

A Mountain to Climb

The Mountain:

Financially, we have a mountain to climb. The annual church income, by August of next year, is forecast to be £207,000. The annual church expenditure is forecast to be £218,500. That is a shortfall of £11,500. As Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield* would say – ‘misery!’ Because we want happiness, not misery, we need to think how we might address this £11,500. This mountain to climb!

First of all, what do we spend the money on?

- 73% goes on staffing costs: ministers, youth worker, support staff.
- 16% goes on maintaining the property: gas, telephone, insurance, repairs and renewals, etc.
- 4% goes to run church activities, publicity, flowers, youth club, piano tuning etc.
- 7% is given away through our *benevolence fund* (to Methodist, national and local charities, as well as gifts to those in personal need). Whilst this is 7% of the whole budget, the benevolence fund equates to 10% of regular weekly giving (cash/standing orders/gift aid re-claim).

Shortcuts up the mountain?

So if that is what we spend – how might we find an extra £11,500? The obvious answer is cutbacks.

Staffing? Thankfully the money we pay to cover ministerial costs is a fixed rate. If I preach a poor sermon, you can't dock a few pounds from my pay! The church council was very reluctant, to see staffing reductions, because the staff are employed, to enact our mission and service. The church council have recognised the contribution to the spiritual development of our young people that a full time youth worker has made. Would you want to go back, now we have seen what a difference investment makes? A music director is perhaps a luxury; but the church council worked hard to install a post which could develop and enhance the variety of music – our personal ‘gifts’. Is this the time to cut our losses? And I can tell you as one who deals with the support staff daily, the complexities of running this building make it like a small business. If we started cutting here, I'm not sure who would do the increasing amount of work. (N.B. we pay the Pastoral Assistants indirectly, through the Eastleigh Circuit.)

Without seriously compromising the work of the church, there is no room for cutbacks. Our investment is in people, so that we might grow the gospel. Our staff, with all the volunteers, help to make this church, and its Christlike influence – grow.

Church activities? Each group has already looked hard at their expenditure. Continue to be prudent without stopping your good work.

Property and administration? Why invest in our premises, whether it be new carpets, projectors or chairs – all costly? Churches that don't invest and modernise, become dated.

New members, younger Christians, look elsewhere; the church closes. I've seen it happen before. It would be poor stewardship not to invest in the wonderful resource that many of you helped to build.

The benevolence fund? Perhaps we could cut it back? And yet, as God has been generous to us, we want to be generous to relief agencies, the care of retired minister's and their dependants, Eastleigh Homestart and the Rent Guarantee Scheme, the local hospice, to name but a few good causes the church supports. In the story Jesus tells, is it not the poor widow who gives everything, all that she has, that Jesus praises. The rich men who give what they have to spare from their wealth, Jesus roundly condemns. Who is generous Jesus asks? For that is what the kingdom of God is about. As followers of Jesus, your generosity and stewardship, reflect God's generosity. So in principle, cutting back here is not an option if we are truly following Jesus.

We could debate whether 10% of our weekly giving is too much to give away. However, there is a good Biblical principle of offering a tithe, a tenth of your 'crops' to God. Deuteronomy 14: 22 instructs the Israelites in this way, so that they may be thankful to God, and remember his benefits. And from verse 28, the tithing idea is extended to cater for the poor and disadvantaged.

We could also debate how the tithe is made up. For instance, many of the church groups (e.g. Men's Fellowship / youth organisations etc.) already give considerable amounts to charity. What if those amounts, were to count towards the composition of the 10%, since church members have already given generously? That would save money on the church budget instantly. But, were we to do that, the charities we all cherish, would suffer. Rather than receiving from the wider 'church family', both what the church groups give, plus 10% of weekly giving, the charities would just receive the 10%. Inevitably, the proportion we could give to each of the many charities would be diminished.

Does this sound like the poor widow who gave everything she had, or the rich men who gave what they had left over from their riches? When charities are particularly hard pressed because of the recession, does this sound like the work of the Kingdom of God?

