

# Regarding Commercialism in the Church

(Taken from the ELCA Financial Stewardship Strategy Report and Recommendations adopted by churchwide assembly action August 1993)

The culture in which we live is greatly influenced by economic assumptions and practices. As people of faith, we live with these cultural realities even as we strive to be faithful to the Gospel. As individuals and communities of faith, we may find ourselves working within these same realities to strengthen the mission of the church and, at the same time, be in conflict with prevailing economic assumptions and practices. The matter of commercialism (i.e., using commercial means to raise money for church-related work) continues to be an issue for the ELCA.

In teaching, preaching and practicing stewardship, ELCA materials and leaders focus on a biblical base. Voluntary giving by church members remains the primary method of financing congregational activities. However, groups within the church occasionally inquire about the appropriateness of generating additional funds through the selling of goods and services, games of chance or other special efforts.

Two of the ELCA's predecessor church bodies developed statements on commercialism within the church. Those statements continue to provide guidance to congregations in making decisions regarding the relationship between stewardship and fund-raising events.

The following observations, summarizing key points of those statements, are intended to:

- Continue the discussion regarding commercialism and the church
- Offer some guidelines for decision-making for all expressions of the church
- Examine traditions and practices so that they remain consistent with the message of the Gospel

The stewardship practices of many congregations are deeply rooted in the heritage of their members. Harvest festivals continue to play a major role in agricultural communities. Bazaars, rummage sales, food sales, and arts and crafts festivals are other ways in which congregations celebrate their heritage.

These events can provide opportunities for sharing time, talents and energy, as well as generating financial support for congregational ministries. The dignity of

such efforts can be affirmed, especially when they are planned and conducted in a manner consistent with other stewardship efforts in the church.

Financial needs and cultural influence have led people at all expressions of the church to look at new ways of supporting ministries in the future. Investments, real estate, stocks and bonds may be used to generate funds for mission now and in the future. Activities to raise funds for congregations can do more than make money; they can build fellowship and commitment in a community of faith.

Games of chance have no place in the life of a congregation. Congregations, like governmental entities, may see such games as a quick, easy means of raising funds; however, these games send adverse messages regarding the value of generous giving and financial stewardship. Games are based on the principle of receiving a high return for a low investment. Luck, instead of thankfulness, need, compassion or commitment, is the guiding principle.

Investing in financial instruments raises other questions. Rate of return can be the primary guiding principle in the world of finance and investment. The church may find itself in internal conflict when the only criterion for investment decisions is obtaining the highest rate. Many congregations have explored creative ways of supporting a broad understanding of stewardship while raising funds. Recycling projects can raise funds for groups even as they teach members and the community ways in which members might care for God's creation.

### **Questions for Consideration**

The following questions should be addressed as congregations, institutions, agencies, synods and the churchwide organization consider fund-raising efforts:

1. Are the goals for the activity clearly established before the activity is undertaken?
  - Who is being served by this effort, and how?
  - Is this effort consistent with the total ministry of the church?
  - What is the guiding principle in designing the event or program: Making the most money any means possible? Service to the community? Fellowship?
  - Does the method of fund raising accomplish these goals, or are they at cross-purposes with the goals?
  - Do the goals complement other financial stewardship efforts within the congregation, synod or churchwide organization?
2. Are the people who will work on an activity part of the decision-making process?
3. Does the activity provide a service beyond the fund raising itself?
4. Will the activity afford satisfaction and dignity to those who engage in it?
5. Will the activity provide an avenue for people to use their abilities and to express their willingness to serve others?

6. Does the activity send a message consistent with the idea of sacrificial giving?
7. Does the activity ask community members to support something that the congregation is not willing to fund?
8. Does the activity build commitment within the community, or relieve the conscience of those who are involved in the congregation in a limited way?
9. Will the activity benefit the ministry of the whole organization, or is it a means for a small group to exert power and control through the dollars raised?
10. Will the activity be seen as a unique contribution to the community , or as direct competition with local businesses, who must pass health inspections and pay taxes?

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