

July 13, 2009

Dear Co-workers in Christ:

Greetings in the name of him whose love urges us on, Jesus Christ our Savior, who died for all that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him who for our sakes died and was raised again! (II Corinthians 5:14, 15)

Our convention is over but the work goes on. I want to thank the many delegates, both church workers and laity, for their participation and the fine missionary spirit which prevailed. I congratulate the newly and re-elected officers of the District and believe that we have an excellent set of leaders to guide us forward.

In the spirit of moving forward in the work we believe God is calling us to do, **I am writing**, with the encouragement of the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors and our new President, the Rev. Gregory Walton, **to brief you on the financial challenges before us** in the District. Since we are all in this together I strongly urge you and your congregation **to join hands with your brothers and sisters** throughout the District **to meet the challenges** before us.

Simply put, we are hurting financially. We ended FY2008 approximately \$167,000 in the red due to a shortfall in income the last six months of that fiscal year. Through prudent spending the shortfall was not worse. For FY2009, we pared back expenses, and salaries were frozen. Our budget called for \$150,000 less in unrestricted receipts from congregations than in 2008. After five months of FY2009 (through June), expenses are right on target but unfortunately our unrestricted income from congregations is \$150,000 less than anticipated. We have budgeted to receive \$350,000 for District outreach from the Fan Into Flame endeavor for the year; at this point, we have received \$11,547. I trust that you understand that we are hurting as a District.

What should we do? Let me suggest that we **see it as “our” challenge.** We are in this together, by virtue of our membership in Christ’s body through baptism. We belong to each other and therefore should approach this responsibly—with us leaders modeling good stewardship personally, helping our congregations practice it corporately, and equipping our members to do it in their personal and family lives. To that end, I am making the following suggestions.

1. **Plan and implement a financial commitment campaign for your congregation.** Plan to do it this fall, if your congregation operates on a calendar year basis. **Teach** the basics of **first-fruits giving, the privilege of stewardship, the joy of generosity, and Gospel motivation.** Through a well-planned and executed endeavor including Bible study, worship, prayer, telling the story, and pledging, congregations have seen their commitments grow two to three times over what they would receive if nothing had been done. More important than the results, though, is discovering the joy of giving.

2. **Model first-fruits giving as a congregation.** Designate the first item in your budget for what you are going to give outside your congregation—that missions come first. It is a signal to your members to put God first, that you trust him, that giving away comes before taking care of yourself. When families put God first in their budgeting and spending it is amazing how that helps them make wise choices in terms of clothing, house, car, and the other items we spend money on. Help your congregation exemplify corporately what you want your members to do personally.
3. **Let me illustrate this idea with what we are doing as a District.** We designate 20% of our unrestricted receipts from congregations to send on to Synod, which equates to 14% of our total budget. In addition, we spend 34% on outreach within the District, and 23% for raising up leaders for the mission, making for 71% earmarked for outreach. I do not expect our local congregations to match that, but I would like to encourage you to **designate a tithe or 10% for your support of District and Synod as a base** (not a ceiling!) and then seek to build from there. It may be that you are not able to start there this year, but designate a definite portion and then seek to raise it year by year. Let our finances reflect that we are missionary in orientation!
4. **An excellent way for you to foster this missionary spirit** in your stewardship is through participation in **Fan Into Flame**, Synod's endeavor to raise \$100,000,000 in "over and above" gifts to support our local and worldwide mission. You may feel in view of the economic difficulties the country is experiencing, this is not the time to give your members the opportunity to participate. My response is just the opposite. **Now is the time when the Gospel needs to be proclaimed more than ever**, for people are fearful, anxious, and open to help. **Please do not deny your folks the opportunity to decide for themselves** if they can stretch and do something more for the mission. I encourage you to participate in Fan Into Flame to raise people's sights to see the mission and to raise dollars to help us support our outreach efforts.

In our District, a major recipient of Fan Into Flame dollars will be the **Transforming Congregations initiative**. The convention resoundingly endorsed this endeavor, as we seek to help our congregations revitalize and become more involved in the mission. **Without Fan Into Flame dollars it will be difficult to accomplish this program.**

5. **Utilize the many resources that are available** to help your congregation do your campaign well. At the Circuit Convocations in spring, 2008, each congregation received a copy of the Big Book—**Congregational Stewardship Workbook 2000**, which is chockfull of ideas and helps. The **District Stewardship Advisory Council** can assist you in knowing what your options are: Consecrated Stewards (a program which has had good results, sponsored by the Lutheran Church Extension Fund), Loyalty Sunday programs, Every Member Visits, Small Group meetings in members' homes; Dinner meetings culminating with pledging. Helps are available. Please make use of the ones that are right for you.
6. In my experience, I find that many folks do not understand stewardship and the privilege of managing what we have for God. If your congregation is like most, I suggest that you can **help your people learn good stewardship practices**. Programs such as those offered by Dave Ramsey or Crown Ministries are a way to do this. Also, Thrivent

Financial for Lutherans has a program entitled, *More Than Money Matters*, which their financial representatives are willing to facilitate. This is an educational ministry they provide and not a promotional piece for their products. Speak with your local representative for details.

7. At our last Council of Presidents' meeting in April, I learned that the topic for **the circuit pastors Bible studies, "Faithful and Aflame," will be focused on Biblical stewardship** in its many aspects. I encourage our pastors to plan their circuit program to include these during the coming year. They will help you grow in your stewardship—whether of relationships, time, abilities, the Gospel or even money—so that you may demonstrate its meaning and the privilege we have to be stewards for the King.

I do want to comment also, that as you follow through on the above encouragement, your own congregation will definitely benefit. A significant Alban Institute study of **congregations involved in cooperative arrangements** discovered that those congregations did not **become** weaker by their sharing, but **stronger**. I am confident that the same will happen as you participate more fully in the shared work we do as a District and Synod.

In our Executive Committee discussion, we were naturally concerned about the financial health of the District. None of us wants to see our ministries curtailed through lack of effort on our part. To help us in this critical time in our life together, **a Task Force will be appointed to help us promote good stewardship and to provide good counsel** if adjustments have to be made to our plans. By coming to you now, I am hopeful that you will take the steps necessary to have a healthy stewardship emphasis either this fall or winter. It's my confidence that, if we all emphasize the privilege we have as stewards of God with good Gospel motivation, we will be able to rise to the occasion, and He will help us do what is needed for His mission.

Surely we have every reason for doing our best. God gave us his very best, his one and only Son to expend himself for us and our salvation. With such strong love to urge us on, can we not figure out ways to help one another serve, give, and sacrifice that not only our needs are met but also more and more people come to know the salvation he has won?

Thanks for your partnership in the Gospel and for working together with us to go forward in the Lord's work! He is faithful and will bless our efforts.

Your partner in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Gerhard C. Michael, Jr.
President

CC: Executive Staff and Board of Directors