

## *Should the pastor know how much people give?*

by THE REVEREND RICHARD H. CRAFT

Soon after beginning with a new congregation, a pastor approached the church treasurer and asked for the details of people's giving – names and amount. The treasurer, shocked by the request, refused. Within a few days, both pastor and treasurer had called their presbytery for advice. The treasurer called the legal department of the General Assembly, seeking support for the principle that only God – and the treasurer – should know what people give.

Both of these strong-willed leaders love Jesus Christ, care deeply about the church and want to do what is right. Their conflict isn't unusual.

Should the pastor know how much people give? Church leaders usually respond emphatically to that question – and defend their positions vigorously!

Instead of having an argument, why not have a prayerful conversation?

### Things to Keep in Mind

While there's certainly no one-size-fits-all answer to this question, here are some ideas to keep in mind:

■ **It's a spiritual matter.** Sometimes we talk about giving as if it were in a class by itself – different from all other expressions of gratitude to God, from all other ways we live out our discipleship. But like worship, prayer, mission, financial giving is *primarily a spiritual matter*. Only secondarily is it a financial matter.

■ **The session should make this decision.** Because it's an important spiritual matter, the session should talk about it. And, by the way, the pastor is a member of the session.\* It's healthy to talk *with* the pastor about who should and shouldn't know what people give. It's not healthy to talk *about* the pastor in the pastor's absence.

■ **Pray together about it.** Some sessions (not yours, of course!) argue about things when they should be praying about them. A prayerful conversation means listening for the promptings of the Spirit. And that includes listening to each other, carefully and appreciatively, especially when you disagree.

■ **Override the default.** Instead of answering the question by accident – in terms of what the congregation is accustomed to, or what a few strong voices have proclaimed – let the decision

be intentional. And let it be based on a concern for growing disciples of Jesus Christ within the congregation.

■ **Consider the spiritual price** to be paid if the pastor has – or doesn't have – the details about people's giving. What are the implications for people's spiritual growth if the pastor knows – or doesn't know – where they are in their journey when it comes to financial things?

■ **Think about the difference between *secret* and *confidential*.** The idea that a spiritual practice like giving should be kept secret – “just between me and God” – doesn't help people grow spiritually. “Confidential” means that information is shared with people who have the *confidence* of the group. It isn't shared widely, but made available to those who are trusted to use it for the common good.

■ **Ask how the information would be used.** Talk about appropriate and inappropriate uses of giving records. Both pastor and elders should be clear on that.

■ **Interpret it carefully.** Let the congregation know *why*. If the session's decision involves a change in an existing pattern, give the congregation an opportunity to talk, ask questions and pray together about it.

### What About “Don't Let Your Left Hand Know What Your Right Hand Is Doing”?

In this saying from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:2-4), Jesus speaks out against ostentatious display; He's not calling for absolute secrecy. If we believed he was calling for secrecy, we'd put our contributions (in cash, not checks) in plain envelopes and slip them under the church office door. And noting that Jesus uses very similar language in the next couple of verses to talk about prayer, we might refuse to pray unless we're in a closet! Jesus himself prayed not only in private, but also when others were listening! Absolute secrecy, whether in giving or in praying, isn't celebrated in scripture.

Today we may have the opposite problem. Some people (not you, dear reader!) don't want the pastor to know, not because of their extraordinary generosity, but because they don't want their pastor knowing how stingy they are! If we don't want the pastor to know, perhaps some prayerful self-examination would be in order.

## We've Always Done It That Way

In many congregations, this issue never comes up. *The way we've always done it* seems right and good. Sometimes there seems to be an unspoken agreement never to talk about this. Raising the issue is likely to provoke a passionate defense of the practice in that particular congregation.

In others, elders and other leaders may tell you they don't know whether the pastor knows the details of people's giving, and they're not very concerned about that. People don't seem to be worried about what their pastor will think of them. It's just not a big deal.

In a growing number of congregations, it is well known that the pastor has access to giving records. The congregation knows *why* that information is important for the pastor to have, and *how* that information is used.

## Some Reasons the Pastor Should Know

Some sessions have prayed about this and have found compelling reasons why the pastor should have this information. They aren't calling for giving records to be published, but making them available, confidentially, to the pastor.

■ **It allows a pastor to be a pastor.** A good pastor is a spiritual guide. How we deal with money and possessions is a spiritual matter at its heart.

■ **It encourages greater openness about money matters** in the congregation. Letting the pastor see what you give is one way to avoid unhealthy secrets.

■ **It provides for greater accountability.** Just the fact that the pastor knows is an incentive to become more faithful in giving. This isn't about guilt, it's about gladness, gratitude and generosity.

■ **It helps people grow healthier in their relationship with money and possessions.** Addiction to money and *stuff* is perhaps the most serious spiritual disease that we have. John Calvin, among others, affirmed that *giving* is a powerful way to escape the captivity of material possessions. Yet, the more seriously we are addicted to something, the less we want to talk about it. A frequent saying at 12-step meetings is, "You're as sick as your secrets." It isn't healthy to keep our giving a secret from our spiritual guide – our pastor.

■ **It allows for better pastoral care.** A sudden change in giving is often a sign of deeper issues. If the pastor notices that change, it may be an opportunity to offer a listening ear.

■ **It allows the church to treat different people differently.** This isn't favoritism! It's a simple fact that people are in different places in their discipleship. They need different kinds of ministry. If the spiritual leader of a congre-

gation doesn't know where people are in giving, the result is generic stewardship, depriving people of what they may need to grow.

Folks who emphatically do not want the pastor to have access to giving records may remain unconvinced. It may help to reiterate that we're not talking about fundraising; we're talking about discipleship: a tangible way to express thanksgiving to God and support the work of Jesus Christ near and far.

## Some Reasons the Pastor Shouldn't Know

Other sessions have taken a prayerful look at their congregation and decided that it isn't appropriate for the pastor to have access to giving records.

■ **When there's a strong history of secrecy.** If folks are told that no one but the treasurer will know what they give, changing that could be considered a serious breach. If that's the case, and the session believes it's spiritually healthy to change that pattern, it's got to be done with plenty of advance notice. And lots of careful interpretation.

■ **When there's an unusual amount of conflict and mistrust** in the congregation, particularly if much of it is focused on the pastor. *However*, that if a congregation's practice has been for the pastor to have access to giving details, an abrupt change to secrecy in the middle of a conflict is almost guaranteed to make the conflict worse.

■ **If it's not clear how this information will be used.** If the people can't trust the pastor to use the information appropriately, there are much deeper issues involved.

■ **If the pastor has a strong personal belief that giving records should be secret.** Many pastors were taught and believe that they should not have access to such records. This is another important reason why the decision should be made by the session – and the session includes the pastor. That doesn't mean that the pastor's opinion trumps the rest of the session. But it doesn't make sense to adopt a policy against a pastor's principled opposition, when that pastor is expected to implement the policy.

## Listen to the Spirit

Pray about this. Listen to the Spirit. Study the Scripture. Listen to each other. Take time. Think about what is *excellent and worthy of praise* (Philippians 4:8) in the point of view with which you disagree! Then pray more and listen some more.

\*In this article the word pastor is used very broadly. It may include anyone who performs pastoral functions in the congregation. Of course, only an installed pastor, co-pastor or associate pastor is a voting member of the session.

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