

From This Corner

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Budget Epiphany

As I travel about this corner of our conference and meet with church leaders, I have noticed somewhat of an obsession with church budgets. I understand this because I was once one who scrutinized church budgets. I used to advocate crunching numbers to make the church budget fit with anticipate income. Every possible method was used to reduce the cost of being the Body of Christ. Our budgets were “lean and mean,” although to be honest I would have to say that most of the meanness seemed to be manifest in the Finance Committee meetings. At those meeting otherwise delightful and sane people would advocate things like examining the Sunday bulletin under a microscope to make sure too much ink wasn’t being applied. We were hell bent not to lavish anything on the Lord. Then one day the light dawned on me. I felt so unclean after these meetings I figured something wasn’t the way it was supposed to be. Dreadful experiences are sometimes the catalyst that gets us thinking outside the box. I took out my largest and most exhaustive concordance to find references to “church budgets” and found none. What I did find were numerous references to the resources God always provides people so that Lord’s work might be accomplished. It also suggested how these resources might be employed in witness, mission, and ministry. It then dawned on me that our scrutiny was on the wrong budget. For whatever reason God had put His resources into people’s personal budgets. What an epiphany that was! The only problem was that since these resources were in these personal budgets the holders of the funds had gotten confused as to whom they belonged and for what purposes they were to be used. Thus, we embarked on stewardship programs that helped people see that God had been putting resources into their personal budgets that were adequate to do everything the church was called to do. Then it happened, year after year, the budget was met and often exceeded. Year after year, some miracle seemed to happen.

In Exodus you will remember that when God’s people needed to get on with the mission the Lord provided more than enough manna to make that happen. As Bruce Birch, dean of Wesley Theological Seminary notes, we like the Israelites, “...stand surrounded by resources and often fail to recognize what they really are. Namely, God’s gifts to provide for human need and empower a community to serve those needs.” (“Why We Apportion: A Theology of United Methodist Giving” GCF&A”) The real task is to discover the resources God has already given. These resources it turns out have made their way into our personal bank accounts. Why the Lord does this is beyond me, but I’ve found giving them back brings a kind of abundant well-being into my own life and the churches of which I have been a part. Go figure. I guess the Lord knows what He is doing.