

Seeing stewardship and evangelism through scattered church lenses

I recently had the opportunity to engage 33 pastors from five denominations in two events that featured intentional conversations about what I call the “dirty words” of the church: stewardship and evangelism. Martha Grace Reese, writing in *Unbinding the Gospel*, notes that a good many people have taken to calling evangelism the “e-word.” I heard recently that someone else had called stewardship the “f-word,” that is, finances. There is reluctance in the church to engage these topics. These conversations also revealed that there is hope, if we can address them not only from a “gathered church” perspective, but from the viewpoint of the “scattered church” as well.

To facilitate and report back on the conversations I used two similar worksheets, “Redefining Stewardship” and “Redefining Evangelism.” There were two columns on each worksheet; on the left participants were asked to define stewardship/evangelism “in institutional terms”; on the right they were asked to define each topic in “life in the world” terms. Based on one participant’s comment about the unfortunate pejorative connotation of “institutional,” and in keeping with the overall direction of my recent work, I’ve changed the left column to “in the church.” If you make it to the end of this report, you’ll find that I’ve changed it even further based on what I learned.

With each worksheet I asked participants to work alone on the left column for a few minutes to establish a baseline understanding of the topic. I told them that I expected they would write down legitimate, theologically valid definitions of stewardship/evangelism in the left column. I then told them they had permission to add jaded, stereotypical definitions as well.

Once they had established an initial baseline, I handed out a small group conversation guide. It contained loosely paraphrased and considerably condensed quotations on each topic from Craig Nessan’s *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation*. Questions for small group discussion followed. Between the quotes and the questions I hoped participants would consider new or expanded definitions or understandings of each topic. I urged them to keep the “Redefining” worksheet handy and to add additional insights to both columns as they talked.

Stewardship “In the church”

The most common definitions of stewardship “in the church” included giving of time, talent, and treasures. (One pastor added, “Thank you 1990s!”) Money and funding for the church, paying bills, and finalizing the upcoming budget were typical responses. One person summed up these comments well: “Stewardship is a matter of meeting the ministry plan that has been set by the church council in financial terms.” Similarly, one said it’s “gathering financial support for the church’s program.” More broadly (and in the “time and talent” category), stewardship is seen as being willing to participate in the various ministry opportunities that the church offers.

Solid theological or practical definitions were fairly rare. One said helpfully, “It’s a discipline—a faith practice.” Another quoted the typical stewardship refrain: “Everything is God’s; stewardship is a matter of giving back to God.” One person started with the theological foundation, “Give in response to God’s grace to us,” but then added the jaded remark in parentheses, “(to support the church’s program).”

Signs of stress and pain were fairly frequent. Stewardship is seen in “should” terms; it’s something that we don’t want to talk about but have to. Some see stewardship as “paying one’s dues.” Another said that it’s the occasion for a once-a-year sermon on money. One person said the annual appeal is an unwelcome process. Another cited the common reaction, “the church is

always talking about money.” One person offered three painful responses in a row. It’s a matter of “bribing God for help; keeping God happy; and because the pastor needs it.”

Looking back on these comments, I wonder if our persistent focus on the institution’s vitality is the driver of these ‘unwelcome’ responses? Do we somehow sense that our focus is on “keeping our life” all while knowing that we are supposed to be about losing it for the sake of the world? (Luke 17:33)

Here is a question for your reflection: what is it like to prepare a sermon, committee agenda, or lesson plan when these are your baseline understandings of stewardship?

Stewardship “In the world”

Among the more frequent comments in the right column were references to activities and programs that the church doesn’t often give much attention to: community gardens, advocacy and political involvement, living simply, caring for friends and family, volunteering, citizenship, or donations to Goodwill. One person suggested making a poster of organizations and causes to which members donate time and money to highlight some of what people do in the world on a regular basis. Interestingly, no one mentioned the one “in the world” stewardship activity that a good many congregations are already devoting time and attention to: care of the earth.

Interestingly, the “legitimate, theologically valid definitions” were more frequent in the right column, even though I did not say anything about this (as I did for the left column). Stewardship was described as “the things God empowers me to do/live out.” Others said it’s a matter of looking outside of self. One person said it’s “the willingness to risk what I have been given or my whole being.” Like one of the positive comments in the left column, one person said it’s “a way of experimenting and developing faithfulness.”

One small group talked about making God-pleasing choices. As a result, several worksheets had comments about seeing stewardship in terms of how we allocate our personal resources. In other instances it is a matter of focusing on *how* we do things rather than *what* we do.

In keeping with Craig Nesson’s interpretation of stewardship as caring, some responses described stewardship as caring and learning to care. Hospitality, was mentioned, as was listening, looking, and noticing.

One person said stewardship involves financial gifts that cannot be deducted from federal income tax. Another said it’s a matter of giving of one’s self to others who will not/cannot repay.

For one person, stewardship was described as “more than writing a check”; for others it also involves wise use of our time in terms of being willing to set our schedule aside and to be diverted or distracted. Participants urged less busyness, opening more time to encountering others. Some said we should walk to more places, cut down on “screen time,” and establish regular time in public places.

