

Gospel Bills and Other Ideas

Pastor Tim, from Wesley Church, was telling me about “Gospel Bill,” a TV show he remembered from his youth, but I missed the beginning and heard only the words: “gospel bill.” Now there’s a stewardship idea, I thought. That might work. We could issue gospel bills, a charge for the privilege of hearing the gospel. We could have one rate for individuals and a discounted price for families. Kids 12 and under would be free. We’d have to set the rate low, of course, what with competition from the big box gospel outlets in the suburbs, but as we’ve learned from the airlines and phone companies, there are ways to supplement low prices. We could charge extra for carry-in coffee at worship services, for instance, and for a price we could offer first class seating (which in our case would be in the rear). People could buy premium church plans that included not only weekly worship services but also free pastoral care visits when they were ill. (Naturally, such visits would have a surcharge for those on the basic plan.) Some plans would offer unlimited minutes of hospital visitation, but others would have, say, ten minutes a month, and then we could charge double for every minute after that.

It was all coming together beautifully, but when I explained this approach to Tim, he was downright discouraging. So, with a sigh, I realized I needed a new stewardship idea. Fortunately, another came up almost at once. We could announce a church shut-down! Something on the news gave me this idea. We’d put up signs at all the entrances explaining that all worship and teaching and pastoral care and outreach was temporarily discontinued until the congregation ponied up as much as we wanted. But again no one shared my excitement. Some even suggested that a shut-down might backfire, some-how. Once again, I had to find another plan.

About that time, I was discussing advertising with some of our Welcome Team, planning a simple ad with a United Methodist slogan on it. Aha! I thought. Marketing! We could just stretch that slogan and involve the community: “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors, Open Pockets”! But again I was shot down. The Welcome Team thought it might not be best to present ourselves as interested in others only for their money. Go figure.

Sadly, these absurd ideas are only exaggerations of stewardship ideas that I've really heard. But here's the truth: we present the gospel freely because it was given freely to us by a generous God. We worship and learn and love and reach out to the world because that's what gives us meaning as followers of Christ. If we were to run out of money, we wouldn't shut down. We'd just seek new ways to fulfill that mission. And we don't seek out people because we need their offerings. We seek out people because the Risen Christ has transformed us and could do the same for others.

This month you will receive cards asking you to pledge to support our church's ministries and to pay the staff that runs them. I hope you will pledge. But don't do it to pay for services rendered. The gospel is free. And don't pledge or give so as to keep the church from shutting down. We don't do that. We're here while we have breath. Instead, give as you are able to support the work that we as a community of faith are called to do, and that we are going to keep doing whatever our circumstances. That's all