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Small Member Congregation Thrives on Giving

Rev. Philip Reitz (based on an interview with Rev. James Aalgaard)

Ontario, a rural town set in irrigated farmland on the banks of the Snake River in eastern Oregon, is the mission field for St. Paul Lutheran Church. Seventy to eighty people worship at St. Paul's each Sunday and have for the last seven years. Yet, this small member congregation has grown both per member giving and its debt by about 100% during those same years. Both the giving and the debt are signs of its thriving mission!

Pastor James Aalgaard, who was called to St. Paul in August of 2000, is open about the 'on the job' training that this first call has been for him. There is no secret to account for the spirit of optimism and mission that the members at St. Paul share these days. It has been hard work. It has also been wise use of member assets, willingness to engage in an intentional mission conversation, openness to the value that partner ministries offered and good leadership.

The seeds were planted during the ministry of Rev. Scott Summers when the congregation confronted a debt of almost \$100,000 from its original building. The debt hung like an albatross around the congregation's neck. While it wasn't an 'easy sell' the congregation leaders engaged the services of Enrichment Ministries for a debt reduction effort that enabled the congregation to pay off this debt in less than three years. The congregation was elated by their accomplishment. (see below)

Choice + Progress = Unhappiness

Philip Reitz

"Ordinary middle-class Americans [agree] that "money can't buy happiness"...[Yet] those same ordinary middle-class Americans [are] not happy at all. Wages have soared over the past fifty years and regular citizens own large homes, new cars and luxuries aplenty. Better still, the environment, with a few exceptions, is getting cleaner, crime is on the decline and diseases are being wiped out as life span increases. So why do people report a sense that things are getting steadily worse and that catastrophe is imminent?" asks author Gregg Easterbrook.

R. Stephen Warner picks up this same theme in his recent Christian Century article, "Burden of Choice: Why more options make us less happy. (7/13/04)"

Do atheist and believer have common cause regarding the notion of gratitude? Author and atheist Barry Schwartz suggests that we need to practice daily the ritual of remembering the good things that happen, big and small.

NPR commentator Aaron Freeman notes that, "Gratitude ameliorates the worst aspect of American [consumer culture] ..[we need] counterbalancing rituals of gratitude for the mind-boggling bounty that is the U.S.A."

The paradox embodied in the question 'How much is enough?' gets at the marrow of our faith life as stewards. Might the preaching and teaching in your congregation help people mine the gratitude and contentment of a Christian life? (see below)

“Giving” continued

Long buried dreams for a more engaging ministry now began to resurface. Yet, the facility, even debt free, was a real limiting factor in all these dreams. However, after a false start the congregation wisely chose to really spend a lot of time and energy discerning what a renovated building could do for their ministry. Again members of the congregation stepped forward and really worked at a vision for their mission.

With their key goals of, a) reaching out to youth and younger families, b) deepening their faith life and that of their community, and c) serving the needs of the community, they now set about designing their facility as a ‘tool box’ for the ministry they envisioned.

Enrichment Ministries was invited back, this time with enthusiasm and great expectation, to help them reach toward their goal of the \$600,000 needed to renovate and add to their building. Along the way, with the help of the Mission Investment Fund of the ELCA the congregation accepted the assistance of the Mission Builders ministry of retired skilled trades craftsmen. The Mission Builders gift to the congregation was about a 30% reduction of the overall project cost for the fine new addition.

With a significant lead gift from a congregation saint the congregation has now raised around \$350,000 toward their ministry facility. Once upon a time a \$100,000 debt almost snuffed out their ministry, but now some eight years later they will assume twice that much debt as they dedicate their new church facility. Not only that, but during the same time they have doubled the giving of members.

Double the giving and double the debt seems to have the people at St. Paul in Ontario ready to move forward into a new and exciting chapter their mission and ministry.

“Choice” continued

Three books for this discussion:

“The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less” by Barry Schwartz.
ISBN 0-060-00568-8

“The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse” by Gregg Easterbrook. ISBN 0-812-97303-8

“How Much Is Enough?” by Pamela York Klainer. ISBN 0-465-03748-8