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TITLE: Doing Ministry "On Purpose"

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"But, Mom and Dad, I didn't do it on purpose." As a child, that was the definitive explanation for all of the world's minor mishaps, the mini-catastrophes that seemed to follow me around like Pigpen's cloud of dust. Oh, it's true; there was no denying it: That rock did fly through the window as if propelled by Dorothy's Kansas wind; that dozen eggs did fall out of the fridge door right after it was heard to slam loudly; there was that mysterious scratch on the right front fender of the brand new car; that itching powder did, mysteriously, seem to find its way into my sister's pillowslip. All true. It was even undeniably true that I was in the approximate neighbourhood when all of those seeming "acts of God" took place. I might even (well, you must admit it's possible) have been a divine agent. "But Mom, Dad, *lissen* to me! I didn't do it on purpose."

Of course not. Paul says that when we were kids it was okay to think like a child, act like a child, even speak like a child. Unfortunately, we tend to grow up. (Yes, unfortunately. Jesus says maturity makes it a whole lot harder to sense the reign of God.) Part of growing up means learning to do things "on purpose," learning to act with intentionality. Growing up means knowing where you are in life and where you want to be, and acting with design and intention to get from here to there.

I've been in ministry a long time now, so I can no longer claim the reckless abandon of adolescence. As I have grown up in ministry, I have learned that the principle of acting "on purpose" is as crucial in professional life as anywhere else. Everywhere you turn in the church these days, it seems there are pastors whining that their people are poor stewards. Indeed, I've been known to indulge in such blubbery bathos more than once myself. Such lamentation is understandable, perhaps even acceptable. What's not acceptable is the next line of the litany, the line where pastors plead, "...and it's not my fault they're such lousy stewards; I certainly didn't do it on purpose." In the matter of congregational stewardship, if pastors have not acted "on purpose," have not carefully measured where their people are, and have not intentionally planned for where they want them to be, the real question is "For heaven's sake, why not??" Poor stewardship is not an accident, any more than rocks that fly through windows are self-propelled. What's more, it's safe to say that working intentionally to change a congregation's stewardship profile is not like brain surgery or nuclear physics; it doesn't require a

genius to do it. It requires a commitment to the task and the willingness to do the hard, occasionally unpleasant work of pulling it off.

Knowing the People

For me, the first stage of purposeful stewardship ministry in a new congregation is to take as much time as needed to get to know the people. This includes knowing about their hopes and dreams and frustrations. It also means understanding them from the perspective not only of their current *performance* as Christian stewards, but also of their *potential* as stewards. In a large congregation, this means hundreds of hours of visiting, but it is visiting with a purpose. Before each visit, I make it my business to know how this household is doing in relation to the church and their faith: Where are they providing leadership? How have they supported the mission? What "strings" do they attach to their involvement? How much do they give each year? Some purists object to the pastor investigating the church lives of the members. I find such squeamishness strange, to say the least. Even those good shepherds who see their ministry as primarily pastoral, i.e., "tending the flock", must surely concede that it's easier to take care of the flock when you know your sheep, and know them well enough to discern the difference between meaningful bleating and the endless noise that comes from those whose sound and fury signify nothing.

After each visit, I fill out a "talent inventory" that I carry with me in the car and – because my memory disappeared with my innocence – I input that information directly into a congregational data base the next morning. For me, the hard thing to remember during all this visiting is that I'm not there to decide if I like these folk, or would choose them as golf buddies; I'm there to find out where they are, and where they could be, on their journey as Christian stewards.

Developing a Mission Statement

Stage two in the process is to work with the congregation's lay leadership to roll all those stories of stewardship performance and potential together into a mission statement. These days, mission statements are all the rage, and there are enough "how-to" manuals around to satisfy everyone's needs. For me, though, there are a few basic principles that must drive the mission-stating process.

A good mission statement will:

- describe where you're going, not where you are;
- be understandable to an average 12-year-old;
- fit an 8½ -x 11-inch sheet of paper, with room to spare;
- be endorsed by between 60% and 80% of the active congregation (If less than 60% are on your side, you don't have a mandate; if more than 80%, the statement is obviously too timid.);
- encourage people to ask regularly "How are we doing at this?";
- talk in straightforward terms about how you will build the financial and human resource base for what you feel called to do.

Recruiting Leaders

Stage three pulls together the first two stages; in other words, now it's time to get into a position where you can actively influence the recruitment of lay leaders in the congregation. No one knows the people in our congregation better than I do, nor is anyone more committed to its statement of mission than am I. Therefore, as pastor, it's up to me to be sure that the congregation's lay leaders are folks who not only talk a good game, but put their money, time, and energy where their mouths are. In my experience, too many pastors bail out at this point, leaving the recruitment of leaders – particularly financial leaders – to a nominating committee, church council, or whomever. Even more to the point, it seems few pastors are willing to take the heat required to remove – yes remove – leaders who, either by their words or their actions, are not taking the congregation in the direction of being the servant community it is called to be. If the development of good stewardship is truly a congregational goal, there are few pastoral tasks more critical than recruiting. That's why I want to know what our people are actually doing, financially and otherwise, as well as what they're capable of doing. If the woman who chairs your outreach committee or the man who chairs your Christian education committee is not visibly generous of spirit, those who follow cannot be expected to be either. Mediocrity loves company.

