



Stewardship in a New World September 2022

A Wonderful Time To Be Generous

By Yvonne Lembo

Now, friends, I want to report on the surprising and generous ways in which God is working in the churches..." 2 Corinthians 8:1 (MSG)

This is a wonderful time to be generous. Giving USA reports that Americans gave nearly \$485 billion to charitable organizations last year – a four percent increase from 2020. Sixty-seven percent of those gifts came from individuals. Religious institutions received the largest share – nearly \$136 billion.

For longtime members of faith communities and for newcomers, COVID has not only introduced us to new ways of gathering, but also to new ways of giving.

Habitual Generosity

Habitual generosity refers to how we routinely offer gifts for our local faith communities. New habits and tools have opened fresh avenues for generosity. Stewardship has moved beyond the confines of a once-a-year event to a year-round focus on God's abundance and a recurring invitation into the adventure of generosity. Here's some resources to introduce your faith community to Year-Round Stewardship and the Habit of Generosity:

[Abundance: Creating a Culture of Generosity](#). Michael R. Ward. ISBN: 1506461409

[Annual Giving Campaign Tools](#). ECF Vital Practices www.ecfvp.org

[One-Minute Stewardship](#). Charles Cloughen, Jr. ISBN: 9781640650084

[Stewardship for All Seasons](#). Giving program by GSB Consultants.

[A Year-Round Stewardship Program](#). Eugene Grimm and Richard Bosse

[Year-Round Stewardship Practices](#). Webinar by www.tens.org

Flexible Generosity

Financial giving has become far more flexible. As of 2021, 80 percent of consumers preferred card transactions over cash, and check-writing is becoming obsolete. The venerable giving envelope has given way to on-line giving portals, ACH giving, social media/crowd funding campaigns, giving apps, text-to-give and QR codes.

These are not just gadgets, gimmicks or fads. They are tools to make it easy for supporters to be generous to Christ's work through your faith community. When used well, these tools deliver a seamless experience of generosity that leaves a lasting impression of doing good, rather than lasting frustration at being blocked by technical glitches, complicated procedures or limited, outmoded means of giving. Here

are some services to help your faith community create a reliable framework for flexible generosity: [Vanco Faith](#) , [Tithe.ly](#), [Easytithe](#) and [PushPay](#).

Planned Generosity

As families mature and their assets grow, they develop an enlarged capacity to make generous plans. Two popular financial planning tools structured for generosity are Donor Advised Funds (DAFs) and Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCDs).

A DAF is a charitable investment account managed by a sponsoring organization, such as a financial firm, community foundation or the [Episcopal Church Foundation](#). Donors deposit assets into the DAF and receive an immediate tax deduction for their charitable gift. The funds are then invested for tax-free growth and the donor can advise grants from the DAF to any charitable organization.

QCDs provide a convenient way for your supporters aged 70½+ to make a charitable gift to your faith community from their Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs). Although IRA account holders are not required to make a minimum distribution (RMD) until age 72, beginning at age 70½, they have the option to designate tax exempt distributions totaling up to \$100,000 per year to be transferred directly from their IRAs to the charitable organizations they choose.

Becoming familiar with DAFs and QCDs opens doors for your faith community to benefit from your supporters' generous plans. Invite supporters to make DAF grants and 70½+ supporters to make QCD gifts to your faith community.

Make it easy for donors to give these gifts. Consider hosting a DAF-QCD workshop led by a trusted financial advisor or including a DAF-QCD invitation in your weekly announcements.

Recognize DAF and QCD gifts when they arrive – usually in the form of a check from the financial firm managing the accounts. Though you will not send a tax-deductible gift receipt to DAF or QCD donors, a note of thanks builds relationship and encourages ongoing generosity.

For guidance on DAFs and QCDs, contact [Jim Murphy](#), ECF's Managing Director for Stewardship Resources and Operations at (212) 870-2844 or jmurphy@ecf.org.

Leaving a generous legacy

This is a wonderful time to be generous. Between now and 2050, Baby Boomers are transferring an estimated \$30 trillion in assets through their estate plans. Up to \$1 trillion of those assets is expected to be designated for charitable organizations. This is referred to as "The Boomer Trillion."

