

Article for Suggested Talking Points for the EPAC Cabinet, re: Financial Recovery Strategies

Entrusted

“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.” [Luke 12:48](#) (NRSV)

It is hard to resist or overcome stubborn notions of scarcity these days, especially when our conference and many of our churches are declining in money and memberships. Yet, many of us know we are still blessed with an abundance of God’s gifts, monetary and otherwise. Those gifts are not just given to us, but *entrusted* to us—all of us—our churches, conferences and denomination—to meet the many demands and opportunities for spreading Jesus’ gospel and goodness “into all the world.”

We celebrate the important, much-needed ministries many of our churches are performing and supporting individually in their local communities and beyond, even global mission support for some. But as United Methodists in the Eastern PA Conference, we are connected one to another by our covenant and our great commission to serve and share Christ as faithful stewards of God’s abundant grace, and to do it together.

Through our ingenious system of apportioned giving, we are able to support far more ministries in far more places, touching and changing many more lives than any church could individually. Our participation in that system relies on principles of shared responsibility and shared rewards. We all have responsibilities and rewards, however great or small; and they are entrusted to each of us, as we share in the giving and receiving of blessings bestowed by a generous God.

We must, on a regular basis, affirm and strengthen the sacred covenant we share as a church, a conference and a denomination to the glory of God. That covenant undergirds a connectional system of giving and receiving that financially supports mission and ministries on local, district, conference, national and global levels. We should all want to be a vital part of that system and to embrace its inherent opportunities, benefits and responsibilities. That is makes us a family, each one unto another.

Because much has been entrusted to us—by God and by our churches and members—we as a conference have struggled mightily to meet the demands of being strategically frugal and focused with funds received through apportioned giving:

1. We reduced our full-time staff dramatically in 2011 to operate within a severely constrained budget. Since then, we have added only one much-needed full-time staff member.
2. We moved Annual Conference to the Oaks Convention Center to save on that yearly expense (with the exception of holding last year’s conference in Lancaster to help us prepare to host the Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference two months later).
3. We have pared down other programmatic and administrative budgets to bare-bones levels by reducing costs and finding savings in many areas—for example, using more electronic rather than postal mail deliveries.
4. We, as a conference, have reduced our number of districts from six to four, allowing us to reduce cost projections dramatically for district facilities, personnel and other expenses. For example, the East District office will be moved to Simpson House in Philadelphia at a significant cost savings. And the Southeast District, when it becomes the new South District, will also save on costs when it moves to the new community center being developed by Hopewell UMC in Downingtown.

5. We have decided to sell the Episcopal residence and superintendents' parsonages when and where possible, while shifting from paying ownership costs to housing subsidies. There may be sales of other conference properties as well.
6. We have consulted with the General Council on Finance and Administration to help our executive leadership devise more ways to lower costs and raise collection rates.

Meanwhile, we are seeking ways and trying collaboratively to help more churches recognize their own abundance and ability, beyond any scarcity, to meet the connectional demands and shared responsibilities entrusted to them.

1. Each district has plans for helping churches understand and fulfill their responsibilities (and their potential) for paying their direct-bill church insurance and pastoral benefits costs and their connectional ministries apportionment. Those plans include volunteer financial stewardship consultants, workshops and resources on vital church mergers, financial stewardship and mission education, as well as the Mid-Atlantic United Methodist Foundation's Financial Leadership Academy for clergy and, in the future, for laity, too.
2. District superintendents and our Bishop have reached out personally to individual churches that are not fulfilling their connectional financial responsibilities—especially their direct-bill payments for clergy benefits and church insurance—to try to help them before it's too late. Those challenging conversations have included payment plans to reduce overdue balances, leveraging property assets to secure needed revenue, choosing to revitalize or close, and exploring possibilities for merger, multi-site or satellite church relationships, cooperative parishes or shifting to part-time pastoral status.
3. We have worked to devise new Vision and Mission statements to present to the Annual Conference, as we continue to develop strategic goals and plans. Our objective is to develop a stronger sense of unity, purpose and direction, while motivating more churches and leaders to cooperate in mission and stewardship together.
4. We are investigating to determine if more affordable and suitable group property and liability insurance policies are available to benefit our churches—each of which is responsible for its own insurance costs direct-billed by the conference.
5. We are working to improve the conference remittance form to make it clearer and easier for churches to use in making monthly payments.

These are only some of the strategies and tactics devised by a special Conference Financial Recovery Task Group that met three times from October to March, while much work was done between meetings. Our efforts will continue as more ideas are explored, feedback is sought and results are evaluated.

In the meantime, we celebrate the new, more affordable ways we are finding to help churches reach new people, raise up new leaders and create more vital congregations for Christ. We now have three Lifetree Cafés where people who do and don't attend church can find friendly, faith-based conversation together in comfortable community settings.

A reborn, interracial church in Philadelphia is creating a transformative, multicultural congregation led by a dynamic young African American pastor and Latina lay leader and aided by returning, longtime white members. Meanwhile, new Latin@ ministries that may grow into faith communities are being developed in Reading, Coatesville and Warrington, while the jurisdiction's largest Hispanic church, our own New Birth (or Nuevo Nacimiento) UMC, is leading the way among Lebanon churches in exploring joint ministry partnerships.

We've invested in Spiritual Leadership training for our Cabinet and large church pastors—with small and medium-size churches to follow—in order to stimulate greater trust among leaders and more

adaptive ministries. And by sharing solution-oriented concepts and resources like Mission InSite, Vital Church Mergers and multisite churches, we are helping congregations around the conference to clearly perceive the realities of their situations and respond in strategic ways.

People are learning and growing at our many helpful training events—from annual Faith-Sharing Seminars to the recent Fresh Expressions Vision Day, from Cross-Racial/Cross-Cultural Forums to Tools for Ministry and Laity Academy. And then there's our Local Pastor Licensing School and Certified Lay Minister and Christ Servant Minister training opportunities.

Indeed, much is given to our leaders, as they, in turn, give much to their congregations and communities. Moreover, much has been entrusted to each church by its membership, past and present, and also by our connectional family through the conference and denomination.

But ultimately, the abundant gifts of ministry entrusted to us all by a loving God, demand much in return—most especially, our integrity, faithfulness to our mission, and responsible, generous stewardship of all our gifts and graces.