

A Spirituality of Abundance

A Theological Framework For the Ministry of Planned Giving

First and foremost, the ministry of Planned Giving is a “vehicle” where you can live out your baptismal ministry and give back to God in thanksgiving for the abundant gifts God has bestowed upon you and upon those you love. You are not called to this ministry because it is a job in the parish nobody wants or that most are uncomfortable with. We believe unreservedly that those called to a ministry of Planned Giving have been given gifts by the Holy Spirit to undertake that ministry with passion, competence, and enthusiasm.

Planned Giving work is an essential component in the ministry of any parish and in the individual lives of disciples of Jesus Christ. Planned Giving programs mediate God’s love and have been proven over time to bear much fruit in the lives of potential prospects and donors.

PLANNED GIVING IS ABOUT STEWARDSHIP

Planned Giving is about stewardship and a recognition that stewardship of God’s creation is a life-long endeavour. Any understanding of stewardship must begin with an awareness that God is “The Great Giver”. To be always giving is an essential part of God’s nature. None of us can ever “out-give” God. Consequently, we are not called to extra-ordinary acts of generosity. However, we are called to be careful and wise stewards of the resources God has given to us. Not just for a time, but to steward these gifts throughout our lives.

A THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCH

An understanding of the theology of Planned Giving must also include a theological comprehension of the role of the church as the Body of Christ on earth. Each of us stands within a long line of a great Communion of Saints stretching back to the formation of the early Christian Church in Acts 2. As Anglicans, we are inheritors of a Gospel faith within a specific liturgical and cultural tradition. It is a tradition rich in worship, sacrament, fellowship, and service to each other and beyond our faith communities. Throughout the 450+ year history of the Anglican Church, each generation receives this Gospel tradition and is called to steward it for a time and then pass it on to generations that follow.

Since everything comes from God and everything belongs to God we are called to be faithful stewards of God's gifts in this age and to pass these gifts on to the church that follows in our footsteps. Remember this: we pass on only what we have ourselves received. When we pass our spiritual gifts on to the church it is empowered to be Christ in the world. We also have financial gifts we can provide to give the financial resources needed for the ministry of the communion of saints that follows us.

AN INVITATION TO THE ABUNDANT LIFE

Jesus regularly warned his audiences that to store up treasures is folly. The gifts God gives are for use on this earth and cannot be taken with us. The parable of the rich landowner (Luke 12:13-34) who tears down old barns and builds a bigger barn to store more goods, though his life is about to be taken from him that very night, is an example of Jesus' teaching. Jesus understood that we worship a God of abundance and that we must live out of a "*spirituality of abundance*".

Many of Jesus' miracles reinforced his understanding of the abundant life. The changing of the water into fine wine in John 2 at the Wedding at Cana, the feeding of the five thousand from just a few loaves and fishes, and his vast healing ministry all point to the abundant life that God desires for all his children.

In John 10:10 Jesus tells the disciples why he came to live among humans. He declares, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." Jesus teaches us that the proverbial cup is not half empty or even half full, but overflowing. That is the way our God has designed creation.

Sadly, Jesus seemed deeply troubled that so many of us lack the eyes to see this. So many unwittingly live their lives out of a "*spirituality of scarcity*". This is understandable but so unnecessary. We fear that we will never have enough and worry that, though we are doing fine now, at some point in the future we may be in financial peril. Insecurity reigns. It seems it has ever been thus throughout the history of humanity. In the story of the Exodus the people cry out for food and lament that they are not back in Egypt, under the chains of slavery, but at least with fish and grain and food to fill their stomachs. Exodus 16 tells us that God heard the murmurings of the people and provided quails and then manna from heaven each morning. The people were told to take only what they needed and no more. God guaranteed the people that there would be enough food each day and that they would not go hungry. But anxiety and a spirituality of scarcity reigned amongst many of the Israelites. Many took more food than needed for each day and by the next morning they found that the excess had become corrupted – filled with maggots.

Theologically we need to come to grips with the knowledge that God gives us what we need. That enough is enough. That the abundance of this earth is not to be hoarded but shared.

