s need to receive.
   - Stewardship is the church’s theological antidote to the chief idols of our age, namely consumerism, materialism, and acquisition.

4. Ask: Of the three reasons listed, which of these do you most readily resonate with? Why?

5. As a group, read together Matthew 6.1-21. Notice, as Reverend Travis notes in the paper, the order of these ancient spiritual practices: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. In the concluding verse Jesus says that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (6.21) Allow the group to discuss the ordering Jesus gives: almsgiving, prayer, fasting – and heart follows treasure (NOT treasure following heart.). You might use this quote from the paper to provide an entry into discussion, “If our hearts are where our treasure is, our hearts have become adept at practicing discretion. Stewardship, then – almsgiving, giving first, sacrificing, risking, trusting, sharing – stewardship describes a spiritual discipline insofar as its committed practice emboldens our trust in the One who owns our abundance. We are to give because it is good for us.”
Part Two/Conversation Two

1. Reverend Travis asserts that there has been a “generational shift away from stewardship as a means to preserve and promote an institution within which (we) experience God, and towards an act of personal spiritual devotion which secondarily benefits the church.”

2. As a group, think through the stewardship messages your congregation sends. Do they focus more on the institutions’ preservation/promotion or giving as a spiritual discipline? (You might have assembled in advance materials from your most recent Stewardship campaign.)

3. If Reverend Travis is correct in identifying a needed shift in the conversation from institutional need, to personal spiritual discipline which secondarily benefits the church, how might that change your approach to Stewardship education, minutes for mission, newsletter articles, etc.?

4. As an exercise that might result in resources to use in your next stewardship interpretation opportunity, try one or both of these suggestions in small groups: a) Write a newsletter article that focuses on stewardship as a spiritual discipline first. Avoid listing the church’s needs in this article. b) If you were asked to present a brief personal testimony in worship about the power of the spiritual discipline of giving you have experienced, what might you say? If you could not speak to it, who in your congregation would you identify as having personal testimony about a powerful experience of the spiritual discipline of stewardship?

5. Reverend Travis says, “The good news is that there is much more joyous and far less anxious motivation for talking about our stewardship than the need to subscribe the church budget. If we actually believe this, our congregational stewardship efforts will not begin with our lamentations about what the church could do if only. They will begin with the grace-full declaration about the joy of emulating our selfless God.” Might your next stewardship communication with the congregation begin a move in this direction? What would you begin to change in order to make this possible?
Part Three/Conversation Three

1. In the final section of the Paper, Reverend Travis claims that the chief spiritual dilemma of our age is wrestling with materialism, consumerism, and acquisition. Do you, or a significant portion of your congregation, seem to wrestle with this? If so, what are the consequences or burdens they bring about?

2. Review pages five and six of the paper as a way to lead into further exploration of our dilemma and how it appears in light of our theological tradition.

3. Stewardship as an antidote to our spiritual dilemma means, “In a cultural climate that teaches us to cling, it is a truly subversive act to release. It is countercultural. It is an act of complete intellectual and spiritual rebellion to say, No, I will not hold this to myself. I will instead sacrifice for a larger purpose; I will set it aside for a more holy use. This, I believe, is a central message of the Gospel and therefore should be the centerpiece for our teaching about stewardship. A theology of stewardship is the exuberant conversation within which we step toe-to-toe with the idolatries of our age and declare with a loud and clear and defiant voice, I am not your slave! I am a child of God. I have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever. Nothing you say or do can ever make that not true.”

4. The above quote from the paper speaks to our very identity as Christians. Have you ever considered the power of stewardship conversations in our Christian identity formation and practice? If not, why?

5. How has your conversation with this Paper and as a group begun to challenge you in your thinking about stewardship? What do you find of value for extending the conversation with your congregation? What will you personally spend time reflecting upon further?

6. End your time together in prayer. If the group is comfortable with it, allow them to contribute to the prayer as they give thanks for God’s abundant grace and love, the church which nurtures us, and the Spirit’s presence as we seek to become ever more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.