

StewardCAST

A monthly e-newsletter of LCMS Stewardship Ministry

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Stewardship of Fellowship

In his epistle of joy to the Philippians, St. Paul starts in a very interesting way. He talks with the people of the Church at Philippi and calls them partners. But these fellow believers are not merely business partners. They are so much more! Paul thanks the Lord for their “partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (PHIL. 1:5–6). That little prepositional phrase “in the Gospel” is where the meat of the partnership lies.

It is the Gospel that gives the Philippians a common purpose with St. Paul, the other believers of that age and the Christians of this day. As believers, redeemed and restored in the Gospel that is the person and work of Jesus, the chief gift from God that the Church stewards is the Gospel. The Holy Spirit

has called the Church to this task of being stewards of the Gospel. But as Paul also makes abundantly clear, this process is one that is piloted by the Lord Himself. He is the One who makes this stewardship possible. He is the One who will bring it to completion in the Day of Jesus Christ. The steward does indeed carry out the effort of stewardship of all things for the sake of the Gospel, but it is the working of the Holy Spirit that brings the results!

Body of Many Parts

There is something to be noticed in these very familiar words from the apostle. The thanking of the Lord for the partnership (*koinonia* in the Greek) is done as a corporate thanksgiving. Paul is writing about the partnership that he has with the Philippian congregation. To be sure, there are individual members of this congregation, but the

partnership for which he thanks God is with all the people the Lord had assembled around Word and Sacrament in that place.

This corporate nature of the partnership is nothing other than an extension of one of Paul’s favorite ways to describe the Church. He speaks of the Church as a body. This body, as he wrote to the Romans and the Corinthians, has many members. But the focus is on the totality of the body, not the sum of the individual parts. It is the Lord who assembles the given members in a congregation. Each has their gifts, talents and resources that are to be utilized for the stewardship of the Gospel in that place.

This is certainly a different view of stewardship than the one that is often taught in the local congregation today. Under the influence of American individualism,



stewardship has often been treated as an individual response that is then totaled as a sum of the parts in each congregation. The emphasis in stewardship is on the individual and not the body. This is backward if one compares it to the partnership that St. Paul is talking about. The stewardship of the Gospel in each location is bigger than the stewardship of the individuals.

Steward leaders in a congregation would be better served to teach stewardship in a corporate model. The Lord has assembled the believers together in that place for a reason. They are the body in that place. This body of stewards is interdependent for the sake of the Gospel. There are some individuals who from a worldly perspective may appear to be more prominent, but that does not render the corporate partnership of the congregation in the stewardship of the Gospel any less critical for the sake of the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is critical that each individual steward is formed by the Word of God to see their place in the partnership that the Lord is working in and through them for the sake of the Gospel in that community.

This partnership also expands beyond the congregation as well. As the earliest history of the Church indicates, Paul's epistles were circulated beyond the congregations for whom they were originally intended. What Paul meant for the Romans applied to the Philippians and to the Christians of today. What Paul wrote to the Corinthians was formative for the Ephesians and the Church of today. All that the Holy Spirit led Paul to pen for the stewards of the Gospel then also gives us formation as the 21st century Church seeks to be faithful stewards of the Gospel.

Layers of Partnership

Since this is true, it is also true that the concept of stewardship marked by partnership in the Gospel of Jesus Christ needs to expand beyond the local congregation. In theory we have this. Congregations are formed into circuits. Circuits are formed into the 35 districts. These districts make up the whole of the body that is The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Beyond the congregation, each of these layers of partnership is one more level removed from the heart of

Gospel work — the font, altar and pulpit — but these layers still exist to serve this partnership in the Gospel.

If one re-reads the second sentence of the last paragraph, this is really only in theory. Except for a few metro areas, for the most part the clear majority of the congregations of the LCMS conduct themselves as independent Gospel franchises. Congregations, many of which share very close proximity, carry out their stewardship of the Gospel in a manner that is almost independent of their neighbors. This means duplicated efforts and duplicated expenses could manifest themselves in ways that look far more like competition than partnership.

This worked in previous generations when people and resources were far more concentrated than they are today. In previous generations, faithful stewards of the Gospel were not able to travel great distances. Today they will drive miles, passing other congregations along the way, to become partners with other stewards of the Gospel.

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StewardCAST may be reprinted with acknowledgment given to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

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The passed-over congregations often bear animosity toward the one that is chosen for partnership. This too does nothing for expanding the partnership in the Gospel.

Enhancing and Expanding Stewardship

One must wonder if this model will be tenable going forward. As a study conducted by the LCMS Stewardship Ministry has made clear, in the years to come there will be fewer resources to serve fewer members who are still tasked by the Lord with stewardship of the Gospel. If stewardship of the Gospel continues with a broad sense of independence, the stewardship of the Gospel, without a doubt, will be diminished!

But what if the congregations of the LCMS took a fresh look at St. Paul's thanksgiving for partnership in the Gospel? How might the Gospel be better stewarded if reduplication were replaced by a genuine partnership that exists for the sake of the Gospel? In areas like Lutheran education, what might happen if congregations in a given area were to trust one another enough to partner in this critical ministry for the sake of the Gospel? Expenses could be shared, and the Gospel ministry expanded! Perhaps in youth ministry and family ministry several congregations could partner to provide care for marriages and those scarred by the devastation of grief,

divorce and single parenting. There are many out-of-the-box partnerships that could be developed by congregations in even more remote areas that go well beyond the sharing of a pastor in multi-point parishes. This has been done before. Remember the Walther League? It is also being done right now in many areas as congregations band together to do ethnic ministry, human care ministry and other ministry. How might the blessing of this be extended to more areas of ministry?

“ There are many out-of-the-box partnerships that could be developed by congregations **”**

Recall again what this partnership is about. It exists for the sake of the Gospel! The Church was created for this partnership. Individuals and congregations exist in this partnership. It is the Lord who is working in and through these partnerships. Steward leaders need to seek out ways that the Lord is leading to expand and enhance the stewardship of this partnership in the Gospel! He is faithful. He will make it happen!