This is an ideal time to invite your Boomers to leave a generous legacy by including your faith community in their estate plans. Faith communities have longstanding relationships with their supporters – sometimes spanning generations. Also, faith communities tap into a donor's cherished values and core beliefs. For all these reasons your faith community is an ideal place for a supporter to leave a generous legacy through their last and often largest gift – an estate gift. This won't happen automatically. It requires an invitation and, sometimes, a little help.

The Episcopal Church Foundation (ECF) offers two resources to help you walk with supporters and invite them to leave a generous legacy for your faith community:

1. [ECF360](#), ECF's on-line "DIY" comprehensive stewardship resource. There are free resources, and additional support is available by subscription.
2. [ECF Endowment Management \(EM\)](#), providing comprehensive endowment services, including help to grow your endowment through planned gifts.

A third resource is Jim Murphy's new book [Faithful Giving: The Heart of Planned Gifts](#), featuring ecumenical and interfaith perspectives on how to cultivate legacy gifts, including a case study from my former work with the ELCA Foundation.

Now is the most wonderful time of the year – a wonderful time to be generous!

Yvonne Lembo serves as Director of Development at ECF. For more than 20 years, Yvonne's expertise has helped families, congregations and faith-based organizations harvest more than \$50 million for their mission, stewardship and legacy goals.

Yvonne regards her work as an expression of God's ministry call for her life. She holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Harvard University, the Master of Divinity with honors from Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia (LTSP), and Certified Estate and Trust Specialist coursework with the Institute of Business and Finance.

Resources:

- [Creating Year-round Stewardship with Holy Currencies](#) by Bill Cruse, Vestry Papers, September 2020
- [Should I Set Up a Donor-Advised Fund \(DAF\)?](#) an ECF Vital Practices webinar presented by Jim Murphy, June 8, 2022
- [Setting up a Planned Giving Program for your Parish](#) an ECF Vital Practices webinar presented by Jim Murphy, June 27, 2020
- [Three Ways to Perk Up Year-round Stewardship](#) by Linda Buskirk, Vestry Papers, September 2018

Gratitude + Generosity = Abundance

By Forrest S. Cuch and Michael Carney

We're living in a world that's out of balance. Some people have plenty, but most have too little. Those with the greatest power and influence seem to have lost touch with the Creator and lost respect for Creation. Unless we can make fundamental changes, our future is bleak.

But where to begin? The destructive forces and nasty politics surrounding us can seem overwhelming, and it's hard to know how to resist. We have been blessed by being among the leaders of a small but vibrant Episcopal church, making a difference on the Ute Reservation in northeast Utah. While our people face many challenges, their spiritual traditions contribute to a growing sense of resilience.

Each day is a gift

For a middle-class white person like me (Michael), raised in the dominant culture, there have been many “aha” moments in my six years here. Here’s something basic I’ve learned: every day is a gift from the Creator. The blessings of each day are not meant to give us whatever we want, but to meet our deepest needs. Our communities and Creation herself are not “out there” somewhere; we’re part of them and they’re part of us. When Native people speak of “all my relations,” they’re referring to the entire living earth, including their human relatives and neighbors.

If every day is a gift from the Creator, the natural response is gratitude. I (Forrest) was blessed as a young man by knowing Jensen Jack, a Sun Dance chief. He told me, “You go to church one day a week to thank God. Me, I pray and give thanks throughout the day. I wake up, and say thank you for the gift of this day. I drink water, eat food, give thanks again. *Turgwayaq* in Ute. When I see my friends and family, I give thanks again. I live my church every day, all through the day.”

Generosity springs from connection to the Creator and one another

After the Civil War, the Uintah band of Utes from which my family is descended was forcibly moved from their ancestral lands in the rich habitat south of present-day Salt Lake City, to the high desert area where we live today. That wrenching change must have been traumatic, but they stayed deeply connected with the Creator and always took care of one another. They shared everything from food, to caring for the young and old, to providing lodging and other needs. Possessions were held in common, and if anyone had food, then everyone ate. Sharing wasn’t just something they did; it was who they were, their way of life. Faithfulness and generosity were among their most important survival skills. This isn’t just among the Utes. Anthropologist Carlos Barrios has identified generosity as the number-one shared value of Native people throughout the western hemisphere.

