Stewardship in a Time Of Limited Resources

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Stewardship season is probably not the favorite time of the year for most parish ministers. Many find stewardship sermons difficult to prepare and the details of the other stewardship activities frustrating to manage. And it seems to be getting more difficult. Maybe this feeling only reflects that after so many stewardship seasons it is becoming more and more difficult to find a new idea or a fresh approach to the subject. Or maybe it is a feeling that the changing economic situation is simply making it much more difficult for people to give. We can look back with some nostalgia on the 1960's when affluence was all around and seemed to be the wave of the future. *Stewardship in Contemporary Theology*, a collection of essays on the "contemporary" understanding and implications of stewardship, published in 1960, had as its concluding essay one entitled "Stewardship in an Economy of Abundance."

No one would write such an essay today. "Double digit" inflation coupled with a dramatic economic slowdown and high unemployment has awakened us from the dream of the "affluent society." The fuel shortage last winter has made us painfully aware that the resources of the earth are indeed limited. While the fuel shortage was exaggerated by the unusually cold weather, government officials, industry spokesmen, and the scientific community all agree that these shortages will continue, that they will get worse, and that petroleum and natural gas are only the first of many raw materials which are becoming increasingly scarce. The point is not that we are about to use up all our petroleum, natural gas, copper, and chromium. The point is that as they become more scarce the price will increase and the percentage of our income necessary to purchase these materials and the products produced from or by them will increase, leaving less to spend for other things.

In this changing economic situation the church gets caught in a double bind. On the one hand, inflation has raised the church's expenses, while on the other hand church members have a smaller percentage of their income with which to support the church. This then is the context in which we have to talk about Stewardship in 1977.

From the preceding description, it may seem like a bad time to be talking about stewardship. It may, in fact, be the very best context in which to explore the meaning of stewardship. It may be a time in which we can see most clearly the implications of the assertion that we are "stewards of the grace of God."

Martin Marty, speaking to the National Council of Churches Commission on Stewardship, observed that these "hard times" of the 1970's bring an opportunity to the churches to develop a sense of Christian realism. The same conditions which highlight the insecurity of our economic props also make us more aware of our need for lasting values. Marty suggested to these stewardship leaders that they concentrate on this hunger of people for durable values rather than on their insecurity over having their earthly props knocked away. That is a good suggestion for us all. It encourages all of us who are responsible for stewardship education to make the growing realization of our limited resources an occasion for reconsidering the basic meaning of stewardship.

The realization that there are limits to our resources also forces us to recognize that there are limits to our power to manipulate the world and its processes. It has not been long since we were talking about completely eradicating poverty and hunger. Cybernation was being hailed as the new liberator which would both expand our productive capacity and free it from dependence upon human labor. Affluence would come to be determined simply by how much a nation could consume since production would be almost limitless. Now we know that the limiting factors to such a formula for unlimited affluence are fuel and raw materials. The specter we now see is one of more hunger and a more limited economy in the years ahead. Year by year in one area after another we are seeing the limits of our ability to manipulate the environment and to remake the universe to our plans.

The realization of these limits to our power has called into question the very nature of our relationship to the universe. The image so dear to western culture is the vision of "Man the Titan," the conqueror who goes out and subdues the earth. This image has been especially dear to Americans. We have all been nurtured on the stories of the pioneers who conquered the wilderness, of the entrepreneurs who rose from rags to riches by their own shrewdness and hard work, and of the scientists whose knowledge and technology have brought the very processes of nature under our control. There has been both a secular and a religious version of this image. The secular version projected a vision of human existence in opposition to God or in isolation from God. The religious version pictured men and women as partners with God or co-owners with God in the universe.

The recognition of limits to our power to subdue, control, and manipulate the universe has raised serious questions about the adequacy of this image of our relationship to the world which pictures us as owners and controllers. It puts us in a better position to reexamine more openly and realistically the biblical image which pictures us as tenants in God's universe. This biblical image is the foundational principle of Christian Stewardship.

