

Stewardship Sunday

November 22, 2015

Introduction

Greetings to everyone!

Today we celebrate Stewardship Sunday as the culmination of our stewardship month. This year's celebration is different. For one, we have one common liturgy for the whole Church, and one message prepared by our National Treasurer, which will be delivered by the Local Church Treasurer or Financial Secretary. I think this is fitting because we want the message today to be not only an opportunity to reflect but also as a chance to share where the Church is in terms of her financial resources.

That it is the Treasurer or Financial Secretary delivering this is not merely symbolic, because it is a fact that the status of the financial resources of every Local Church and the whole Church for that matter depends primarily on how the laity has been good and responsible stewards.

Why Stewardship Sunday?

- But, why do we celebrate Stewardship Sunday?
- We celebrate Stewardship Sunday because stewardship, together with (Christian Education) and Evangelism are at the core of our Christian faith. Stewardship is important because this component in the life of the Church is where and how we develop and create resources that will allow us to continue doing mission. Poor stewardship leads to weak resources and having inadequate resources does not allow us to achieve what we need to do, both for Church and for the world in general. For today, we need to realize and make a commitment to how we can be better stewards.

If the meaning of Stewardship Sunday has been lost on us, I hope we will rediscover its essence.

How Do We Fare as a Church?

On the national level, it is my pleasure to let you know that ending ecclesiastical year 2014 – 2015, we registered a surplus of close to a million pesos after having deficits for several years.

One big factor for this is the big increase in Wider Mission Support in the first year. For the current ecclesiastical year, the end of October 2015 shows that our WMS is at 3.5 Million pesos compared to 2.2 Million pesos for the same period last year, a really big leap in a short

period of time. This just goes to show that we can do more financially if we just work and cooperate with each other.

Our efforts at transparency and timeliness of report has clearly yielded positive results. Since last year, the conferences receive monthly WMS report within the first 2 weeks of the following month. We will continue toward this path for the remainder of the quadrennium. But we will not stop here, we will continue to be open and seek ways to improve communication and reporting to the rest of the constituency. Communicating, talking, interacting, and in the process tearing down the curtains of fear and mistrust. This is the internet age and certainly there is room for improvement!

Now, to the message of today's worship service which is about the giving of tithes.

Tithing as the Heart of Stewardship

At the heart of stewardship obligation is tithing. It is tithing because tithing is the best "proof" of our commitment to our faith. No one needs to witness our tithing, we will be judged solely on what we give and to whom it should be given.

Leviticus 27:30 is very clear on this. *"A tithe from **everything** on the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord". It says **everything**, so clear it does not leave any room for other interpretation. The verse continues, "whoever would redeem any of their tithe must **add a fifth** of the value to it. Every tithe of the herd and flock – every **tenth** animal that passes under the shepherd's rod – will be holy to the Lord."*

What then are the implications of tithing?

First, it is an obligation to our Lord. This obligation **is real**, not figurative. It is real because it talks about something we have already earned or gained. Not some future promise we are apt to make and pray about. Like praying to God that if we win the lotto we will donate 20% of it to the church or to the poor or some charitable institution. How can we commit to giving something we do not have and yet unable to give a percentage what we already have? And this is why it makes this real, God does not ask from you something you do not have or have not earned. This way, there is no unnecessary pressure on us. The obligation only materializes when our gain or income, or fruit, has also materialized!

Despite the absence of pressure, why is it so difficult to follow this? As Christians, we acknowledged our faith to the Lord Jesus Christ and because of this we are renewed. We have a new life, a new beginning, new hope, and certainly should have a new perspective of how we view the world. And yet, when it comes to giving our tithes, we lose this perspective and even negotiate with ourselves and convince ourselves that we will give some alternative offering in lieu of our tithes. In fact, I have heard a pastor say that even if there are many Christians that have been born again, the wallet or the

purse does not always follow. It takes sometime for the wallet and the purse to also be born again. In a lot of instances, they never do. And if it never does, how then can we claim that we are totally new. We would like to claim the promise of God and yet unable to fulfill our own obligation. What makes us think then that we can have this promise if we do not give our share?

Second, tithing is not a basketball game wherein you can substitute players. Verse 33 states. *“No one may pick out the good from the bad or make any substitution. If anyone does make a substitution, both the animal and its substitute become unholy and cannot be redeemed.”*

This is a verse written during a time when animals and grains were used as medium of commerce. Nowadays, we use money and currency as the medium. Yet, even if it has become easier to determine our tithe, we still try to substitute it for some future obligation, like going to church more often, singing in the choir, participating in some activity, or donating other materials or goods. Perhaps this may be because we do not know that it is not allowed. If this were a basketball game, we will be called for a technical and the substitution reversed. With this information, whether new to us or not, there is only one thing to do, that is to obey God’s law! No ifs, no buts, no options. The only option available is to follow.

