

Pat Conover: How Much Do You Make and How Much Wealth Do You Have?

August 18, 1996

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Opening up the Word today is not going to be in the form of a traditional sermon. It's not that I can't think of anything to say on the issue of stewardship and accountability. It's not even that I didn't find the lectionary scriptures engaging with regard to stewardship. I think I'm just curious about a possible realm of conversation that white middle class culture mostly leaves in the dark and that Seekers mostly leaves in the dark. The big unasked questions I'm considering are, "How much money do you make and how much wealth do you have?"

I'm sorry, but I've been peeking. It will probably get me into trouble. So I've decided I want some company in whatever trouble we find.

Maybe I shouldn't be expecting trouble. It's a dark area and I've been warned away from it but maybe that is because a dragon is guarding a treasure and doesn't want to be disturbed.

Part of the spiritual work of the [Homemakers Mission Group](#) is to try to uncover and work with the spiritual issues involved in moving. We started off with times of general prayer and sharing and named a bunch of things worth consideration. We

decided to consider several things before we engaged stewardship issues. Well, now we are engaging the stewardship questions.

The point question that Seekers needs to answer as we consider relocation is "How much can we afford?"

We could have simply settled for an analysis of our current level of giving. But that only answers what we **are** affording rather than what we **could** afford. In the past, Seekers has not brought the issue of **need** very far into the discussions of the stewardship of giving. Instead we have pretty much stayed with the individualistic spiritual question of what should one give to the church as one part of the expression of my faith.

But thinking about the issue of what **we** need has inspired me to push my questioning a little bit further. I find myself wanting to ask some questions that I usually politely dodge. So, you have been exposed to a number of questions in the paper and questionnaire on stewardship that have been circulating. And I've heard that some of you have found this line of questioning disturbing.

And I've been talking to some individual Seekers and trying to figure out what is so disturbing about talking about the wealth and income we hold as individuals and families. Here are some of the things I've heard.

- I'm concerned some people might be jealous of what I have.
- I feel shame because I'm not as financially successful as other Seekers.
- It will make me feel competitive. I would feel that I have to give as much as the average Seeker to be accepted.
- I'm afraid someone will ask me to give more than I want to give.
- I don't want people to know my business because they

might think I'm not doing the right things.

- I don't want to feel pressure to give more to Seekers because that would threaten my economic security.
- I don't know what my wealth is and I would feel stupid because I can't answer the question.
- I don't like to think about money things. It just makes me anxious.

Maybe you don't feel any of the above feelings. But right now I would like you to take some time to get in touch with what you do feel. To focus your reflection here is a hypothetical question. There is no expectation that you have to share your answer. Suppose you were asked to share information about your income and wealth with a trusted small group of Seekers to encourage and support your overall intentional stewardship of your resources. How would you **feel**.

[Significant Pause]

Seekers does have a word to say about financial giving to the church as a spiritual discipline. It says you can't be a core member unless you give a tithe of your income to Seekers. While I have met this standard, I have repeatedly said that I find the tithing standard to be not biblically grounded and to be unjust for several reasons. But, let me repeat, I do support a **high standard** for financial giving and overall stewardship, a standard I think of as higher than tithing.

But right now, what I want to focus on is that having a tithing standard for core membership does divide us. There are a number of people in Seekers who would become core members but feel blocked by this standard. My point is not about changing the standard but rather that having any standard divides us. The stewardship standard is not unique as a dividing line. Some are not stuck on the tithing standard for membership but on other standards.

At the same time that Seekers is divided by standards, Seekers

also puts a great emphasis on community and on accepting each other **as is**. We do a lot of things to down play the divisiveness of our standards and to encourage full participation and interaction in our common life. But when we are in a time of potential financial need, the questions around meeting the stewardship standards of tithing one's income to Seekers takes on more bite.

Seekers has standards for membership for a simple spiritual reason. We want to be a community based on deep commitments. A lot of churches could make that statement. What sets us apart is that we say we want to be accountable for our commitments. Accountability helps us remember our commitments, helps us clarify our growth agendas, and gives us feedback for reflection.

So, I've got a second question for your reflection. Remembering your feelings in response to the first question, do you want to **feel** any accountability for your financial stewardship? If your answer is yes, can you suggest any mechanisms for gaining such accountability?

[Significant Pause]

I want to lift up one last angle on this subject for your reflection. It is particularly a question for anyone who is feeling mad at me for raising these questions, mad at Seekers for having stewardship standards, mad about having to move, on any of the feeling of shame, or fear, or jealousy, or competitiveness, that you identified in response to the first question. Such feelings can be signs of alienation: alienation from me, from Seekers as a corporate body, or from each other.

Alienation is serious business. If that is what we have discovered this morning then we probably need to do something about it. I don't think that telling me to shut up will do the trick. I don't think that sliding back into tactful avoidance of these questions as a community will do the trick either.

Covering up alienation with silence surely clogs the wellsprings of individual and community spiritual growth.

So, let's close with some silent prayer. In addition to the time of community reflection this morning, I am interested in additional conversation. If you don't want to talk with me, I hope any of you who are feeling stirred up will find ways to talk with each other.