

The Road Less Traveled – November 4, 2016

The status quo is a deceptive thing. Because most of us do not like change, there is comfort in it. It is predictable and familiar. But the status quo also can be dangerous because we quickly can become trapped in it, leaning on the comfort of the past rather than leaning into the future in faith.

No where is that more evident than in the financial life of our church. Church finance is tricky. While our expenses are fairly fixed throughout the year – salaries, mortgage, utilities, etc. – income varies significantly at different times of year. We receive nearly 20 percent of our annual giving during the month of December, while the early part of the year and the summer sees much lower giving. That creates a problem because we still have to pay our bills during those lean times.

So we operate much of the year living off of savings, hopeful that we will rebuild those savings by the end of the year so that we go into the New Year able to fund the ministries that God calls us offer to our members, our community and to the world. Unfortunately, for the past few years, we have sweated out the end of the year, just hoping to finish strong so we can fulfill our commitments. We've been cutting it close, praying that unexpected expenses or lower-than-expected giving doesn't put us in a financial bind.

This year, we are cutting it awfully close.

As of the end of September, we are approximately \$35,000 behind on the giving that was pledged for the support of the church. That's not a lot, relatively speaking (only about 3.5%) but when the budget is as lean as ours, every dollar matters. Your staff has done a good job of keeping expenses down, and that helps a great deal, but we still face some challenges as we move toward the end of the year.

Of particular note is our Connectional Missional Giving commitment. This commitment, known by many of you as Apportionments, represent the financial covenant that we have with The United Methodist Church. Aledo UMC, like every other United Methodist Church, commits to be a part of the financial life of our denomination. A portion of our Connectional Giving goes toward the administrative realities of an earthly institution. It helps fund our Central Texas Conference office and other General Agencies of the church. But it also is part of a worldwide ministry that changes lives in the name of Jesus Christ. Ministries like the United Methodist Committee on Relief – which puts first responders on the ground in the aftermath of floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes and other disasters around the world; Imagine No More Malaria – a decade-old effort to eradicate the scourge of malaria from sub-Saharan Africa; not to mention schools, hospitals and outreach ministries around the world are all made possible because of our commitment to The United Methodist Church.

Our Connectional Missional Giving represents our tithe as a church, funds that we surrender to the larger work of the Church for the glory of God.

And we are in danger of falling short of our commitment this year.

To maintain a positive cash flow through the year, we budgeted this year to postpone our Connectional commitment until the fall. We have paid about a third of our commitment, but nearly \$75,000 remains unfulfilled. Your Finance Committee is working diligently on strategies that, while painful in the short run, will put us on the road to better financial health. That strategy depends on finishing this year strong, and entering 2017 fiscally sound.

And so here is the challenge. If we can meet this two-fold challenge, we will move into the future financially sound and better prepared to follow where God leads us.

1. If you are behind on your 2016 pledged giving – and if you're not sure, contact the church office for an update – make the commitment to fulfill that pledge before the end of the year. Most of the shortfall that we are experiencing is in pledged giving.
2. I believe we can raise an additional \$100,000 before the end of the year. It sounds like a lot, and it is. But the truth is that we are many, and we are capable of great things. I know because I already have seen it. One family in the church, through an overwhelmingly generous gift, has put us halfway to that goal. And if the remainder of us can come together and bring us the rest of the way, then we will not only finish 2016 fulfilling all of our commitments, we will move into 2017 strong and healthy and on a more responsible and viable financial path, ready to answer God's call.

We do not want to become trapped in the status quo. It may be comfortable, but there is no future in it. I hope you will join me in prayerful consideration of what each of us can do to prepare Aledo UMC for the future.

See you Sunday.