Others talked about stewardship in terms of naming daily activity as holy. Congregational leaders should name the expertise of members as being used by God for the welfare of others. We should use God’s resources that have been given to us “to care for what God cares about”—and apparently that was not just what happens in the church. For example, one person suggested that we lift up Little League or soccer coaches and parents as being important, and provide resources for them to teach body stewardship, teamwork, and cooperation.

Here is an activity to aid your reflection: imagine writing a sermon, committee agenda, or lesson plan when *these* are your baseline understandings of stewardship. If people respond negatively to stewardship as a once-a-year funding campaign, how would their responses be different if we focused on stewardship as an “in the world” faith practice?

In summary

One participant offered a helpful comparison. In “in the church” terms, stewardship is a matter of “managing time, talent and treasure—for the good of the whole church and its mission(s).” On the other hand, in “life in the world” terms, it is a matter of “managing time, talent and treasure—for the good of others.” Another person offered a similar pair. From the “in the church” side, it’s a matter “giving of self for the sake of the institution.” From the “in the world” perspective, it’s “a generous response to God’s abundant blessings in all that we do, say, believe.”

Evangelism “in the church”

When we shifted our attention to evangelism in the second half of each gathering, the most common responses revolved around inviting people to “our church,” which (participants noted) is pretty obviously connected to bringing in new members. It’s a matter of replacing dying/leaving members and filling the pews. “More people,” after all, means “more money.”

Secondarily it’s about sharing our faith. But there is considerable fear associated with that. Evangelism is often seen as going door to door or handing out tracts, which is “absolutely terrifying.” Or as one said, “Getting your butt kicked for being a loudmouth.” It is stereotypically associated with street preaching, fire and brimstone, saving souls, or telling people how to get to heaven. It’s a matter of drawing people into *your* beliefs.

The minimal approach to evangelism is offering interesting and dynamic Bible studies that attract new members. Or it’s a matter of offering new member classes. Often it’s the job of a committee, which might only oversee the website or advertise worship service times. If the committee members are ambitious, they’ll deliver bread or cookies to visitors.

One person offered that it’s a matter of telling others why our church is better or best. It’s a matter of inviting people to existing programs.

Evangelism “In the world”

There seemed to be two primary foci for a redefined understanding of evangelism: speaking and living the faith. These two approaches appeared in equal numbers on the worksheets.

Participants that defined evangelism in terms of an act of telling the story of how faith shapes our lives concentrated on doing so in appropriate ways at appropriate times. They spoke of the need to listen first. They said we need to be honest about being a person of faith without being pushy. They noted the importance of building relationships with people rather than “flashing” them. Some mentioned the need to be observant and to pray for and look for the places and times where God is at work in the lives of others. One noted that it would be wise to “invite someone to tell me what Jesus means to them.” Evangelism is a ministry of presence.

In terms of “living the faith,” many of the responses made reference to living the good news of hope rooted in God’s love for us. They said we need to be a living example of a disciple’s walk

in our daily activities and relationships. It's a matter of "being the church of Jesus Christ wherever we may be," or "interesting others in what motivates you *by the way you act.*"

One person noted that evangelism is the flip side of stewardship, helping others see that their life is already in Christ.

Like they did with stewardship, several noted that evangelism is a spiritual practice that is supported by adult faith formation. Others noted the importance of testimony in the gathered community in order to help people see and speak of God's presence in the world. One noted that we should ask the question: "What has God done in *your* life *this week?*" Several noted that we need to practice telling one's own story in God language.

One person noted simply that evangelism is "an opportunity; an adventure."

One pastor talked about a conversation with a Quaker who talked about how much he loved his church, and answered all the pastor's questions about Quakerism. Then the pastor asked, "It's clear that you love your church and it enriches your life. Tell me, what difference does Jesus make in your life?" He paused, then said he'd never had anybody ask him that before. He struggled to articulate an answer.

In summary

As was the case with the conversation on stewardship, the worksheets show a clear difference of focus: evangelism "in the church" is bent toward ensuring the health of the church by bringing in new members. When we stop to think about it, both evangelism and stewardship can and should be lived out in the world, through our daily activities and relationships.

As I processed the conversations, I realized that I may have created an unintentional and false dichotomy. "Bad stuff" was mostly written in the left column, and "good stuff" was listed in the right. In listening to the conversations and reading the worksheets, I saw that the two columns could have been labeled "gathered church" and "scattered church." Both stewardship and evangelism have legitimate, theologically valid definitions for the gathered church *and* for the scattered church. Doing things (such as an annual appeal, or inviting people to worship or other activities) that support the ongoing health of the congregation is necessary and helpful. At the same time, though, the conversations showed that we have not fully thought through the application of these spiritual disciplines for our life in the world. In fact, the really exciting and encouraging ideas—and most of the energy—surfaced in the "life in the world" brainstorming.

As we wrapped up the second gathering, I observed that the two halves of the conversation (stewardship and evangelism) had a lot of similarities, and I wondered whether separating them had caused the conversation to be redundant. Participants affirmed that they weren't the same, but when we look at them from a scattered church perspective they are related and similar. One participant described them as the warp and the woof that, together, form fabric. We talked about stewardship as a matter of being attentive to our God-pleasing care for our possessions and time; evangelism is a matter of being attentive to our God-pleasing care for our relationships.