

## **A Stewardship Moment**

Rev. Joe Hoffman

*January 14, 2007*

I stand before you today with deep gratitude. It is a joy to be able to say to you that we have pledged more this year than ever before! Our pledges will support a budget of \$20,000 more than last year! We have a lot to be grateful for – our giving is growing stronger and stronger. I am proud of this congregation.

I am also proud to stand before you today to present you with a challenge. Proud because congregations that face challenges are congregations that are alive. Even though our pledging is more than ever, we are still far short of our goal for giving. We increased our budget by a very large amount in one year – and we did so in order to have the money to expand the possibilities of our ministry – and a large part of it was to increase our staff – because our staff is overworked and we need more help.

But we ran into a little problem at the end of the year when the Piney Mountain property contract fell through. We had anticipated the sale of the land – but when it didn't sell, we realized we had to put the mortgage into the budget. So we put the new staffing plan on hold, we cut back on the program ministry ideas, and we added \$93,000 for mortgage payments – with the understanding that we would revise the budget once the land sales.

The challenge is this. We need to pledge an additional \$85,000 to reach our goal for giving for this year's budget. If we receive no more pledges than what we have – it will mean that we have to zero budget program ministries, zero budget all of our justice and benevolence funds – including what we give to the United Church of Christ – and it means we will have to cut one staff position.

I know that we don't want to do any of that. And I know that this can feel scary. I was encouraged yesterday when I heard the words Martin Luther King often said to the people of the civil rights movement- “Don't be weary. Don't be worn. Run on. And let's see where the end will be.” I have taken those words to heart.

And I have remembered the story of the Hebrews leaving Egypt – on their way to a freedom land – but along the way they run upon the sea on one side and turn to see the Egyptian army chasing from the other side. And they said – why have you led us to this place where we now surely will die – but you know the story – God did not abandon them. God helped them to find a way – time and again, when they were hungry, when they were thirsty, when they were discouraged, God helped these people find a way.

I have thought and prayed about our situation for weeks now. Because you see, I think we have come to where we are by being faithful to our understanding of God's vision for us. I believe that. We have debated and disagreed and been excited and afraid together – but in the end, as we made our decisions, I am sure we did that as faithfully as we knew how.

So this is where we are. And we find ourselves in the unique position of having a lot of asset – a lot of property – and not much money in the bank. It is a short term situation, but one with which we must be creative and responsible.

I remember when we started the capital campaign – we prayed for a long time about what to set as our campaign goal. And we came up with \$1 million. We were told that it was too much. The professional consultants said – you can't do it unless you have some rich person out there who will give a big chunk of it. And we didn't have such a person. We each gave what we could. We pledged \$1.1 million and we gave most of it. We each gave what we could. And I am so proud of us.

I remember Ed Torrence standing in front of us and saying – we are like the little engine that could – who said when facing the challenge of the mountain in front – I think I can, I think I can, I think I can. And we found that we could.

That has been our way. To trust that we can. To trust that God is not going to leave us here with no way forward. To trust that God will show us a way.

Now, let me break this down for you just a little. We have about 100 adult pledging units thus far this year. If each of us who has pledged could give an additional \$10 a week – that would be \$1000 a Sunday – and over the course of the year – that amount would be \$52,000. You see how this works. If each of us can give just a little more – it can add up fast.

For some, \$10 extra a week may be hard – but for others of us, \$10 a week is a drop in the bucket. Some of us could give \$20 or \$30. Without it affecting our lifestyle at all.

I ask all who have pledged – please ask yourself – what more can you give. Pray about this. God, help me know what more I can give?

This simple \$10 more a week leaves us with about \$35,000 yet to figure out.

Some of us have not pledged anything. I ask everyone to make a pledge. Give something. Make the commitment to give something. Be connected with us. Be part of the effort. Do what you can. Whether you are a member or a friend. And if you are not pledging because you think your little amount doesn't matter – please know that every gift matters. It is together that we can do this.

There may be a few here – in fact, I feel sure there are a few – who could make a bigger gift. As if we are in a capital campaign – you could make a gift of \$10,000 or more. I don't know who you are – but I think the resources are among us.

I believe God is still speaking. God has not led us to this time and place with all our creativity and passion and love – for us to falter and fail now. Join me in praying that God will show us a way. And pray too that God will help you see what your part can be.

I am meeting on Wednesday night with some of the leaders to start adjusting the budget according to our pledge amount. I would like to hear from you before then. If you can, you can adjust your pledge today by dropping a new pledge card in the offering plate – or write a note and sign your name – saying how much more you can give. Or you might need to go home and talk it over with your partner, pray about it, whatever it is - do what you need to do – and get back with us as soon as you can. (You can be directly in touch with our Financial Secretary – Cathy Whitlock at [cwhitlock@unca.edu](mailto:cwhitlock@unca.edu). And while we need your pledge update as soon as possible, we will be working on this in preparation for the annual meeting on January 28 and will take it whenever you can send it.)

We are working on new strategies to sell the land faster – we will adjust the budget as best we can – and we will bring all this to you at the annual meeting in 2 weeks for your consideration, input, and approval. If you have ideas in the meantime – please let us know.

I believe in us. I am proud of us. I know we can do this. Will you help?