This article is recommended by the PSEC Generosity Mission Team. It was published in the UCC's "Generosity Updates" email.

The following reflection from Janet Long comes from the "Imagine Together" Stewardship Resource recently released by the UCC. Use Janet's observations to discuss the role of the pastor in the stewardship efforts of your local congregation.

On the Pastor's Role in Stewardship: When - and Where - Do I start?

Rev. Janet A. Long

The pastor has a significant role in the financial health and well-being of the congregation. The following are some of the ways in which the pastor can be involved and engaged in advancing the practice of faithful stewardship:

1. The pastor sets the tone: We worship a God of abundance, rather than scarcity. Our response of generosity (a facet of the fruit of the Spirit) reflects gratitude.

2. The pastor's own practice of financial stewardship should be reflective of the call to lead and to serve. While the expectation of tithing may not find its way into the job description, it is expected that the pastor will set an example of generosity and faithfulness in regular, percentage giving in support of a shared ministry.

3. Jesus spoke about money more often than anything else other than the realm of God, making it is clear that money can inhibit or enhance our practice of Christian discipleship. Even so, preaching and teaching about money often is discouraged and sometimes avoided. Embracing the opportunity to preach and teach about money will strengthen the body of Christ by lifting up the invitation to offer one's heart to the Lord (rather than one's money to pay the church's bills).

4. A willingness to talk about money, in general, as an integral part of both personal/family and congregational life allows money to be relegated to its place: It is a tool to be used to reflect the values held by the individual or family and the congregation. Money can be directed to efforts that bring about justice, show a love for kindness, and invite us to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Honest conversations about money can be a gift the church offers to balance the messages bombarding people from every angle. The topic of money is one that should be considered year-round, not just during an annual stewardship emphasis.

5. Speaking of an annual focus on stewardship, having such a program is imperative. Setting aside a specific Sunday for making commitments as an act of discipleship in support of shared mission and ministry is key. Planning for this significant event needs to begin several months in advance. Recruiting a team of faithful and generous stewards is the place to begin. (More on this follows in #7.) Determining a theme for the annual emphasis and considering those who could inspire the congregation to grow in giving are important conversations to have. Involving a cross-section from the pews in response to a theme-related

question is one way to help people imagine how they might respond to the opportunity to take a step forward as stewards. Challenging the congregation's leaders to lead is a good place to begin.

6. It is important that the pastor have full access to the congregation's giving records.* By knowing the giving patterns of parishioners, the pastor can respond to changes in those patterns. If a person/couple/family increases giving, it may signal an openness to increased involvement in the church's life. If a person/ couple/family decreases giving, it may signal some uncertainty (marriage or job issue, health problem, spiritual concern, etc.) that calls for pastoral care.

7. Knowledge of parishioners' giving allows the pastor to work discreetly with the congregation's nominating committee to ensure that those who are being asked to provide leadership are generous in support of the mission and ministry of the congregation. Financial stewardship is an important marker of commitment (or lack thereof). Nothing will drag a church board or group of elders down more quickly than a person who is not invested financially in the ministry being shared. When "How much will that cost?" or "We can't afford that" are the comments made in response to an idea, the path to expanded mission and ministry will be made much more challenging. Conversely, generous givers tend to have generous hearts and minds when it comes to considering others' ideas.

8. The pastor can be key in inviting legacy giving to the church. An endowment fund encourages church members to consider an estate gift to the church which will bless future generations in perpetuity. The pastor has opportunities to introduce this conversation in a variety of settings.

9. By being involved in all aspects of church life, the pastor can provide context and oversight to the congregation's financial team regarding expenditures and anticipated expenses. This knowledge can be extremely helpful in budget planning and budget building, including the presentation of a narrative budget which involves telling the congregation's story of mission and ministry in a way that engages more people.

10. Regular meetings with the congregation's financial officers, finance committee, stewardship committee, memorial committee, and permanent funds trustees will enable the pastor to share the big picture with each group, ensuring that the congregation is free of the silo effect (where groups work with only partial information).

11. Praying for the congregation's stewardship to be a blessing from the church's doorsteps to the ends of the earth reminds givers that all offerings are gifts to God. Sharing examples of how that prayer is answered provide reasons to rejoice—and to give more generously.

*More about the pastor's access to giving records:

The value of the pastor knowing about the giving of members of the congregation s/he is serving has been quantified by the Lake Institute on Faith & Giving. The organization cites these statistics: *[A]mong those congregations whose clergy look at giving records, 58% reported an increase in the amount they received over the past three years (42% [of those congregations had] an increase of 10% or more).*

The difference is stark: There is a higher likelihood of growth in giving if the pastor has access to the congregation's giving records. Like all confidences a pastor keeps, this is a sacred trust. Bringing the pastor into the loop likely will make a positive difference in the life of the congregation.