

# Stewardship... What We Can Do With What We Have

By Pastor Abner Cotto-Bonilla

The end of December is the time when ministers and church leaders are thinking about what ministerial programs they should fulfill for the coming year. During this process, they have to review their financial results from the current year and determine what their budget will be for the next one. Without question, a church cannot plan their ministerial (program) calendar without considering the budget. Good financial stewardship is not only important to a church, but it is also one of the main ingredients that makes the activities on the program calendar possible. Religious institutions that often fail to have a good stewardship plan for their finances not only risk potentially not being able to fulfill their church calendar but may also not be prepared to manage any unexpected situations that arise. In fact, 2020 serves as a good example of such unexpected situations. Even though back in December 2019 everything looked to be “business as usual” for the upcoming new year, nobody expected that we were about to suffer a global pandemic from pretty much the very beginning of 2020. This is when good financial stewardship asks for accountability.

Being a pastor of a Hispanic congregation in White Plains, New York (Misión Bautista Hispana de Westchester), has taught me how important it is to be prepared in advance when it comes to economic matters. I believe that our congregation was able to cope with the pandemic because we were adequately prepared for unexpected events. This allowed us to continue paying salaries and current expenses. However, the church is called to fulfill God’s mission inside and outside the community, and part of that mission is to help people in need when crises come. What if the church cannot fulfill such a mission because they are struggling financially? The challenge not only relates to paying salaries and current expenses, but also to helping those who are seeking help and hope in the midst of their economic crises. We have come to realize that many churches have not been able to pay their pastors salaries in these months of pandemic.

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The inability to pay salaries raises great financial concern for the ministers and their families.

What can we do to be prepared for extraordinary experiences like a pandemic which continue to persist? We can answer that question by saying that no one is truly ever prepared. On the other hand, God has called us not only to have faith in what God can do with financial resources, but we have also been called to be good stewards

in the place we are serving. It does not mean that this task is easy to fulfill. It requires a good and constant process of discerning, evaluating, implementing, and most importantly, trusting.

The biblical narrative of the “Feeding of the five thousand” is a good example of this. (John 6:1-15 CEB) Jesus noted that there were many people in crisis seeking hope and fulfillment of their needs. They were hungry and there was no food in the area. Can we call this a crisis? The disciples could have thought,

"we are with Jesus. He can do everything for these people." Surprisingly, Jesus asked them, "where will we buy food to feed these people?" Can you imagine the disciples' faces? I imagine some of them saying, "um, Jesus, we did not come prepared for this." The gospel according to Matthew shares with us an important detail when the disciples suggested to Jesus that he "send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves." (Matthew 14:15 CEB) Have we ever been in the disciples' position? Have we acted like them in the midst of people's crises? Why did Jesus want them to act before him? These and other questions lead us to think that good financial stewardship is very relevant for today's mission.

The establishment of priorities should also not be forgotten and is a key part of the discernment, evaluation, and implementation of a financial plan. In doing so, we must first think about what our ministry's expectations will be for the next year. Second, such expectations have to be hand in hand with the budget. Furthermore, we can review how funds were used in the prior year, and then evaluate what party should have a higher priority relative to others for the coming year. We cannot forget that a good financial practice does not only consist in considering a single year, but that it is a year over year process.

Working with a sister church has also helped us fulfill the needs of the community. We have been working together with a program called "Food Coop." Members of the church are sponsors for families in the community that are in need. Most of them are single mothers with children. They not only receive food from the church, but they have also found a family through the program. This program was extended to families from the church who lost their jobs as result of the pandemic. Thankfully, we have been a witness of what God can do in the midst of crises. I believe that God prepares us for the mission to which we have been called. It is on us to believe what God can do with the resources we have on hand. As Margaret Marcuson states, "we can do more than we thought with what we have, and we have more than we thought." (Marcuson, 5) In other words, it is not simply about knowing what we have, but what we can do with what we have.

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