Stewardship is not fund raising or budget building or program promotion or even tithing. All of these may result from stewardship, but should not be mistaken for stewardship. Stewardship is an attitude toward life, a view of the world, a concept of reality which acknowledges God as Creator and Owner and accepts life as a sacred trust to be gratefully received and responsibly tended.

Any approach to stewardship which nurtures the illusion of ownership or even co-ownership is ultimately destructive of stewardship no matter how successful it is or how much money or other support it produces. Appeals which urge us to be "generous" or to give "our fair share" may be psychologically correct in producing a response from affluent people, but they are theologically questionable in that they feed the illusion that we are owners of resources who can choose to be generous with what is ours and share fairly what we own and control. Even the appeal for tithing often has carried with it the, sometimes not-so-subtle, assumption that if we give God *his* tenth we can do whatever we please with *our* nine-tenths. Stewardship involves ten tenths. Any appeal which reduces stewardship to generous giving or even to church tithes is a perversion of biblicial theology.

The present economic bind which is affecting the "success" of these appeals may provide just the incentive we need to make us reexamine our understanding of stewardship. The growing awareness that control of the universe by human knowledge and technology is more illusion than reality may also awaken us to hear again the affirmation of the Psalmist: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and those who dwell therein. . . ," as well as to ponder again the words of Paul "you are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." The knowledge of our limited resources may be the very thing which also awakens us to the truth that we are guests in a world we have not created. If it does, then this is the best time to slice through the fund raising techniques which have often been substituted for stewardship and come to see Christian stewardship as it really is: a particular way of relating to life which accepts it and manages it as a sacred trust from God.

A second aspect of stewardship which a time of limited resources helps us to see more clearly is the relationship between stewardship and commitment. Economics is usually defined as the allocation of scarce goods among competing demands. Likewise stewardship can be defined as the effective use or management of available resources. We spoke earlier of how affluent times encourage us to think of stewardship in terms of how to use our "surplus," i.e. give generously, share our wealth, etc. But in times of limited resources when the demands are greater than the goods, we are confronted with the fact that responsible stewardship really has to do with setting priorities for the limited resources we have. For this reason times of economic hardship can be creative periods for persons, for churches, and for the society as a whole since they raise clearly and insistently the questions of value and priority.

One cannot help wondering what the American involvement in Vietnam would have been if back in the early 1960's the American people and their elected officials had been forced by the economic situation to choose between "guns and butter." One cannot help wondering what shape the church would be in today if 20 years ago congregations had been forced by their limited resources to choose between lavish new buildings (with long-term mortgage payments and large utility and maintenance requirements) and the mission program of the church. Nationwide debates or churchwide discussions about what was really important for our national or church life—what was in line with our civil and/or religious principles—were really needed. But our affluence and the illusion of limitless resources it nurtured allowed us to avoid such discussions. Hard times make us face up to the need to set priorities and make decisions about what we value most. For this reason hard times can be the most creative of times.

Such a time of priority setting is the very best time to talk about stewardship. Jesus voiced the primary concern of Christian stewardship when he said "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Christian stewardship is more concerned about the commitment of the giver than it is about the size of the gift. Christian stewardship is concerned about the orientation of the heart.

And the allocation of our treasure is one of the clearest ways we reveal that orientation. When resources are abundant we may be able to hide our basic orientation with token gifts from our surplus, but during hard times our real commitments become evident to all. Such a time provides the opportunity for us to see clearly that Christian stewardship is the living out of our faith in Jesus Christ and our commitment to his kingdom.

To say that stewardship is basically concerned with commitment is to say also that stewardship has to do with ethics. We may have begun to see this relationship already. Many thoughtful people around the world are raising questions about the implications of churches enjoying wealth in the midst of poverty or about Christians growing fat in the midst of starvation. What is required of the churches in America in this last quarter of the 20th century? The requirement is the same as it has always been: to keep before all their members the reality of the Lordship of Christ and the insistent call of Christ to serve in his name all the children of God. The shape that service takes in this time of limited resources cannot be divorced from the issues of hunger, freedom, justice, and human rights. Jesus himself asks, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I bid you?" Jesus himself summed up the moral law in terms of love for God and love for neighbor. And in his parable of the Last Judgment, Jesus identifies the Christian ministry with feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and ministering to the sick and imprisoned. Stewardship theology defines our existence as that of tenants responsible to God for how we use what he has entrusted to us. Stewardship ethics describes the shape of that responsibility for the time in which we live.