While family was important in my (Michael’s) upbringing, the focus was on my parents, sisters and me. We had many friends in the community, but we “minded our own business” and they minded theirs. Our relatives had moved around for their jobs and were known mainly through yearly Christmas cards. My background didn’t seem lonely or disconnected until a West African friend told me, “a cousin to you is like a brother or sister to me.” His immigrant community has a strong sense of belonging to one another, and they’re very responsive to each other’s needs. Could our church congregations become more like that? So many of us experience a sense of isolation in our daily lives and need more human connection and support.

We have what we need

Not only that, but our country as a whole has become disconnected from the earth. The dominant culture’s misguided focus on controlling the environment and extracting “natural” resources puts us in opposition to the sanctity of Creation. Though our traditional ways have been severely disrupted, my (Forrest’s) people never forgot that we belong to ecological communities. After the shock of being displaced by settlers, our ancestors learned what they needed to survive, shared generously with one another and continued to pray throughout each day. My mother taught me that abundance is not a matter of possessions, but a consequence of gratitude. “If you’re thankful for what you have,” she often said, “you’ll get more.” We may not be given everything we want, but we have what we really need.

Jesus warned us about people who “store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” (*Luke 12:21*) We can begin by focusing more on our gratitude for the blessings we’ve received than on what we think we want. We can remember to value relationships more than possessions, which will lead to more generous sharing with one another. We can expand our sense of family from “nuclear” to “extended” to “all my relations,” including all of God’s Creation. A life-giving cycle is created as gratitude leads to generosity, promoting a sense of abundance that generates still more gratitude, making the cycle self-perpetuating. Thanks be to God!

Forrest S. Cuch is an enrolled member of the Ute Indian Tribe. Raised on the Uintah and Ouray Ute Indian Reservation in northeastern Utah, he graduated from Westminster College with a B.A. in the Behavioral Sciences in 1973, and has held many challenging directorships in both tribal and state governments. The **Reverend Michael Carney** has served for the past six years at St. Elizabeth’s Episcopal Church on the Uintah and Ouray Ute Reservation. He is an active member of the Episcopal Indigenous Ministries community and coordinator for the Mountains and Deserts ministry coalition.

Forrest and Michael share more of their ideas and stories in *A Native Way of Giving*, available in paperback or as an eBook [here](#). They would also be glad to join your book study group or adult forum via Zoom, and can be contacted at stelizabethsut@gmail.com.

Resources:

- [The Joy and Gratitude Within](#) by Kathy Culmer, Vestry Papers, November 2021
- [A Personal Take on Gratitude](#) by Jeremiah Sierra, an ECF Vital Practices blog, August 10, 2015
- [Gratitude & The Pursuit of Happiness](#) by Laurel Johnston, an ECF Vital Practices blog, October 14, 2011
- [What if Everyone Practiced Gratitude Year Round?](#) by Erin Weber-Johnson, an ECF Vital Practices blog, May 6, 2014

New Life for Congregations and Clergy

By Benge Ambrogio

It’s not just about money, but money can certainly be a key ingredient.

In 2016, the Episcopal Church Foundation received a three-year grant from the Lilly Endowment to help provide “lay and clergy leaders of the Episcopal Church with resources, tools and other support to help address the financial and leadership challenges of congregational ministry in the 21st century.” Part of this program was the [Ministerial Excellence Fund](#) (MEF), which provides “grants to entrepreneurial clergy with the ability to help transform congregations but for whom personal financial challenges provide significant impediments.”

While personal financial challenges can be a factor in bringing promising clergy to congregations that will benefit from their leadership, clergy financial challenges often come from their *congregation’s* financial challenges, and it can be hard to disentangle the two. If the congregation can get some support so they don’t have to just focus on money, they can fairly compensate their clergy person, who in turn, doesn’t have to worry about their paycheck. They are both then freed up to partner for congregational care and focus on mission.

The MEF and the Diocese of New Hampshire

In 2016, The Episcopal Church of New Hampshire was honored to be chosen as a recipient of a Ministerial Excellence Fund (MEF) grant. We were granted \$25,000 annually for three years, with the diocese responsible for raising an equal amount, thus providing \$50,000 annually to support MEF clergy.

With these funds in place, we identified three promising clergy and three congregations that we knew would thrive under their leadership. Each of these congregations could not quite afford full-time clergy but had the potential to grow into it. Each wanted to call their respective clergy person, and with a grant of \$16,650 to each, they were able to do so!

