

In the spring of 2003, when I was first extended a call to Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church in Mount Sidney, Virginia, I ran to the **ELCA Yearbook** and to the church's online forms at **ELCA.org** to see what I could find out about the congregation.

When I mentioned the congregation to others, I watched them pull that same Yearbook down and do just what I had done. They flipped it open and looked at the congregation's average worship attendance. They followed the columns over and looked at the congregation's giving. Then they did some quick math to get the giving ratio by dividing the attendance into the giving. Then they would look up and say, "This looks like a really healthy congregation. They seem to understand stewardship. Look how high their giving is!"

Recently, I heard a few comments that our congregation does not understand stewardship. This is simply false, so I thought it was important to share this information with you, and brag on this congregation a little bit. We need to know the truth.

The truth is that our overall giving as a congregation has continued to go up every year. Ask our Financial Secretary if you don't believe me. Our designated giving has increased every year. Our undesignated giving has increased every year. This increase has continued *in spite of* the death (or transfer) of a number of our top givers every year! That means others have stepped up and are beginning to experience the joy of the spiritual discipline of giving.

Some folks would argue, "But we aren't giving enough to meet our weekly budget amount." It is easy to assume that on the surface, but this comment misses the point of our budget.

We pass challenging budgets because we want to be challenged in our giving toward mission. If we were consistently giving *over* our weekly budgeted amount we would need to reevaluate our budget because it would be an indicator that we were not challenging ourselves enough. *We would need to raise it.*

As a result, "not meeting this year's budget" is not a fair indicator of giving. This does not mean that we should not continue to encourage giving. Giving is important because Jesus asks us to be givers, but it is not important for any other reason. Jesus doesn't need our money, but he'll use it best.

If everyone were tithing a true tithe, we could double our budget, but I doubt we would know what to do with so much at once. (Although we could always give more away to the food pantry and to ELCA World Hunger). However, when folks catch a vision for a particular project or charity or mission, they have a greater sense of ownership and are inspired to give because they believe in it. They are "invested" in it, and as a result they then invest their money and time into it.

Over five years later, I still continue to be impressed by the high level of stewardship in this congregation. It is because you are invested in your church and invested in God's mission. It shows, and anyone can look it up to see. Great job!

Peace,

Pastor Chris