Bishop's Message: E-Chronicle, October 2014

Clergy & Stewardship

September 29, 2014

Aloha ke Akua:

During stewardship time, I am often asked, **"Should clergy review the giving of parishioners?"** The assumption is that the clergy shouldn't know what people give to the church. First, let me be clear, the rector or vicar (or other priest-in-charge by whatever title) cannot be denied access to the giving list of the congregation. A treasurer or warden does not have the authority to keep the giving records from the priest. So, if the priest-in-charge asks, the records should be shared.

Should the priest ask to review the giving records of a congregation? I have changed my opinion on this over the course of the past few years and now I think it important for the clergy-in-charge to review the giving records of the congregation being served. My change of heart can be summed up in the book recommended over the past couple of years by the diocesan Stewardship Committee. In *Ask, Thank, Tell: Improving Stewardship Ministry in your Congregation* (Augsburg Fortress, 2006), Charles R. Lane writes (on page 65):

"**The pastor should know what each person gives to the congregation.** I am aware that in some congregations this is the final taboo. I have heard the common complaint, 'If the pastor knows how much people give, the pastor will let this influence his or her ministry to people. He or she will cater to the big givers.' My standard answer to this is that if your pastor would structure pastoral care around giving levels, then you have much bigger problems than what the pastor does or doesn't know.

Because wealth and what we do with money and possessions God has entrusted to us is such a huge issue in our relationship with Jesus, the pastor has to know what people give. How is the pastor to help people grow in their relationship with Jesus if he or she is kept in the dark about how much people give? The pastor needs to have access to giving information, and the pastor needs to handle this information just as the pastor handles everything else the pastor knows about people's lives — confidentially and pastorally."

So, I think the answer to the question is "Yes."

The clergy might well ask, **"What do we do when we review the information and how do we do follow-up?"** I think the information provides the clergy a good sense of the spiritual health of the congregation and its leadership. For example, if a congregation is overly dependent on the giving of one or two individuals, that can be a sign of a long-term problem. Changes in giving pattern can also be a sign of individual pastoral issues. Often, individuals in congregations don't know how much others give. Sharing information on average pledges and the distribution of giving can help everyone understand the giving patterns of the congregation. We don't, of course, share giving information of individuals, but we can share information about patterns in congregational giving and the distribution of contributions.

The issue is not that about recognizing those who give the most. It has been suggested that perhaps clergy will be inclined to favor the biggest givers. That has not been my experience of clergy. In fact, I think clergy often appreciate those who give as best they can despite limited resources. It is the living out of Luke 21:1-4 ("Looking up, Jesus saw rich people throwing their gifts into the collection box for the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow throw in two small copper coins worth a penny. He said, 'I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than them all. All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had to live on.'"). Understanding the giving of individuals can aid the clergy in assessing the commitment of parishioners and possible leaders in stewardship and congregational life. Those leaders can best be called from the faithful, consistent givers over the course of time.

Lastly, an important element of trust is that clergy need to openly, honestly and publically share about their personal giving. As Lane also writes (page 64):

"**The pastor should model effective leadership.** Despite all the cultural taboos, the pastor needs to talk about money, and talk about his or her own personal financial stewardship. If a pastor is tithing or beyond, the congregation should know that. If the pastor has circumstances in his or her life that block this, the congregation should know about them. One of my great stewardship mentors was a colleague in my first call. Pastor Dan Sander talked so honestly and openly about money and about personal stewardship that I don't think it ever occurred to anyone that he shouldn't be doing this. His caring and candor defused taboos."

So, clergy need to be up front about their giving. I think this is a reasonable expectation of the congregation of their clergy. It is hard to preach about stewardship or expect parishioners to give without open sharing from the clergy. Yes, that goes for the Bishop too. Bea and I have tithed most of our married life (beginning early makes tithing easier). There have been hard times when our giving slowed. There have been times when medical bills took precedence, and then there was a couple of years when both boys where at ʻIolani School and tuition costs overwhelmed our budget. Right now, however, we are again able to tithe (give 10% of our after tax income). Our giving is shared between the Cathedral (where Bea is a parishioner), mission congregations of the Diocese, and Episcopal schools (on whose boards I serve as Bishop).

“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.” 1 Corinthians 15:58

Aloha ma o Iesu Kristo, ko mākou Haku,

+Bob

The Right Reverend Robert L. Fitzpatrick
+ Keali‘ikoaokeakua