We recognized very quickly the impact of these funds. One of the clergy grantees reported:

“Because of this grant, I have been able to focus fully on making God real to people and to bringing about the Kingdom of God, which could not have happened if I had to have a part-time job. It allows me the flexibility to be there for parishioners when I am needed.”

– The Rev. Tim Brooks, St. Paul’s Church, Lancaster, NH

What we also recognized was that three years was probably not going to be enough time to get the congregations to be self-supporting, and a hard cutoff in grant funding would be a difficult economic shock for them to absorb.

One grant cycle inspires a way to continue and expand the process

So, we hatched a plan. What if we could extend the grants to five years, and taper them off for the last two? Also, would it be possible to continue this program, bringing on new clergy and congregations as others rolled off? What would it take to continue this for the long term? [The plan](#) involved tapering off the grants to our first three recipients and bringing on a new clergy and congregation each year. Over time this would morph into a constant annual funding amount that we could support through our operating budget.

With the help of a second round of funding starting in 2019 through ECF’s Ministerial Excellence Fund, we were able to implement this plan as envisioned. Now that the grants have ended, we are funding this out of our operating budget. To make sure that this support is available for the long term, we have built this into our upcoming capital campaign [From Deep Roots, New Life](#). We hope to raise funds to endow what we are calling the “Ministerial Development Fund” to support promising early- and mid-career clergy and vital congregations than can thrive under their leadership.

MEF grants are making a difference

We now have seven clergy and congregations that have received or are receiving grants. In all cases, the impact has been very positive. It has breathed new life into “stuck” congregations; it has supported the planting of a new church; it has helped a university congregation re-invigorate its campus ministry.

“Help funding a full-time rector gave the vestry a new level of energy and focus. We didn’t spend our meetings stressing over the budget, but instead were able to focus on our mission and service. Eight months after calling our new rector, the congregation grew, our youth programs were revitalized, and

we completed a very successful stewardship campaign.”
– Ron Rodgers, Treasurer, St. George’s Church, Durham, NH

As I said before, it’s not just about the money. Although I’ve focused on how grant funds from outside our diocese have helped invigorate ministry in a number of our churches, we couldn’t have done it without clergy leaders who can inspire and vital congregations to work with them to build new ministry. Just giving money to congregations is not going to solve their problems. But when the right people are in the right place at the right time, grants such as the Ministerial Excellence Fund can make all the difference. Thank you, Episcopal Church Foundation, for making this possible!

Benge Ambrogi serves as the CFO for the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire. In this role, he is responsible for the financial, legal, and property operations of the Dioceses. He began service with the diocese in 2002 as a volunteer with the Mission Resources Committee and later became a part-time Missioner for Congregational Initiatives. He is also known as “the guy who rode his bike” to all of the Episcopal churches in New Hampshire in 2011 and 2012. With Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in engineering from MIT, in the secular world Benge has 30 years of experience in the defense, medical, and robotics industries.

Resources:

- [Writing Grants for Faith-Based Organizations](#), an ECF Vital Practices webinar presented by Daniel Velez Rivera, March 8, 2018
- [Three Tips for Grant Writing](#) by Linda Buskirk, an ECF Vital Practices blog, August 27, 2019
- [Who Can You Call?](#) by Chris Meyer, Vestry Papers, May 2014

Questioning Stewardship

By Miguel Escobar

In 2010, I presented a workshop on Christian stewardship practices in Hendersonville, North Carolina. This presentation took place at Nuevo Amanecer, a conference for Latino Episcopalians conducted almost entirely in Spanish. The twelve or so attendees who gathered in the conference room that day were lay and clergy leaders of Spanish-speaking congregations.

I was there to present how most mainline congregations do annual fundraising, practices undergirded by the theology of stewardship – *mayordomía* in Spanish – in which all Christians are called upon to be stewards – *mayordomos* – of all that God has given us. Just a few slides in, however, I noticed that several participants appeared both skeptical and perplexed.

Eventually one of the attendees explained to me that the Spanish word I was using for steward, *mayordomo*, had negative associations where he was from, that he would never want to be a *mayordomo*. In Bolivia, for example, *mayordomos* were the overseers who had exploited people like him and his family, the property/business manager-in-charge who employed violence to squeeze every cent they could from the blood and sweat of their workers. There were nods around the room as people recognized that ‘stewardship’ was a peculiar term to be praising, as it was so closely associated with exploitation and injustice.