Values We Learn by Tithing

Tithing is never easy, most especially to those who have less. In my understanding of this law and of human nature, there have been a few realizations and this is what I want to share in the hope that our commitment as Christian become total . . . meaning that our bank accounts, wallets, and purses will likewise be born again.

First, hard earned money is always difficult to part with, knowing all the hard work, sacrifices we had to undergo just so we are able to provide something for us and for our family. And this is what makes tithing difficult, because the money that we will give includes something of ourselves. It includes our time, our labor, and our talent. To make tithing easier, we have to include as a component of that money or income the knowledge that our time, our labor, and our talent are resources that have been lent to us during our lifetime and we are honoring this privilege of having these resources by returning some of it through our tithes.

Second, tithing is actually training for Christians, but most of us just do not realize it. Tithing teaches us a lot of positive values. What I have observed is that those people who tithe invariably have a better sense of what value for money is and are better at managing their financial resources. Because our financial resources are reduced by 10%, what tithing does is to force us to prioritize what we need versus what we want. This process makes us assess what really is important in terms of expenses against what we only think is important.

Third, tithing teaches the value of giving. Since we are able to analyze for ourselves our need, we only keep those that are essential to us and it makes it easier to give those that are not. Thus freeing us from the addiction we may have from having these excesses.

Fourth, whether we realize it or not, tithing teaches us to save. It forces us to have discipline in managing our financial resources because we have to set aside a portion that we have to give back.

So you see, tithing is not about sacrificing, it is about giving back. It is about learning positive values that will allow us to manage better our resources and be less susceptible to crises. It is about being good stewards and honoring our obligation.

Honoring Our Commitment

There is a lot we can do if we just do our share and work with each other. As I mentioned earlier, stewardship is one of the pillars of our faith. And if we talk about stewardship nothing is more important than human resources. How we make of our human resources will determine our future as a church.

For one, we can improve the way we minister to our church workers in terms of improving their lives so that they live decently and honorably. I do not have to go to plenty of details because we are all aware of these.

Salaries, living standards, education for the family are some of the issues we grapple with daily. These are the same issues our church workers grapple with also but magnified several times over because theirs is a life of commitment. Their lot is almost entirely dependent on where they are assigned. Something that should not happen if only we are accustomed to tithing religiously and share these resources for the greater good.

In the last National Council, we presented a plan that will reduce the WMS allocation that will go to operations from 35% to 30%. We have also informed the National Council we intend to bring this down further to 25% in the next ecclesiastical year. The idea is that at some point, none of the share to the national office will go to operations and instead, most of these will be allocated for the welfare of the church workers . . . for their retirement, health and other needs. Other parts will go to supporting our ministerial students, so that we do not burden the local churches and the conferences. There may still be some needs which we have not yet identified.

The additional allocation does not apply only for the church workers. We all say that the future of our church are the young people. Yet, we are witnessing the exodus of our young people from our churches to the new religious movement churches. These members represent not only our future but they are the best and the brightest. Departing from our

church because we have failed to provide the program and venue to nurture them, challenge them, and allow them to let loose their energies in the different aspect of our ministries.

We have, also in the last national council, substantially increased the allocation for the Christian Youth Fellowship and the Christian Young Adult Fellowship. This additional allocation is meant to provide us with the resources to get full time staff or staffs to see to it that we address this need and bring back the young people to our church because we have become relevant again in their lives with the programs that capture their interest and imagination.

We have also now prioritize Christian Education again and have started producing Sunday school materials for the rest of the quadrennium. Years of neglect on this component of our ministry means we have a lot of catching up to do.

One thing is clear though, we know where we are going and how to get there. What we are now doing is building the parts and components of our ship to get us there.

There are plenty of plans on the table and we intend to make this a reality within the quadrennium. Even if we are unable to realize some of these, at least no one can fault us for not trying. Some have said we are dreaming and aiming too high. This I say we are not because we are not starting with nothing! We are actually starting with plenty of resources. These resources are YOU, our community of believers called the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. We can all make a difference and we are not asking for something extra. We are only asking we that we all be good stewards and tithe faithfully.

What kind of future do you want for our church? What quality of church workers do you expect the church to develop? What kind of church members do we want to have? For me, I see a church with a strong foundation in stewardship of people, nurtured, developed, and molded through relevant Christian Education. Members filled with energy and a vibrant community because our evangelistic zeal caters to everyone, regardless of their political beliefs. Not prioritizing one over the other but recognizing that each play an important role in the holistic ministry of the church.

These are questions the solution of which is in our hands. Are you now ready to honor your obligation to your church?

Larry C. Millan

National Treasurer

United Church of Christ in the Philippines