

# Be the Church

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**John Wilkinson**  
**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**November 20, 2016 (Stewardship Sunday)**  
**I Corinthians 12:4-11**

Today is Stewardship Sunday. The late church member Sally Clapp would tell me that this past Sunday should have been the stewardship sermon in order to influence this morning's results. I always responded that that presumed a sermon that wouldn't decrease the results!

I'd like to say a few words about how we do this, and then a few words on why. But first, and foremost, I'd like to say thank you. Whatever your response, if you have done so, we thank you – the Session and Trustees and Deacons, the Stewardship Committee and Joint Budget and Finance Committee, all of us. Thank you. And thank you in advance if your pledge is to come.

This year we have spoken about two things. Participation and capacity. We'd like all of us, and certainly a greater percentage than those who currently do, to participate. No pledge is too small. (I should also say that no pledge is too big!) If you are young and unsure about your financial prospects, make a token pledge to get in the game. If you are like many whose financial landscape is shifting, make a pledge as well. This is not a contract and we are not a collection agency. Situations change. But please do participate, as an indication of connection and commitment.

And capacity. I firmly believe that this congregation has the capacity to meet and exceed our goals. The right sermon, or the right stewardship theme, won't get the job done. Your own sense of commitment and generosity will. We are generally polite to the point of reserved about all of this, but let me ask you – as Bonny and I are doing ourselves – to stretch, as you are able, to increase your capacity if you can do so.

Third Church is in a strong position in so many ways. We are rich in people resources and building resources and program resources. Our membership is growing, slightly, yes, but growing, in a time when that is not the norm. And as I've said, I do believe that collectively we have the resources to reach our goals.

You will remember, however, that a year ago we were led to make budget reductions, and if you studied the budget we sent out with the pledge cards, we are facing a similar scenario for 2017. Let's say the delta is \$50,000. It is achievable. I believe that, and not just as a form of wishful thinking. That's why all the talk about participation and capacity. So again, let my last word echo the first one – thank you.

That is the how. Now here's the why, and you have permission to change your pledge after this conversation concludes, but only if the number goes in a certain direction, per Sally Clapp's admonition!

I recently wrote two grant proposals, one for a study project for myself and one for the urban consortium of Presbyterian congregations of which we are a part. Good news – both grants were approved. In each grant I had to describe what the money would be used for and why it was important, why it mattered that this money would be dedicated to this particular use.

That's what Stewardship Sunday is all about. Making the case – why and how. Yet it's more complex than that. In a sense, you are the funder, you who pledge or offer financial support in other ways. But in another sense, that's not quite right. We are all the case to be made, all of us as the church. We self-fund, so we make the case to ourselves. We look at each other and tell each of us why this matters, why this enterprise is worthy of our investment.

But we also make the case to our community, with our relevance, with our mission and program that makes a difference to our neighbors, their hearts and bodies and souls.

And not to be overly melodramatic, but in a deeper way we really make the case to God. God is the one who gives us all these gifts – time and energy and money – and it is to God to whom we are ultimately responsible for how we are stewards of them.

The Stewardship Committee each year identifies a theme. This year's was simple, if not simplistic: "Be the Church." We understand that theme in many ways. At a very primary level, we state that what we are is a part of the body of Christ, a spiritual community in a particular place and time.

In generations past, the church was often identified by what it believed; now more and more it is identified by how it behaves, by what it does. In my mind, believing and belonging exist in a kind of continuous dance. We believe this so we do that. Doing that leads us to believe this.

This year I've been thinking of the church as a community of reconciliation, whereby we live out our reconciliation to God by being reconciled to ourselves, to one another and to the world. I did not know that reconciliation would feel as urgent as it does.

And because of who we are, this community of reconciliation, there are things we are called to do. Each congregation will do them differently; each one will do them imperfectly and incompletely. Our yardstick is how well we are measuring up to our vision – to love God, to love ourselves, to love our neighbor.

That will look like many things. One way to think about it is Paul's list that I read from I Corinthians, a litany of varieties of gifts. If we are given wisdom, then the church is to teach, teach one another and teach our young. If we are given faith, then we are to worship and pray and sing. If we are given healing, then we are to care, care for one another in our grief and in our pain – physical and spiritual. If we are given miracles, then we are to work miracles – feeding people, housing people, tutoring people. If we are given prophecy, then we are to be prophets, to speak out, to give voice, to change the system to make it just and equitable for those in deepest need.

If these are the gifts we are given, then it seems fairly clear what our vision is. It is universal, in that the needs exist everywhere and the gifts are given without prejudice. But it is particular, in that we are called to exercise our gifts here.

Worship and music and arts. Education for all ages, our children and youth and all of us as adult learners. Fellowship opportunities where we build community. And outreach – in Rochester, in our nation, around the world, including sharing a voice for the voiceless and caring for those in deepest need. That's what it looks like here.

To be clear, our version of it requires financial support. In terms of program, our outreach ministry is the largest proportion, and that seems about right. But they are all really interconnected. Our education program and our worship and music fuel our outreach, and our outreach helps to give focus to our education and worship.

In another sense, our mission is carried out with the two largest components of our budget, our people and our facilities. Our staff, the extraordinary group of people with whom I am privileged to serve, supports all of you in enacting our call. They are worth every penny of our support, and more so.

And I've been thinking of this building more and more as a vehicle of our vision. Meetings that lead to decisions and programs. Worship that inspires us to serve. Classes that lead to acts of faith. Every community group that meets here because we care about the community. A Great Schools for All event that welcomes in the community, or an Eastman School concert that does the same, that reminds the world that no real wall exists between the church's life within these walls and the church's life beyond them.

For Third Presbyterian Church at least, people, our staff, and this fabulous building, are vehicles for that vision. And all of that takes money. So that we can keep making the case to ourselves, to our community. And we keep making the case to God, the one to whom we are ultimately responsible because it is God who gives us gifts in the first place, and God gives us the vision to which we put those gifts to good use.

I am hopeful that we achieve our goals, because I can tell you that time after time, in life after life and in moment after moment, what we do together as Third Church matters. It matters to lives and it matters to communities. It matters as we teach our children and bury our dead and sing songs of praise. It matters as we provide a warm meal or a place to live for a week. It matters as we seek to change systems. It matters, in this moment, as we seek to make sense of a world that feels as if it is making little sense, to provide spiritual meaning to help all of us, and each of us, navigate our days with love and justice and hope.

That's the vision. That's the case for investing your money, Bonny's and my money, our money, in this mission. I can ask unabashedly and unashamedly – because I believe in it, in us, in you. We are funders of it. We are stewards of it. We are artists and teachers and missionaries, fellow travelers, chosen by God, empowered by God, comforted and provoked by God, gifted by God. To be the church. Amen.