

## Stewardship in Plain English

By Leisa Anslinger

**The Personal:** Everything I consider mine really belongs to Someone else. The person who I am, and the greater person I am called to be; every moment of every day; my relationships with family and friends; my possessions; the food on my table and the food at the Eucharistic table: all are gifts, amazing, overwhelming, and precious gifts. I can choose to generously share the gifts I have been given, out of gratitude for the gift and the Giver, or I can possessively hold what I perceive as mine, even though in reflection I realize that it is not mine at all. I can apply reason and say “I am the one who has earned what I own. I’ve worked hard; I deserve to hold onto my possessions all I want.” But then, reason will also tell us, if we listen, that the skills and abilities used to do the work involved are given to us by our lavishly generous God, and then, reason will also tell us that it makes sense to share with others in the manner with which we have been given from the beginning.

That is the essence of stewardship. All we have and are and will be is God’s. We are caretakers of all of this, and being a caretaker of so much means that we have been given great responsibility. Amazingly, we are given complete freedom to decide how we will care for our lives, our relationship with God and others, our vocation, our possessions. Not only this, we have been shown what true stewardship “looks like,” in the person of Jesus Christ. Living the life of a disciple of Christ inevitably leads to reflection about what is important in life. Jesus did not hesitate to respond to the needs of those whom he encountered. How will we use the gifts we have been given to continue Christ’s response to the needs of the people Christ encounters today? The Christian steward grows in willingness to give life, love and care as a continuation of the work of the Master, and finds true joy in the giving.

**The Communal:** We are not left alone to do this good work, either. We have the presence of the Holy Spirit within and around us to guide and strengthen our decisions and action. We also have one another; as members of Christ’s body united in the Spirit. As we grow as stewards, we come to revel in the knowledge that each of us has been given specific talents and abilities, special combinations of traits that uniquely equip us to contribute to Christ’s mission. Since each of us is particularly gifted, it is essential that each person does his or her part. Alone, each of us can do only what one person can do; together, we can transform our world. Discovering how to combine our strengths in ministry benefits those who are served and simultaneously builds up the community of faith, drawing people more deeply into Christ’s life with a sense of purpose and love.

**The Practical:** We can do much within our parishes to contribute to stewardship as a way of life:

**Leadership:** Embracing stewardship is a particularly challenging aspect of discipleship. It is likely that as you read the opening paragraph of this article, even if you are actively cultivating a spirituality of stewardship in your life, you winced just a bit. That reaction gives us an insight into the importance of leadership, of the pastor and of parishioner leaders. Not only do leaders model the on-going conversion in Christ that stewardship signifies, leaders insure that stewardship is lived, preached, and witnessed to throughout all aspects of parish

life. That may sound simple, but it is more complicated than one might initially suspect. The pastor, staff, pastoral council, and stewardship commission/committee learn in time to consider the messages, intended or unintended, that are communicated in all facets of parish life. Leaders are also instrumental in discerning how to walk the delicate balance between challenging continued growth and celebrating signs of present generosity.

**Formation in Discipleship and Stewardship:** There is a cyclical nature to formation that leads to discipleship and stewardship: the more we embrace our baptismal call to follow Christ as disciples, the more we are likely to respond as stewards. The more we challenge ourselves to be good stewards, the more likely we are to realize how our faith affects all of our lives, leading us to desire more complete understanding of our faith (and to participation in adult faith formation opportunities). The more we grow as disciples and stewards, the more likely we are to share our faith with others, and our active evangelizing strengthens our desire to follow Christ, deepening our commitment as disciples. The center of this cycle of conversion, of course, is the Eucharist and the sacramental life of the Church; we celebrate what God is doing in our lives, we are nourished to continue to be transformed, and we are sent forth to continue to love and serve the Lord and one another.

**Inviting and Welcoming:** Have you ever heard someone say (or maybe you've said this yourself), "The 20-80 rule applies here. 20% of the people do all of the work; 80% come and go without any investment of themselves." That certainly was the sentiment in my parish a few years ago. Those who are actively involved were tired and burnt out, and yet knew that if they stopped serving, our parish and the poor we served would suffer. The answers were simple: learn to invite those who show any sign of being ready to offer themselves in ministry; warmly welcome new parishioners and establish a kind expectation from the beginning that they will become actively involved; communicate what needs exist and invite all in the community to offer their gifts in response; ask those who serve in a ministry to accept a designated term, and invite them to find a partner who will serve as back-up and companion on the journey; ministry coordinators should have a designated successor who shadows the coordinator for a year. By concentrating on inviting and welcoming, my parish has increased participation in ministry by 315% in the last ten years – now 68% of adults are involved in one or more ministries!

**Commitment, Renewal, and Acknowledgment of Ministry:** Take time each year to invite parishioners to consider how they are living and growing as stewards in all of their lives. Offer the opportunity for people to make a commitment to be good caretakers of their personal resources at the parish and beyond it; the process of making a commitment is a healthy spiritual exercise that reminds each of us that stewardship is a way of life, at home, in the workplace, in our parish, in service to those who most need our care and attention. Acknowledging the many ways in which people are living as stewards is a powerful sign of the love of a grateful community as a reflection of God's love being poured out for others.