My view is this; let the church groups, generously donate their charitable giving to whosoever they choose. This gives each group total autonomy. And let 10%, of our regular giving, week by week, go to the charities the Church Council decides. Of course, the more you give to the church weekly, whether as an individual, or as a group, the greater the pot from which to give 10% to our favoured charities.

Other routes up the mountain?

Fundraising: Last year, we raised £6,500 through special events. It was a magnificent effort. Thank you. But I think we're at about capacity. The organisation of events takes a lot of time, and the number of free Saturdays or evenings is limited.

Letting the building: There is a limit to the number of customers and the available time slots need to be balanced with sensitivity to existing church users. If you know of people or

groups who might want to use the building, put them in touch, to see if we can help. *You* are our best publicity.

Cutbacks and increases in other sources of income are projected to raise only £1,500. So we must look, as the Church Council favoured, to increasing personal giving, to find the extra £10,000. Roughly, that amounts to 80p extra, per household, per week! That's just two pints of milk!

We do have a mountain to climb. But we can do it.

Responsible giving.

Honesty boxes are usually situated at some site of outstanding natural beauty where you park your car. They rely on trust – how much do you put in? Do you pay according to the beautiful view that is before you – a thanksgiving for magnificence? Do you pay according to what it might cost in Winchester to park for an hour? Or do you, pull up, take the photo, and sneak off without troubling the honesty box's fragile frame?

The amount you give, week by week to the church, is like an honesty box. No-one is telling you how much to put in. Of course, some churches do dictate what their members should give. They insist on a tenth of income. Whilst we as a church apply that amount to our benevolence giving, the Methodist Church has never been that prescriptive for individuals. In the collection plate, you are faced with an honesty box. John Wesley wrote on the use of money: *Render unto God, not a tenth, not a third, not half, but all that is God's, in such a manner, that you may give a good account of your stewardship.*

King David expresses a similar thought (1 Chronicles 29). David is building the temple; a palace not for people, but for God to be worshipped. David gives all his wealth and invites his people to give their own gifts. David does this, declaring that any gift is merely returning to God, what is God's already; offering all that is God's. He prays; *Yet my people and I cannot really give you anything, because everything is a gift from you, and we have only given back what is yours already.* This would hold true for financial gifts or personal talents. The offering of our gifts is then, recognition of the treasure we have been given by God.

What treasure have you received from God? Responsible giving gives thanks, like the harvest, for the good gifts one has been given; offering back gifts which are God's already. Have you or your family benefitted from God's gift of youth work in this church? Perhaps you have been visited in hospital by a pastoral visitor. What a gift of God. What of God's gift of conversation in the coffee room, day by day? Can you really price it? Yet they all have hidden financial costs, whether in staffing, training, administration or property. How do you offer back to God what is God's already, in thankfulness?

What price, the gift of Jesus?

Responsible giving will be different according to your individual needs and families. But the scripture, whether reflecting on rich King David, giving the wealth of his treasury, or Jesus' story of the poor widow giving all she had, reminds us that we are offering back to God,

what is his already, in thankfulness for the varied harvests we have received. My purpose is not to tell you how much to give. I recognise there is a recession. I know that some of you exist like the widow in the story. Yet I also know that the cruise ships sail from Southampton with many a Methodist on board.

I want you to prayerfully review how much you give to the church – giving back to God what is his already. Some may feel their contribution is just right. For others, like me, there is a realisation that the amount placed in the collection is the same as five years ago! Is that responsible? Have your gas prices not shot up? So have the churches. And wages too increase with inflation. So too the church workers' wages. Responsible giving is also weekly. Studies show that most worshippers only give, when they attend church. You may only attend once a month – but the work of the church goes on every day. Please consider a standing order, which will pay your offering for you – each week. Or using the envelope scheme – which is a visual reminder to give, on the weeks you are not at church.

A mountain to climb?

Jesus says of a poor widow: *For the others put in what they had to spare from their riches, but she, poor as she is, put in all she had.* King David says: *Yet my people and I cannot really give you anything, because everything is a gift from you, and we have only given back what is yours already.*

I believe by faith, prayer and responsible giving, that we will reach the summit of the mountain.