

## **“For Where Your Treasure Is, There Your Heart Will Be Also” (Matt 6:21)**

### **Financial Anxieties Block Justice Overtures at General Assembly**

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I grew up in a working class family of immigrants. Even though my parents worked twelve hours a day, six days a week, we still often could not pay all of our bills regularly or on time. We had to decide which ones were the most urgent, and which ones would need to wait. We lived on a tight budget, and financial insecurity under-girded our day-to-day reality.

Because of how I grew up, I understand the reluctance of a financially stretched church to set aside money to fund additional programs or studies. I understand the need to work within a budget and to choose wisely and carefully what we will support and what we will not.

As a commissioner to the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, I witnessed how the theme of money and the lack thereof found its way into our discussions and our deliberations. It became pervasive throughout the assembly, from discussions on capping per capita to refusing to discuss important items of business simply because they had financial implications.

While I understand the need to be faithful stewards of our budget (especially when we face a depressed economy and a decline in per capita giving from congregations), I believe this rhetoric began to move beyond merely “good stewardship” and into the realm of cowardice and pretext. I believe too often we operated out of fear and began to buy into the myth of scarcity. And sometimes, we simply used money as an excuse to block programs and studies that would further the work of justice in the church.

Even though my family struggled financially, we always made sure there was some money set aside both to give to the church and to spend on entertainment or recreation. While this may not have been the most practical way to manage money, I believe my parents understood that it was necessary to invest in beauty, joy, and the work of the church. They understood that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” and so they chose to put their money into those things that they valued and that gave us life: God, acts of compassion, laughter, and art.

Working for justice and equality, practicing radical hospitality, these are the age-old commandments from scripture that continue to breathe new life into the church. These are the practices into which we should be putting our hearts, and as such, where we should be investing our treasure.

But that is not what happened at the General Assembly. We rejected several items, but two in particular with big financial implications, that could have furthered justice and extended hospitality to two groups in the church who are traditionally marginalized: women and people of color.

The recommendations from the Status of Women Methodology Task Force would have assessed the status of women in the church, helping us (by examining issues such as compensation and attitudes toward women in leadership) in our work to dismantle sexism and to create a church that is hospitable and welcoming to all genders. The proposed study was an answer to the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly's "Resolution to Explore the Study of the Status of Women at All Levels in the PC(USA)"—an Assembly action that presently cannot be fulfilled.

We have, for instance, never done a study that includes Christian Educators. These leaders shape our church through how and what they teach our children and youth, and they also happen to be predominantly women. We, however, have no study to help us grasp how to best support and nurture their ministry. The recommendations from this report carefully evaluated how to do a full study on the status of women that would comprehensively achieve the task before them; however, because of the cost to conduct the study properly, the Assembly chose not to approve these recommendations.

Similarly, the Assembly rejected the recommendation from the Report of the Special Committee on the Nature of the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, which instructed the church to provide all denominational news, policy statements, web information, and other communications in Korean, Spanish, and other languages as needed. Its cost, once again, was cited as the predominant argument against such an effort. The Assembly replaced the recommendation with the more innocuous and vague instruction to "provide basic accessibility."

We allow presbyteries and congregations based on language affinity to exist within our structure because we still have not figured out how to radically welcome those with whom we do not share a language; however, we do not allow these presbyteries and churches to participate fully in the life of the PC(USA) because we deny them access to essential information needed to understand and navigate this denomination.

These are only two of the many items brought up at this Assembly that addressed justice. Some of the others did actually pass. In fact, all of the recommendations from the Committee on Immigration Issues, which I moderated, passed, and I was heartened by the Committee's discussion and the Assembly's approval of those items. But, only one of those items had a financial implication, and it was comparably minor. Sadly, those items that made strides towards creating a more fair and just church that also required us to support those actions with our money, did not always fair quite as well.

We cannot be a church that says we stand for justice and then refuse to back that up with our actions and our dollars. Jesus tells us, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt 6:21). If we claim to seek justice, we must give our money to

strategies and programs that break down unjust systems; we must conduct studies and enforce policies that help us understand and dismantle institutionalized sexism and racism. We cannot say one thing, and then do another.

My hope has been that as a church our hearts will seek justice, and our treasure will follow.

Scripture, however, interestingly reverses the causal effect, arguing that it is our hearts that follow our treasure: where we put our treasure is where our hearts will be. Perhaps then, even if our hearts are not quite yet fully aligned for justice, even if we do not have it all figured out, even if we feel ambivalent about spending more money, we should put our treasure there any way, so that our hearts may follow. And perhaps, even if we do not always want to do the work of justice, investing our money towards such efforts may help transform us into a church that does.

It is a risky and costly venture, but discipleship should not be cheap, and justice comes at a price. We may not all be willing to lay our privilege aside just yet, but maybe if we put some money towards those efforts anyway, our own hearts will follow suit.

As we live into the deliberations of this 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, both with its shortcomings and its advancements towards justice, I pray that our church chooses to invest both our treasure and our hearts toward the work of justice, so that we may be transformed and brought to new life. I pray that our church may not be paralyzed by fear, but that we may “walk, run, and soar in hope” trusting the leading of the Holy Spirit, so that when we convene again in two years, we may be better equipped to respond faithfully and with compassion, putting our money where our hearts should follow.