Let us then look at some of the ethical implications of stewardship in a time of limited resources: implications for our personal decisions and life style, implications for our civic responsibilities, and implications for our life together as the church.

There are definitely ethical implications for those of us who have under our care such a large proportion of the world's resources. We have heard the statistics many times. Americans are responsible for 33 percent of the world's consumption of petroleum, 68 percent of its natural gas, and 44 percent of its coal. The United States, with only 6 percent of the world's population, is responsible for 33 to 35 percent of the world's consumption of all resources. It doesn't take much arithmetic to figure out that, at this rate, 20 percent of the world's population would consume it all, leaving nothing for the other 80 percent. Stewardship as a life style has definite implications for the level of our consumption.

Whenever the subject of hunger, of polluting the environment, or of using up the earth's irreplaceable resources is raised the immediate response (from those who live in affluent societies) is to place the blame on overpopulation: if those poor nations with birth rates of 4 or 5 percent would stop overpopulating the earth, these problems could be handled. And there is no denying the fact that overpopulation is a very real problem of crisis proportions. More mouths to feed and lives to sustain mean greater demand on the world's resources and greater pollution of its environment. Zero population growth is an essential ingredient for a stable, sustainable global society. But the rate of consumption in the more affluent countries is also a real problem of crisis proportions. The average U.S. citizen consumes 22 times as much energy as the average Chinese, so 22 Chinese could be born for every single American without consuming any more of the earth's irreplaceable resources. One average U.S. citizen pollutes the environment 50 times as much as the average Indian, so 50 Indians could be born for every American without any greater pollution of the environment (data from Earl Barfoot, "Life-styles and Hungry People," United Methodist Board of Discipleship).

If resources are limited, it is not possible for some to have more without others having less. It has been difficult for most consumers to perceive this truth. The most hopeful aspect of the fuel shortages last winter was the beginning of that kind of perception. A surprisingly large number of natural gas users voluntarily turned down their heat even to the point of some discomfort. They did this because they could see how their failure to conserve natural gas would mean closing more factories and putting more people out of work. They could see how excessiveive consumption of natural gas in one month would mean less gas or even no gas the next month.

If the winter of 1977 helped the American consumer to see how excessive consumption by one group means extra suffering by another group, even in this one area, then maybe there is reason to hope that we can begin to broaden this perception to other areas. Maybe we can begin to understand how our excessive consumption of gasoline is related to the plight of the hospital in Zaire which must turn sick patients away because of the price and scarcity of the diesel fuel needed to run its generators. And some day maybe we will be able to perceive how our heavy consumption of feed grains is related to the suffering of malnourished people around the world. Not until we begin to make this connection will we begin to alter the wasteful consumption habits we have developed.

A second dimension of excessive consumption is the effects it will have on future generations. The ethical implications of our stewardship are not exhausted by our responsibility to people around the world. We also have a responsibility to future generations who follow us. Seward Hiltner has laid out these implications in a parable (he calls it a dream). A man and a woman are marooned on a deserted island with no hope of escape or rescue. They discover that the island food supply grows at such a rate that it will provide them each with 2500 calories per day for 50 years, which is also the length of time it will take for a new crop to begin producing. If they over-consume they will run out of food before the new crop comes in. Things go well until they realize they are going to have a baby. They have to decide if they will reduce their consumption in order to have enough for the three. The man says they should maintain their 2500 calorie diet because he is confident that they will find other sources of food before they run out. The woman does not want to gamble with their child's life and thinks they should reduce their consumption accordingly. ("Starving the Future's Children," CHRISTIAN CENTURY, 1-21-76).

