

### These are our numbers

Money talks, so what is it saying to our church? A robust review of our finances is an essential part of our trusteeship before the watching world and our stewardship before God. This paper asks why we need to know our numbers.



In the American TV series *The West Wing* the President's advisors want to use a new sampling technique for the decennial census, something possibly against the constitution. Mr Willis of Ohio, finishing the term of his late wife, is asked to support the proposal. A social studies teacher, he knows the constitutional issue but says this: *'I think the problems that we're going to face in the new century are far beyond the Wisdom of Solomon, let alone me. But I think the right place to start is to say - fair is fair. This is who we are. These are our numbers.'*

#### Money talks

It's the right place to start for churches too. Our churches also need to know their numbers because the numbers have a story to tell and we must listen. The financial tools in the [Financial Analysis](#) section of Giving in Grace help us to listen and to understand better the story our money is telling us. But here's the thing: the numbers tell *our* story; it belongs to no one else and we the people have the power to shape and change that story. We don't let the numbers set the tone of our conversation.

A true story might help to illustrate. A stewardship committee was delighted when a bank manager with experience and skills joined the group. The new church budget was short on income so the bank manager suggested a significant reduction in mission giving to balance the numbers. Instead the group proposed a deficit budget to the prayerful giving of the congregation to the gracious bewilderment of their newest member! Our money talk is informed by but never captured by the numbers.

#### Pay before you pray!

That was the humorous response from a finance committee member to the church's need for greater giving; funny but mistaken. Money is a prayerful, spiritual matter because we don't pray, worship and live in a world divorced from the ordinary, messy, and sometimes dirty world of money. But without ever meaning to, our finance committees can invest time and energy talking about money on its own terms, while some clergy and lay leaders see money as secular not spiritual. Scripture sees things quite differently. So let's briefly look at three snapshots from scripture and consider why we need to know our numbers.

#### The silver and gold is mine

After the Exile and under the leadership of Ezra the people of Israel began to rebuild their ruined temple. They built and consecrated the altar and laid the temple foundations and without embarrassment the bible records and celebrates the generosity that made the work possible (Ezra 1:6-11; 2:68-69; 3: 7). Suspended by King Artaxerxes work began again under Darius (Ezra 4:17- 5:2) and the prophet Haggai re-called Israel to the job in hand. It was, as Jim Collins would say, a big, hairy audacious goal for a people still rebuilding a ruined city and economy. But it was a spiritual business: to declare the presence of God in his city and with his people.

And the money that made it possible was part of the people's response to God. The life of God could not be confined to the margins of Israel's economic or spiritual life.

Haggai 2:9 says, 'The silver is mine, the gold is mine says the Lord'. We need to know our numbers because there is no divorce of sacred and secular when we are about the things of God. Now good stewardship is more than the numbers and good giving is driven by a big vision. But the numbers matter because we can only create a new future if we take a long, hard look at what is happening now.

## Bringing our best

At the dawn of creation Cain brought, 'some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord' but his brother Abel 'brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of the land' (Genesis 4:3-4). The rest, as they say, is history and we might add, a lesson in stewardship. Good stewardship is not about bringing something but bringing the best we have to give.

In 2003 Lyndsay Boswell was CEO of the Institute of Fundraising. He wrote a powerful and personal article describing how at the church annual meeting he asked people to think about giving £1 per day to their church. He then realised that he personally attended once a month and usually gave £5. He wrote, 'It felt like I was doing my bit. What really hurt me was I thought I was and I had managed to fool myself.'<sup>i</sup>

We've all been there! But we are all required to give not just something but our best. We cannot divorce our giving from our living. If we max out our credit cards, fail to budget and spend chaotically our giving will always be vulnerable. We need to know our personal numbers to live and give well. It is the same for our churches. To give our best to God means proper attention to the financial life of the church: operational details, forward planning, trends, risks and opportunities.

If we don't know our numbers we cannot make informed decisions. Instead too many decisions are based on anecdote, assumptions or defensiveness. Individuals think they are giving more than they are, forgetting that it could be several years since we increased our giving. Church leaders assume that everyone is giving all they can or find someone else to

blame for the financial situation of our church. If we don't know our numbers we don't know the best that we can offer to God.

## The administration of grace

St Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, a church planter, evangelist, theologian and stewardship officer! A key part of his apostolic ministry was a financial offering for the church in Jerusalem to which he devotes two full chapters of the New Testament (2 Corinthians 8 and 9). One of the striking aspects is Paul's desire for transparency and accountability in what he calls 'the administration of grace' (2 Cor 8:16-24).<sup>ii</sup>

Attention to money matters is a part of the spiritual oversight of each congregation. Transparency requires clear communication of financial facts, our budget plans and why our reserves are held as

they are. Accountability means our internal financial controls, our reporting to the church council and the congregation about our mission and how the money has helped us meet our objectives. For Paul the financial offering was a carrier of spiritual values and today the way we manage our finances reveals much about attitudes and culture.

## Conclusion

No church, no individual can move to a new future if we are not realistic about the present. These are our numbers and we need to know them. The numbers are not a secular matter but part of our stewardship of all God has entrusted to us. The numbers tell a story but we are not captured by them, we have the power to change that story. As individuals and as church leaders we don't just hear what money is saying. In our 'holy conversations' around our numbers we can begin to shape and retell the story.<sup>iii</sup>

## Notes and Resources

<sup>i</sup>Third Sector 9th April 2003

<sup>ii</sup> For more see the background sermon notes in the [Preach 2 Corinthians!](#) resources.

<sup>iii</sup> For more see the paper Holy Conversations at the [Know Our Numbers](#) [tab](#)

