

SHOULD A PASTOR KNOW WHAT CHURCH MEMBERS GIVE?

Rev. Kate Huey

My own response is a wholehearted "Yes!"

I've been perplexed over the years when both pastors and church members say that pastors shouldn't know what their church members give, as if pastors can't be trusted to resist the temptation to let that information influence how they treat those members. Perhaps the saddest one was the pastor who said, "I can't trust myself with that information."

Aren't we entrusted as pastors with all sorts of information about our church members that could influence our feelings and actions toward them, if we allowed it to do so? Shouldn't our church members feel that they can trust their pastor with personal information, including painful things that might not be admitted to anyone else? Isn't it part of our ordination promises not to be influenced by such things but to love each person entrusted to our care, and not to show favoritism or judgment? (I'm pretty sure I remember making that promise.) I find it a bit odd that members feel more comfortable trusting any number of other people in the church with information about their giving, including the church administrator, the treasurer, the stewardship committee, and the giving/pledge secretary, than they feel they can trust the pastor.

This is a sign of our discomfort in general with the subject of money, as well as its power in our lives. Today a pastor can often talk about sexual issues from the pulpit and in adult education classes, but 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, and not about sexual concerns.

And aren't we very aware as pastors of the great generosity our church members show with their time – don't 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 our 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's 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.

Also, the pastor is called to grow the giving of his/her members. If a billionaire joined your church and wrote a check to cover all the operating expenses (now try not to linger too long in that scenario), it wouldn't change the need of the people to grow in their

generosity. 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're formed in the image of that generous God. A healthy, vital church thrives on generosity of spirit which leads to forgiveness, patience, and yes, trustingly sharing what we've 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. (Can you imagine going to the doctor but refusing to share certain information about your health, and expecting the doctor to care for your physical well-being?)

Justice and compassion require something of us, and they're 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 wasn't 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's 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're 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.

(Note: this is often a cultural issue; in many churches, not only the pastor but the entire congregation is informed about the giving of the members.)

Source: United Church of Christ