

The Road Less Traveled – December 1, 2017

It's that time of year again. For me it used to be when I started sweating Christmas ideas for my wife, who proves to be incredibly hard to buy for. It was the time that we shopped for the kids, tried to come up with perfect gift idea for my Dad – who is impossible to buy for – and getting things packaged up for our family that lives far away. When I became a pastor – or to be more precise, when I became a senior pastor – that all changed.

I still spend a lot of time thinking about all of the people on my list, but now what tends to preoccupy me this time of year is matters of a financial nature. Namely, church matters of a financial nature. It's not just the time of year that we start looking ahead to next year, projecting revenues, looking at expenses and dreaming about the ministry we might accomplish in the name of Jesus Christ in the coming months. It's also the time of year that I and your Finance Team are sweating the finish to the current year. No matter how we plan, it always comes down to December. A strong December financially means we'll finish the year strong, pay all of our bills, and meet our commitment to the larger work of the United Methodist Church. If December ends somewhere south of strong, then we find ourselves in a real dilemma.

This year – as in many past years – we enter December financially in decent shape to meet all of our local responsibilities to the staff, ministries and facilities of Aledo United Methodist Church. But it is the larger commitment hanging out there that tends to keep me up at night. The commitment is what the church calls Connectional Missional Giving. If you've been a United Methodist for more than a few years, you might know it as Apportionments. Whatever you call it, it's the same thing. It is the money that we pledge as a congregation to the larger work of the United Methodist Church. It is our tithe, you might say, to the building of the Kingdom of God that largely happens outside the walls of our congregation.

And "tithe" is fairly accurate, since that pledge amounts to roughly 10 percent of our annual budget. This year our "tithe" amounted to \$111,000, and there is still a sizable chunk of that that remains to be paid. Like your own tithe, it is money that we surrender to the larger work of the church in anticipation and expectation that something holy will result.

And it does. There are, of course, administrative expenses on the Conference level that are paid through the Connectional Missional Giving of every church in our conference. Salaries are paid. Rent on the Conference Office. The salaries of our District Superintendents, and so on. But the funds are called Connectional Missional Giving because the spirit of our connection as United Methodists is missional. So the money that we pledge helps fund things like the United Methodist Committee on Relief, which has become the premier aid agency in the face of disaster. When Hurricane Harvey struck southeast Texas, UMCOR was among the first on the ground offering assistance and will most assuredly remain there working long after other relief agencies have moved on. Through our Connectional Missional Giving we are part of the Global Mission Fund, which sponsors missionary efforts

around the world, sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in places starved for the Gospel. A good friend of mine recently left pastoral ministry for the mission field. Today she is helping plant churches in Sierra Leone, and I am proud that this congregation played a part in training and preparing her to take the message of Christ to Africa. Through our giving we are part of the Ministerial Education Fund, which ensures that no one called and equipped for ministry in the church should ever ignore God's call because of an inability to pursue an education. And we continue to be a part of Imagine No More Malaria, a multi-year initiative that is winning the battle to eradicate malaria from sub-Saharan Africa.

And there's more. Much more. But suffice to say, our Connectional Missional Giving is important, and not just because it is expected that we will meet our commitments. This financial partnership is unique to the United Methodist Church. It is what connects us as a denomination. It is the absolute conviction that we are called to look beyond ourselves, our own church. That what begins here really has the power to change the world.

That's why we are pushing. That's why your Finance Team and I continue to share financial information with you and continue to pray for a strong finish to 2017. We'll pay our bills here at home. But if we stop there, then we have somehow managed to shrink the scope of God's Kingdom. And if that happens, we all lose.

See you Sunday.