Nowhere, of course, is the principle of careful recruiting more important than in the appointment of the Finance Committee (or whatever it's called in your church. I prefer Finance Committee because it's clear what you're talking about). The appointment of the finance chair is one of the critical moves that is made each year. If the chair understands Christian stewardship as the grateful response of generous people and demonstrates that belief by his or her own gracious generosity, you're halfway home. But if he or she sees the church's resources as treasures to be guarded, understands ministry as "expenses", is congenitally more inclined to say "no" than to say "yes", or simply fails to understand the difference between a church and a business, you're in big trouble. Nor is it enough simply to find the right person for the job. For me, it's vital to develop a relationship of understanding and, if possible, friendship with the finance chair because so much of the congregation's attitude towards stewardship issues will be shaped by that person's leadership.

Keeping Stewardship Up Front

For me, doing ministry "on purpose" implies the regular, disciplined placing of Christian stewardship issues in front of the congregation, ideally at every available opportunity. New member "preparation" events, the church school, women's groups, Bible studies, youth groups, all these and more are contexts in which the stewardship word of the church may quite properly be spoken. No Sunday service ever passes without folks being challenged, in one way or another, to consider their level of stewardship. For instance, we use the painfully simple device of the Minute for Mission. Every week, a lay member of the congregation between the ages of 10 and 90 is invited to prepare and present the liveliest possible 60 seconds on a mission project or theme that is important to them. The clergy staff do not write the words for them. At the very least, folks are asked to select from some pre-written

resources provided by our denomination and edit those resources to taste. By far the best Minutes, however, are those that folks take time to prepare and own themselves, especially those written in the first person (e.g., "This is why I support....."). Those who take the time to prepare their own texts grow more in the task of preparation than the congregation does in the act of hearing, so we encourage that discipline whenever possible.

A Stewardship Congregation

Then there's the Bible. It's really tough to preach or teach out of Scripture without constantly raising stewardship issues, which makes it all the more surprising that many pastors seem not to do so. In every church I've served, there have been those who accuse me of talking too much from the pulpit "about money and politics and not enough about religion". It's a wonderful accusation for which I am grateful every time I hear it. If liturgy is the work of the people, and politics is the process of the people, and money is the power of the people, and stewardship is the lived gratitude of the people, it's hard for me to understand how the church can expect to do the former and the latter without dealing with the two that are in between. A stewardship congregation is one that cares passionately about creation. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development made clear that no substantive change will happen in this area without a radical redirection of political and economic (i.e., money) agendas. A stewardship congregation will care passionately about the world's desperate ones. When a one percent shift in lending rates takes more money out of the hands of the world's poor than all the dollars that North Americans give in a year to benevolence, do we really think we can change the lives of the poor by dropping another two bucks into the plate? A stewardship congregation is one prepared to take radical (i.e., rooted) stands in the name of God's justice. In my experience, however, as soon as those stands move beyond the theoretical into the practical, they take dollars – dollars to sponsor refugees or provide food for the hungry or advocate on behalf of prisoners. Preachers who don't name that monetary connection every time they preach on justice are abdicating their responsibility.

Now, a word about children and young people. Include them. Every stewardship campaign we run has units aimed at the kids in our congregation. They read (and sometimes prepare) Minutes for Mission; they count the offering (and are sometimes shocked to find \$1.00 in an adult's envelope); they usher; they teach; they have envelopes and receive tax receipts; they learn from their earliest days in church school what it means to be a steward. Stewardship is not a tap that gets turned on when people are 14, or 16 or 21; it is part of the lifelong discipline and joy of living Christianity.

When I was asked to write this article, I was invited specifically to talk about some of the new, creative things we have done to make our congregation so alive in the area of stewardship. I realize, of course, that I haven't done that, but I don't apologize. Stewardship is not an experimental science, requiring a new set of tricks each year. I quite frankly don't even think it requires a whole great gob of creativity. What it does require is intentionality, acting "on purpose" to help a

congregation hear the stewardship invitation that is implicit in the gospel and translating that invitation into a specific course of forward action. In every congregation I've served, the direction of that gospel call has been different; there's no formula that can be picked up and transferred from place to place. But the principles are always the same: Get to know the people; work with them to discern and define where God is calling you to go; recruit those who are themselves committed; preach the gospel; and name, and name, and name again the connection between that gospel and the way we live our lives. No brain surgery or nuclear physics here. Just a lot of hard work, work done "on purpose" in the name of Christ.

Ken Gallinger has recently retired from pastoral ministry and continues as a regular columnist for the Toronto Star. Ken lives near Parry Sound, Ontario. This article first appeared in the Journal of Stewardship, a publication of the Ecumenical Stewardship Centre (ESC). For stewardship resources, visit the ESC website at www.stewardshipresources.org.

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