Stewardship Season

As ‘stewardship season’ begins, I am conscious that for some this period is the only time Episcopal churches preach and teach about money. Yet experiences like the above – as well as further explorations into who stewards were in the Gospels – have led me to question stewardship as a way of describing faithful relationship to God’s abundance.

Indeed, those who promote stewardship must wrestle with the fact that stewards are frequently presented as morally dubious characters in the Gospels. In several stories, stewards are the foils to Jesus’s scandalous generosity, and they are closely linked with dominion, exploitation and injustice. It is a steward, for instance, who at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12) critiques Jesus for saving the good wine for last. At the outset of the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-13), a good and faithful steward is exploiting his master’s land and people.

While the steward counts beans, Jesus transforms water into wine. While a steward exploits the land and people, Jesus praises the one who remits the debts of the poor.

I therefore wrestle with the doctrine of stewardship. This wrestling came to a head during the COVID-19 pandemic as I watched how church and society addressed disease, a new wave of global poverty and the increasing inequalities between rich and poor. This ultimately spurred me to reflect and write on what Jesus had to say about wealth, poverty and stewardship. And in the end, I found hope in Jesus’s parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-13).

A Biblical Critique

The parable of the unjust steward takes place on a vast agricultural estate, one in which a landowner and his property/business manager, the steward, had pressed workers into forms of debt bondage. Biblical scholars have noted that the steward here was likely a “first slave,” or a man who had been freed from slavery for the purpose of serving as manager and overseer of the other slaves, day laborers and tenant farmers who worked the land.^[1]

One day, the rich landowner suspects the steward of squandering his wealth. Before any proof or defense can be made, the landowner fires the steward, at which point the steward panics and comes up with a plan for survival after news of his dismissal becomes widely known.

His plan for survival is a curious one. Whereas previously the steward had extracted wealth from those he had overseen, the steward now begins to send his master’s wealth flowing in reverse. He does this by using that wealth to remit the debts of the slaves, day laborers and tenant farmers who were indebted to the master. Biblical scholars have noted that these debts were so large that they were likely the debts of entire villages.^[2] The steward does this in the hope of being welcomed into these laborers’ homes after he has been dismissed from his role.

Surprisingly, the steward’s decision to use the landowner’s wealth to remit debts ends up being praised by both the master and Jesus. Jesus concludes this parable by appearing to praise fiscal immorality in a line that has perplexed interpreters for millennia: “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into their homes” (Luke 16.9). Jesus then states that like the steward, everyone must choose their master in life: “No slave can serve two

masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Luke 16.13).

Who then are stewards, and what is stewardship?

At the outset of this parable, the steward’s actions are highly exploitative and unjust. The faithful steward extracts wealth from the land and its workers so as to maximize returns and profit. Yet the steward only gains safety and salvation when he begins to send the money in reverse, to alleviate debts, in an act of economic jubilee. In essence, the faithful steward finds salvation in an act of anti-stewardship.

A Theological Critique

All of this may seem like quibbles over vocabulary, yet how Christians talk about money is one of the most relevant issues today. And I am hardly alone in questioning stewardship as a good framework for doing so.

Writing in the 1930s, the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr criticized mainline Christianity’s idolization of stewards and stewardship. In “Is Stewardship Ethical?”, a short article he wrote for the *Christian Century* in 1930, Niebuhr traced the origins of stewardship to the influence of business leaders and wealth managers in mainline Protestantism during the industrial buildup between the two World Wars. [3] He describes stewardship as a naïve framework that allows the church to avoid asking the harder questions about its sources of wealth, including the unjust means by which such wealth was made.