What right do we have to gamble with the lives of our grandchildren by naively assuming that new resources will be found to replace those we are wasting today? We have not understood the meaning of stewardship if we do not see its implications for the shaping of our personal life style and consumption habits. If these times of limited resources help us to see these implications, then this will prove to be the best of all possible times.

Stewardship implications for our times have to do with more than personal life styles. As basic and as important as this is, it is not sufficient for these crucial times. The worldwide problem of hunger will not be solved simply by all of us skipping a meal a week. Neither will riding a bike to work automatically improve the lot of an Asian farmer or an African mine worker. We need better systems of distribution. One of the resources of which we Americans are stewards is citizenship in the world's principle economic power. American agriculture policy, trade agreements, economic policy, treaty arrangements, etc., have far-ranging effects on people around the world. Responsible stewardship includes the way we use our influence to work for policies that will encourage a more equitable distribution of the world's resources among the world's people. This is the kind of stewardship our Christian brothers and sisters in Africa are requesting of us when they speak of a "moratorium" on mission activity. They are saying that if we really want to help Africans, we will put our efforts into trying to influence our own government to step up its economic assistance programs, to increase its agricultural assistance programs, and to stop supporting repressive governments controlled by white minorities. If we really want to help Africans and Asians and Latin Americans, we should put our efforts into changing the wage scales and working conditions set by the large multinational corporations which control such large portions of the economic life of these poorest countries. Since most of these corporations draw their leadership and their capital from North American and Western Europe, the opportunity we have to influence their policies is an important resource of which we are stewards and for which we must some day give an accounting. How will we be able to justify the maintenance of our high standard of living when the price of its maintenance is the misery and poverty of farm workers and mine workers around the world? These are some of the civic dimensions of our stewardship responsibilities. The realization that the earth has limited resources which must be shared by all the earth's peoples makes these dimensions stand in sharper relief.

Finally, the practice of stewardship in these times of limited resources carries important implications for the church itself. The failure of the churches' receipts to keep pace with their rising expenses is forcing the churches to reexamine programs and to set clearer priorities. And it is forcing churches to do more things cooperatively. Numerous ecumenical consortia are being developed to prepare economical curricula, to administer relief efforts, to strengthen theological education, to coordinate social inquiry and action, to plan and implement mission strategy, and to perform many other tasks denominations did alone in more affluent times. Cooperative arrangements are being worked out for new church development and old church consolidation to prevent costly competition and duplication of efforts. Congregations are learning to share buildings, staff, and programs. Could it be that the unity for which our Lord prayed—a unity which our mutual love and commitment to the same Lord has not been able to bring about—will eventually be brought about by the common experience of limited resources?"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

1977 may seem like a terrible year to be faced with the responsibility for leading a congregation in another stewardship program. This is especially true if part of the congregation thinks of stewardship only in terms of collecting enough pledges to meet next year's budget and the rest see the church's stewardship emphasis as one more demand on an already over-loaded family budget. And this talk of changing our life style, reducing our consumption, changing policies that will cause us to pay more for goods so that people we do not even know will get higher wages is not likely to make either group in the church happy. It could even make them so mad that they will give less instead of more. That is a serious risk. But if we have correctly understood the meaning of stewardship for 1977, if we really are tenants in God's world and are responsible to him for how we use his resources, if the resources of the earth are limited so that one group can have more only when another group has less, if God loves and cares for all his children in all parts of the world as well as those generations which are to come, and if Christian discipleship shows it self in obedient response to the call of Christ—*then do we have any alternative?*

Who knows what long term effect such an approach to stewardship will have. As Martin Marty suggests, maybe this is the time to develop Christian realism. The freezes and shortages of 1977 may have stretched the perceptions of people to such a point that they can begin to see what has to be done to develop a sustainable global society. After all, the future of the church has never been guaranteed by the size of its budget. Neither has the future of any person been guaranteed by the level of his or her standard of living. The only guarantee any person or institution (civil or religious) has is the guarantee given by the one who said: "Whoever would save his life shall lose it, but whoever would give his life for my sake and the gospel will surely find it."