

*7 Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you —so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. 8 I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. 9 For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. 10 And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— 11 now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. 12 For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. 13 I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between 14 your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. 15 As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."*

I'm one of those people that really hates asking for help. I've always found joy in helping others – its why my first career was as a paramedic, then a Hospice volunteer, then a pastor...but I've never wanted to receive help. Back in the day when Tim took his first full time ministry position as a student pastor, we went from an income level that provided for the needs of our young family of four, to an income level well below the poverty line. We struggled. Hard.

One day, one of our previous ministers called and asked me to lunch. He knew the pay cut we had taken, and he correctly guessed that by this point, we were finding life difficult. He was a prayer warrior type and God seemed to have sent him a hotline to our family needs. At lunch that day, he pulled out his checkbook and said, "How much to get you caught up?" I was horrified. "No way am I accepting help from you," I said. His response rocked me. "Who do you think you are?" He asked bluntly. "Have you ever helped someone like this? Have you ever given what someone else needed in order to make things better for them?" Of course I had, and he knew it. "Then who do you think you are? Do you think you are too good to receive help?" He went on to remind me that just as I had helped others in the past, someday I would be in the position to help others again, but for now, it was my turn to be in need and who was I to refuse the blessing of joy to those who wanted to help.

It was a hard thing for me to do, but he was right. We survived those days of need, thanks to him and others like him who so joyfully and graciously gave...not just money...but vegetables from their gardens, vacations at their second homes, and the amazing soul who left an envelope in our mailbox filled with gift certificates to area restaurants and grocery stores every month for almost two years. We survived and eventually our time of need turned to abundance, and we began to find ways to do the same for others.

This lesson is at the heart of Paul's plea to the Corinthian church to joyfully participate in the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. It sounds as if they had enthusiastically agreed to give at first, then maybe their excitement cooled a bit. Perhaps someone said, "Wait, what if the famine spreads? Maybe we should be saving our money in case we need it someday."

So, Paul steps in to remind them of the joy they first had in knowing they could help others by opening their hearts to generosity and love. "Look," he says, "No one is asking you to bankrupt yourselves. We are asking you to give out of your abundance. You have plenty, why not share it as Christ modeled for us?" Then, as my wise friend did, he reminds them that someday they will be in a season of need and there will be others who have the abundance and will return the joy.

It is in Paul's reasoning that I always find myself reflecting upon our own connectional structure within The United Methodist Church. We proudly say we are a connectional church because we are a denomination of churches that strive to stay connected to God, connected to each other, and connected to the communities around us. I always loved how Bishop Larry Goodpaster would remind us every year as he fixed our appointments and sent us back to our churches, "I am appointing you to serve a community which happens to have a United Methodist Church."

As part of The United Methodist Church, every local church like ours gives a small portion of our resources to apportionments, money given to support the mission and ministries of the denomination. What you may not know is that about 97% of that money gets poured back into the local church...to churches in need. We give out of our abundance, and it helps churches who are struggling. It also means that there have been times when we have received some of that money ourselves through grants and gifts to achieve certain ministries that we can't afford on our own. As Paul reminds the Corinthians, we don't do this because it is demanded of us, we do this because there is joy in being able to help others and to live in the compassionate and empathetic ways Christ modeled for us.

In a few minutes we are going to be bringing new members into the church and we will once more be reminded of our membership vows in which we promise to support the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness...these are the ways we promise to stay connected to God, to the church, and to the community around us. There will be seasons of abundance and seasons of need, but we promise to be there through every season.

Let me give you an example of how we are living this out right now at Wilkesboro UMC. In years past, we had the blessing of abundance. We celebrated being a thriving church in a season in which church commitment was high and church remained the center of family engagement. As a result, we were able to add on to our facility and create plenty of space for classrooms and meeting rooms that met our needs. We had the abundance to pay off those debts and today we enjoy the blessing of that abundance. However, seasons change. Our church is no different than other Main Street churches who now find that church is no longer the center of American family engagement. Church attendance in the US is

decreasing. The trend now is that churches are shifting away from the large church model that calls for grand sanctuaries and multiple education wings and it is getting smaller, more intimate, and less institutional. We are trending back to what Paul's churches looked like...smaller churches, networking together in times of need and times of abundance.

What this means for us is this...we are a smaller church, but no less thriving. We have wonderful ministries, a big missional heart, a deepening level of discipleship among our members, and we are growing. These are abundant blessings. However, these blessings are not the kind that demands classroom space and facility usage. These are blessings that have us gathered more often in one room, or out in the community serving in some way. From the joy of past abundance, we now have a large facility in which about 90% of it sits empty most of the time. All that empty space still has to be heated, cooled, cleaned, and cared for. It simply isn't good stewardship. This facility was built to be used for the good of the people and the example of Christ to provide for the needs of others...we want to use it as intended.

So, several months ago a group of us joined a cohort facilitated by The Ormond Center, a group founded by Duke Divinity school and supported by the Duke Endowment. The goal of The Ormond Center is to foster renewed imagination, will, and ability among clergy, congregations, and communities as we journey together, becoming agents of thriving. So, five of us joined a group called the Community Craft Collaborative and over the course of several months we were tasked with taking a deep look at our church's assets and a deep look at the needs of the community around us in order to look for places of intersection. What do we have that others need?

Our determination was easy. We have facilities ...entire wings of space that are grossly underutilized and we have a community that needs space. Eventually our focus narrowed to our community's great need for Day Care. We are in a daycare crisis in Wilkes County. The last news I heard was that of our few remaining day cares, four of them have directors that are not even taking a paycheck in order to try to keep the doors open. Wilkes County needs daycare. So, we embarked on a plan to try to lease our empty space out as a day care.

I'll be honest, we have been shocked at the challenges we are faced with, but that isn't my point. My point is this: We have an abundance of space and we want to use it for the good of the community around us. Does this mean we are giving up on the idea of our church growing. Absolutely not. Our church is growing and who knows, there may be a day when all those rooms are needed again. This is why our proposals are centered on leasing space, not selling it. Does this mean that we will have to give up something we need? No, we are focused on the space that currently is unused or underused. We maybe need to move some things around, but we will find ways to continue to use our facility as we need while also using it to meet the needs of our community.

In September, we will be gathering another cohort for work at The Ormond Center. This one is called the Placemaking Lab and it is specifically focused on helping churches to find creative uses for their underutilized facilities. It will help build off the first cohort where we identified community needs and will help us find funding partners that will help us to meet

those needs. Our first cohort team was me, Gilbert Cox, Jan Taylor, Beth Elledge, Margaret Cooper, and Jean Stetler. We are building a new team for this next cohort – most of our original cohort is returning but we are inviting others to join us...we need a team of 8-10...so if this sparks your imagination, I hope you will join us.

Our goal is simply this...to shift our vision away from a scarcity mentality to one of abundance thinking. We can sit and fret over empty classrooms and memories of days in which they were filled...but wouldn't it be more Christ-like to rejoice in who we are and all that we have now? Wouldn't it serve us and our community better to embrace the church we currently are and use our excess of space to help our community become all it can be?

Our facility, while it has served us well, has areas that are rarely used and yet cost us to maintain. This simply is not good stewardship. So, we are excited to shift our vision away from what we are holding on to in case we need it...to what can we do now that would use it for good.

As Paul said, I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

May God's vision of open hearts of generosity, be our vision as well.