Niebuhr gives the example of “the pious business man” who is both honest and generous, two virtues which “give him the satisfaction of being a Christian.” [4] Yet this pious businessman “regards his power in his factory much as kings of old regarded their prerogatives.” “Any attempt on the part of the workers to gain a share in the determining of policy, particularly the policy which affects their own livelihood, hours and wages, is regarded by him as an attempt to destroy the divine order of things.” [5] The doctrine of stewardship does not help this businessman see his broader moral obligations but only serves to “sanctify power and privilege as it exists in the modern world by certain concessions to the ethical principal.” [6]

Niebuhr’s critique resonates with what I’ve observed in the last fifteen years of working for the Episcopal Church, which is ‘stewardship’ being used to justify ongoing exploitation. I’ve now personally observed multiple instances in which ‘sound stewardship’ became the rationale for church organizations *not divesting* their endowments from fossil fuels. In these conversations, being faithful stewards of the organization’s assets meant first and foremost maximizing returns, never mind the exploitation of the earth and the poor.

Niebuhr concludes his article by insisting that stewardship is an inadequate framework for how the church talks and thinks about money. “There is not one church in a thousand where the moral problems of our industrial civilization are discussed with sufficient realism from the pulpit to prompt the owner to think of his stewardship in terms of these legitimate rights of the workers.” [7] Niebuhr challenges the church to find a better approach for thinking about God’s abundance, one that not only asks critical questions about sources of wealth but also recognizes “how necessary and ultimately ethical are the restraints of an ethical society upon man’s will to power and his lust for gain.” [8]

Therefore, I question stewardship as a sound way of describing how Christians should relate to God's abundance. Frankly, I don't see much in Jesus's life or in the Gospels inviting us to be shrewd wealth managers. What I do see are repeated invitations to join in what the late Episcopal LGBTQ+ advocate Louie Crew once described as Jesus's "promiscuous generosity" – a form of generosity so open that it scandalized not only stewards, but onlookers and disciples alike.

Therefore, as stewardship season begins, I hope faith leaders will recall the remarkable truth of the parable of the unjust steward. In the end, the steward gains new life by releasing his master's ill-begotten wealth for the remittance of debts; he gains refuge by serving those he'd formerly exploited. In other words, this 'first slave' chooses which master to serve -- and I believe the Church must do the same. On stewardship, Jesus concludes this parable: "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Luke 16.13).

Miguel Escobar is the author of [The Unjust Steward: Wealth, Poverty, and the Church Today](#), a book that explores how wealth and poverty, inequality and economic justice are treated in the biblical and early church theological tradition. He serves as executive director of Episcopal Divinity School at Union and writes and leads workshops and conversations on Christianity's complex and contradictory relationship to money.

[1] Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2003, Second Edition), 292.

[2] Malina and Rohrbaugh, Social Science Commentary, 292

[3] King, David. "Beyond Abundance: Is Stewardship Ethical?" Word & World Volume 38, Number 3 Summer 2018.

[4] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?," Christian Century 47 (April 30, 1930): 555

[5] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?," Christian Century 47 (April 30, 1930): 555

[6] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?," Christian Century 47 (April 30, 1930): 555

[7] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?," Christian Century 47 (April 30, 1930): 556

[8] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?," Christian Century 47 (April 30, 1930): 557

Resources:

- [Let Earth be Heaven](#) by Rachel Taber-Hamilton, Vestry Papers, March 2022
- [A Native Sense of Stewardship](#) by Forrest Cuch and Michael Carney, Vestry Papers, September 2020
- [Good morning, Steward!](#) by Lisa G. Fischbeck, an ECF Vital Practices blog, September 25, 2020
- [Bring Me a Morsel](#) by Lisa Meeder Turnbull, an ECF Vital Practices blog, November 16, 2012

Questionando la mayordomía

Por Miguel Escobar

En 2010, presenté un taller sobre prácticas de mayordomía cristiana en Hendersonville, Carolina del Norte. Esta presentación tuvo lugar en Nuevo Amanecer, una conferencia para episcopales latinos realizada casi en su totalidad en español. Los aproximadamente doce asistentes que se reunieron en la sala de conferencias ese día eran líderes laicos y del clero de feligresías de habla hispana.

Estaba allí para presentar la forma en que la mayoría de las feligresías tradicionales realizan la recaudación anual de fondos, prácticas sustentadas en la teología de la mayordomía, en la que todos los

cristianos están llamados a ser mayordomos de todo lo que Dios nos ha dado. Sin embargo, a las pocas diapositivas me di cuenta de que varios participantes parecían escépticos y perplejos.