HUMAN ANXIETY

Certainly, Jesus understood that people are anxious about their personal financial security. A quantum leap for people in their spiritual faith journeys is when they are able to trust that God will provide for them in the future – that God has always provided for them in the past and always will. In Luke 12:22 Jesus addresses this anxiety:

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you are to eat, or about your body, or about what you shall have to wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Consider the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!"

Just a few short verses later Jesus reiterates his point:

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

We have a wonderful opportunity to grow beyond our anxiety to a place where the knowledge of God's abundance overflowing in all our lives creates genuine transformation. Our hearts do not have to remain in bondage to a spirituality of scarcity.

Understanding that God's creation is teeming with abundance for all creates a freedom that can bring a deep inner peace to many Christians. When we have a felt experience of God's abundance and generosity we can only respond in thanksgiving.

PEOPLE HAVE A NEED TO GIVE THANKS TO GOD

We must understand a basic aspect of human nature. Scholars incorporate this understanding into a branch of theology called "The Theology of Man". People want to make generous acts of thanksgiving to God. They have a deep spiritual need to do this. Experience has shown that many truly do treasure their relationship with Jesus Christ and their hearts are firmly grounded in God's love. The biblical record overflows with the joy in the hearts of ordinary people finding creative ways to give thanks to God for his many blessings in their lives.

In the story of the Flood, Noah's first act upon finding dry land and exiting the ark in Genesis 7 is to build an altar to the Lord and make offerings of

thanksgiving. When Hannah conceives a long-awaited son in 1 Samuel 1 her joy and ecstasy overwhelms her and she offers the boy Samuel to the Lord for service under the High Priest Eli in God's temple. In 1 Chronicles 16 David recaptures the Ark of the Covenant from the Philistines and rejoices as it is carried back into Jerusalem. To the scorn of some, David himself is singing, dancing, and making merry. He threw a great party of thanksgiving to God *"distributing to all Israel, both men and women, a loaf of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins."*

Solomon is so overwhelmed with God's many gifts in his life that he undertakes the building of the most marvellous temple of its time and joyfully dedicates it to God and asks that God might make his home there. People from around the Mediterranean world travel great distances to marvel at its beauty and grandeur.

In the New Testament more stories abound of peoples' need to give thanks to God for God's blessings in their lives. In John 9, the man born blind is so thankful he risks his life as a member of his family and is cast out of his community for testifying on Jesus' behalf before the Pharisees. Joseph of Arimathea donates his family's newly dug tomb for the body of Jesus, he has been so impacted by Jesus' life and teaching. In Acts 8, we encounter the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. The Ethiopian is so overjoyed with the Good News explained to him by Philip that in thanksgiving he asks for immediate baptism and goes on his way rejoicing.

PLANNED GIVING AS JUBILEE

Ancient Israel held the principle of Jubilee as sacred. In Leviticus 25 and 27, especially verses 16-25 and in Numbers 36:4 the principle of Jubilee is articulated. Every 50 years the people of Israel were commanded by the law to return the land and other property to its original owners, to redistribute wealth that the poor might have a share in the bounty of the Lord.

Jubilee laws call on Israel to restore an equitable distribution of land and property and there is much evidence in the ancient world that this redistribution was reality and not fiction. This concept of Jubilee unfolds for us a world in which God (acknowledging reality) has a plan to provide equitably for all. The world, it is recognized, will continue to veer off into imbalance. At least there are concrete actions devoted Christians can take to be true to the knowledge that, in fact, all the world and all that is in it is from God and owned by God and not by us.

We know God puts it in our hearts to want to give. Certainly we want to know that our family members will be taken care of but we want to give. Throughout

our lives as members of the church we are regular supporters of its ministry and display consistent generosity over time. Almost always it is from our cash flow or family operational budgets. The Planned Gift is almost always a gift of assets.

In many ways the Planned Gift can be seen from a theological perspective as a form of individually declared Jubilee. A returning to God for redistribution to those in need. But there is a sacred trust at stake. The donor is trusting the church to redistribute assets acquired, often over a lifetime, to those truly in need, to ministry that honours the passions and intentions of the donor – to ministry that honours the concept of Jubilee. Thus, through our Planned Gift we become agents of Jubilee together – true stewards of the gifts of God.

All of this becomes possible as we move forward in our spiritual journeys from scarcity to abundance, to the life Jesus calls us each to and the inner peace and freedom it brings.