

StewardCAST

A monthly e-newsletter of LCMS Stewardship Ministry

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Keeping Stewardship Between the Ditches

Many Americans have a deep-seated longing for the open road. From the time of Henry Ford's Model T up to the most technologically sound all-electric cars of the future, there has been a romantic fascination with roads. The image of an open road with an expanse of America unfolding out in front of the driver either makes the driver excited or nostalgic. It brings memories of the great American road that is Route 66 or anticipation of a destination that is engendered by a stretch of the modern interstate system. In most

corners of the nation, no matter how modern mass transit becomes, there will always be a desire to hit the open road.

Since people made the switch from horses and wagons to cars, roads could no longer just appear out of nowhere. Preparation needed to take place. Over the last century, the technology of roadbuilding has advanced tremendously. Built on a solid road base using the most modern construction equipment, today's roads are smoother, safer and more secure.

But there are still dangers that come with even the most modern super highways. However, most of them don't come from the road itself. Except for the occasional pothole and that texting driver, most of the dangers on the road come from the ditches that lay along side the road. Out of the ditches come random animals seeking to become roadkill. Ditches are where wayward cars end up when their drivers grow sleepy or lose their focus. It is in ditches that one finds memorials for those who lost their lives in transit. Ditches are NOT where you want to end up when driving!



Avoiding stewardship ditches

Stewardship leaders in the congregation don't want to end up in the ditch either. Leading stewardship is truly a journey for the pastor and the congregation. At this point the pastor and people are at home. They have not left. They are not on the open road. Before them lays an open road of free and joyous stewardship of life and its resources. There is only one standard that guides them. That standard is faithfulness. The steward has been created and redeemed for this very purpose. They have been made and re-made to carry out this stewardship in the image of God as a reflection of the One who created it all.

Scripture is clear in laying out this road that is known as stewardship. However, just like a highway, interstate or road, there are ditches on the stewardship road as well. These ditches are where the dangers lie; the roadkill of previous programs, congregations whose pastors and leaders swerved to avoid the topic all together and memorials to stewardship of bygone eras that have now left greater financial stress and less resources for these institutions. These ditches need to be avoided at all cost!

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Ditch #1 – The programmatic ditch

On one side of the road is the programmatic ditch. Congregations get stuck in the muck and mire of this ditch when they limit stewardship only to annual stewardship programs and capital campaigns. This ditch can be tempting because there sure seems to be pragmatic success in it. Any steward leader that has used some stewardship programs, like Consecrated Stewards from

Lutheran Church Extension Fund, knows that there is some marked benefits to their use. Congregations using well thought out and executed programs can regularly see a 15–35% increase in giving year over year. This is a temptation for any congregation that is struggling to meet the financial obligations of ministry. Capital campaigns have a long history of making ministry expansion possible. Many congregations have proof in brick and mortar that these programs work.

But this ditch brings the grave danger of getting stuck. The congregation that depends on programs can get stuck in viewing stewardship as only a financial thing. Stewardship is easily held hostage by what Charles Lane calls “paying the bills.” Yet another danger is that it makes stewardship too simplistic. This is a paint-by-numbers approach that seeks to raise funds rather than forming godly stewards who freely and joyously seek to serve the Lord by giving and serving for the sake of their neighbor.



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Ditch #2 – Stewardship reluctance

There is an equally deadly ditch on the other
 side of the road of stewardship. This ditch is
 marked by a reluctance to directly engage in
 stewardship at all. The people don't like to
 talk about it, so the pastor chooses this ditch
 rather than anger the people he is called to
 serve. Many times, this is cloaked in a desire
 to be theologically conservative and correct.
 This ditch has a muddy base that allows
 the steward leader to believe that talking
 about stewardship is somehow beneath the
 preaching and teaching office. Those mired in
 this ditch think that if they preach and teach
 faithfully about everything else, stewardship
 will happen organically.

It is important for the steward leader to
 recall that faithful stewardship goes against
 the sinful nature of human beings. The
 old Adam seeks to serve self over God or
 neighbor. He or she will seek to amass
 things and build a reputation and kingdom
 for self rather than the Lord or others.
 Failure to intentionally teach what Scripture
 says about being a steward of all of life and
 life's resources will leave the individual
 stewards and the congregation stuck in a
 ditch of self-centered seeking for vainglory!

Staying out of the stewardship ditch

Ditches don't allow for those on a journey
 to get from point A to point B. Whether on
 America's road, a modern interstate highway
 or the journey of forming faithful stewardship
 in a congregation, it is imperative that those
 navigating the trip stay out of the ditch. The
 road to faithful stewardship is one that can
 be safely traveled when one keeps a proper
 balance between the ditches along the side.

Here is what that means. Not all programs
 are bad. The discipline that is created by a
 program can provide the framework for

solid stewardship growth. Take a lesson
 from stewardship of the body. When one
 tries to lose weight or get in shape, it really
 doesn't happen accidentally. Success comes
 through a program of discipline. Dieting
 is a programmatic change in eating habits.
 Routines at the gym are programmatic
 disciplines that strengthen the body.
 Programs work! But what happens when
 one drops off the diet and quits going to the
 gym. Old habits return and leave the person
 worse off than before. So programs ALONE
 don't work. There also needs to be changes
 in culture and vision if the programmatic
 changes are to be cemented in for the long
 haul. This change only happens in the area
 of stewardship when the program is followed
 by intentional teaching! When this happens,
 stewardship will indeed grow.

But growth cannot be measured in dollars
 and cents dedicated for ministry. It is
 only measured by the individual steward's
 connection to Word and Sacrament. This
 Word is what calls the steward to faith. It
 is this Word that also engenders a deeper
 practice of true, biblical stewardship. This
 happens when the teaching is explicit and
 intentional, not simply left to spin its wheels
 in the ditch of stewardship avoidance. This
 teaching must come before, during and after
 any programmatic effort. The results are
 much harder to quantify, but that does not
 mean the effort should not be undertaken.

Stewardship that takes place between the
 ditches will bear much fruit. This growth
 won't come because of the clever program.
 It won't come because of the winsomeness
 of the leader either. Stewardship ditches
 are only avoided when the Word is central,
 Sacraments celebrated and the program is
 focused on who the steward is in Christ.
 With man, it is impossible. With God, all
 things are possible!

