

**Q:** “Should the pastor know what members give?”

**A:** In the early 1990s John and Sylvia Ronsvalle conducted an in-depth study of stewardship attitudes and practices in Christian churches and shared a summary report in their book titled *Behind the Stained Glass Windows* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996).

Their research—gained from parish pastors, synod and Churchwide leaders and seminary faculty members from many denominations—indicated that a large majority (over 75 percent) of the above church leaders believe that what a member gives is a strong indication of spiritual maturity. Ironically, when that same group of leaders was asked whether or not members want their pastors to know the individual giving amounts of members, approximately the same percentage (over 75 percent) said no.

The irony here is that most will agree that the level of giving is a spiritual issue, but most also believe that members do not want their spiritual leader, the pastor, to know this information about their members.

This is likely a sign of our discomfort in general with the subject of money, as well as its power in our lives. In church circles, the sharing of money is a “faith practice” and not a simple IRS defined “charitable contribution”. Today a pastor is called to grow the giving of members and strengthen faith practices in homes and among individuals, and yet many pastors are denied access to the very information that informs their pastoral work. Some shrink from mentioning money, even though Jesus talked about it repeatedly. Read the Gospel of Luke, for example: one story after another speaks about money and possessions.

Pastors are very sensitive to the great generosity our church members show with their time – we even give awards of recognition and expressions of thanks to those who have given many hours and talents to the church. Is there something about money that is more valuable than our time and energy? Aren’t time and energy actually more personal, more connected with who we are and with, if you will, our “worth”? Or is our worth only counted in dollars, as the world measures it?

Then there is the pastoral care question. When someone’s giving drops or stops, it’s a signal to the pastor that s/he may need to respond sensitively to a need or a change in that person’s life or in their relationship with the church. It may be a crucial moment in the pastor/member relationship. How can a pastor tend to the spiritual care of her or his flock if s/he has no sense of their giving?

We live drenched in the generosity of God, beginning with creation, but including our own lives and ultimately of course the gift of Jesus, who gave his own life for us. We are formed in the image of that generous God. A healthy, vital church thrives on generosity

of spirit which leads to forgiveness, patience, and yes, sharing what we have received from that generous God. Spiritual health deserves the close attention of the pastor, and spiritual care is a personal thing, not practiced in a vacuum.

Justice and compassion require something of us, and they are at the core of our faith: if there is suffering that can be eased by greater sharing, how can the pastor not speak on behalf of those in need? Jesus himself was not shy about urging people to give it all away. A pastor who has a sense of their church members' financial health is better able to speak not only prophetically but sensitively to these issues.

And of course there is the pastor's call to challenge those who can to give more and to say thank you, too, for the generous support of those who give. Again, we are not shy about recognizing those who practice good stewardship of their time and talents; and isn't that what money is, in the end? It's our time and talents turned into currency, and it has the power to be used for the greater good in thanksgiving for all we've received.

While I believe the pastor should have free access to giving information and the pastor should treat that information with confidentiality, my best counsel for pastors and church leaders is to deal openly and honestly with this issue. In most congregations, the financial secretary knows the giving amounts of members. Sometimes the entire stewardship committee and certainly tellers may know the giving amounts of members. And yet, in many congregations the members do not want the pastor to know.

Here are some questions to ponder:

- Is it a trust issue? Are members willing to "trust" the financial secretary but not the pastor?
- If giving is indeed an important faith practice and spiritual measurement, shouldn't the pastor, the person with the God-given accountability of overseeing the spiritual welfare of members, have access to this information?
- If a sudden drop in giving is an indicator of a problem, shouldn't the pastor have ready access to that information?
- Few people would argue about whether or not their doctors should know vital and sometimes very personal information about them, like blood pressure, pulse rate, cholesterol reading and lifestyle issues. Such information is necessary for doctors to treat their patients competently. Shouldn't pastors also have important information about their members so they can be competent spiritual leaders?

Think it through. Talk it through.

Above materials were gleaned from  
*Frequently Asked Questions,*  
Congregational Stewardship Workbook 2000

