



From the desk of Pastor Rachel

From the Pastor...

Is it Time for A Revival of A Time-Honored Church Tradition?

In the early days of American Methodism, when more than 80% of the population made their living in agriculture, the majority of our church members were farmers. Each autumn, once the harvest was in, Methodist farmers would tally their income for the season and then contribute a portion of the year's profits to help support their local church.

Out of this natural yearly rhythm grew the tradition of the Fall Stewardship Campaign which allowed everyone to celebrate the harvest and all of God's blessings by offering their contribution toward the expenses of the church. For generations this is how churches across the country kept their doors open and their ministries alive. After the Civil War, a national day of Thanksgiving was initiated by President Lincoln, in part to acknowledge this uniquely American way of life.

Today, in 2023, only 2% of Americans are still farming for a living and the annual stewardship campaign has fallen out of fashion and favor. In the meantime, the cost of running a church, just like everything else, has risen steadily. In 2022, the median budget for a United Methodist church with fewer than 200 people in weekly worship attendance was roughly \$170,000, while the average member contributed \$17.00 per week -- a figure that has not risen at nearly the same rate as church expenses for such necessities as insurance, utilities, and compensation for clergy and other staff. Well before disaffiliation or unification were being discussed at Peace and Trinity, expenses and contributions at both churches were following this same general pattern, so that even with conservative budgeting and wise investing the contributions from members and attenders have not aligned realistically with the fixed costs of operations for some time now.

It's interesting to note that even in this time of diminished church attendance, nearly everyone who belongs to a church believes that it is an important part of their life, and they want their church to thrive. They agree that the church serves a meaningful role in the life of the community. And yet, those beliefs do not necessarily translate to financial giving. A fair percentage of church members heartily object to open discussions of money and fundraising, even when both are upheld by the Scripture, tradition, and the sheer pragmatics of keeping the lights on and the church doors open. This presents church leaders with a real catch-22. How do today's United Methodists approach this essential topic without ruffling the sensitive feathers of members who would prefer that matters of our personal and church finances remain a silent mystery?

One answer to this dilemma is to take a fresh and updated look at the time-honored tradition of the Fall Stewardship Campaign. Is there a way to reintroduce faith-based beliefs and routines held by our agricultural forebears so that contemporary church-goers can feel inspired and informed, without feeling manipulated or unduly pressured? Many, including yours truly, believe it's worth a try. The big question is, can we move

beyond our initial feelings of resistance and discomfort long enough to reconnect with the spirits of those generous and faithful people who built and sustained our churches for years before us? Can we be intentional about discerning God's guidance for how to financially support our United Methodist ministries and missions, both for now, and for the future?

If you are willing to join in this exploration, please accept my gratitude, and then stay tuned for further information and instructions that will be shared between now and the end of November.

With gratitude and blessings to all.

PR