Finalmente, uno de los asistentes me explicó que la palabra española que yo utilizaba para mayordomo (en inglés steward) tenía asociaciones negativas en su lugar de origen y que él nunca querría ser mayordomo. En Bolivia, por ejemplo, los mayordomos eran los capataces que habían explotado a gente como él y su familia, el administrador de la propiedad/empresa que empleaba la violencia para exprimir cada céntimo que podía de la sangre y el sudor de sus trabajadores. Hubo asentimientos en la sala cuando la gente reconoció que "mayordomía" era un término peculiar para admirar, ya que estaba tan estrechamente asociado con la explotación y la injusticia.

La temporada de la mayordomía

Al comenzar la "temporada de la mayordomía", soy consciente de que para algunos este período es el único momento en que las iglesias episcopales predicán y enseñan sobre el dinero. Sin embargo, experiencias como las anteriores -así como nuevas exploraciones sobre quiénes eran los mayordomos en los Evangelios- me han llevado a cuestionar la mayordomía como forma de describir la relación fiel con la abundancia de Dios.

En efecto, quienes promueven la mayordomía deben luchar con el hecho de que los mayordomos son presentados frecuentemente como personajes moralmente sospechosos en los Evangelios. En varios relatos, los mayordomos son lo contrario de la escandalosa generosidad de Jesús y están estrechamente relacionados con el dominio, la explotación y la injusticia. Es un mayordomo, por ejemplo, quien en las bodas de Caná (Juan 2:1-12) critica a Jesús por guardar el vino bueno para el final. Al principio de la parábola del mayordomo injusto (Lucas 16:1-13), un mayordomo bueno y fiel se está aprovechando de la tierra y de la gente de su amo.

Mientras que el mayordomo cuenta habas, Jesús transforma el agua en vino. Mientras que un mayordomo se aprovecha de la tierra y de la gente, Jesús alaba al que cancela las deudas de los pobres.

Por lo tanto, lucho con la doctrina de la mayordomía. Esta lucha llegó a su punto álgido durante la pandemia de la COVID-19, cuando observé cómo la iglesia y la sociedad abordaban la enfermedad, una nueva ola de pobreza mundial y las crecientes desigualdades entre ricos y pobres. Esto me impulsó finalmente a reflexionar y escribir sobre lo que Jesús tenía que decir sobre la riqueza, la pobreza y la mayordomía. Y al final, encontré esperanza en la parábola de Jesús sobre el mayordomo injusto (Lucas 16:1-13).

Una crítica bíblica

La parábola del mayordomo injusto ocurre en una vasta finca agrícola, en la que un terrateniente y su administrador de la propiedad/empresa, el mayordomo, habían sometido a los trabajadores a formas de servidumbre por deudas. Los eruditos bíblicos han señalado que el mayordomo aquí era probablemente un "primer esclavo", o un hombre que había sido liberado de la esclavitud con el propósito de servir como capataz y supervisor de los otros esclavos, jornaleros y agricultores arrendatarios que trabajaban la tierra.

Un día, el rico terrateniente sospecha que el mayordomo ha dilapidado su riqueza. Antes de que se pueda presentar ninguna prueba o defensa, el terrateniente despidió al mayordomo, momento en el que

éste entra en pánico y elabora un plan de supervivencia después de que la noticia de su despido sea ampliamente conocida.

Su plan de supervivencia es curioso. Mientras que antes el mayordomo había extraído riqueza de aquellos a los que había supervisado, el mayordomo comienza ahora a hacer fluir la riqueza de su amo a la inversa. Lo hace utilizando esa riqueza para cancelar las deudas de los esclavos, jornaleros y agricultores arrendatarios que estaban en deuda con el amo. Los eruditos bíblicos han señalado que estas deudas eran tan grandes que probablemente eran las deudas de pueblos enteros. El mayordomo hace esto con la esperanza de ser acogido en las casas de estos jornaleros después de haber sido despedido de su función.

Sorprendentemente, la decisión del mayordomo de utilizar la riqueza del terrateniente para cancelar las deudas acaba siendo alabada tanto por el amo como por Jesús. Jesús concluye esta parábola pareciendo elogiar la inmoralidad fiscal en una línea que ha dejado perplejos a los intérpretes durante milenios: «Les aconsejo que usen las falsas riquezas de este mundo para ganarse amigos, para que cuando las riquezas se acaben, haya quien los reciba a ustedes en las viviendas eternas.» (Lucas 16:9). A continuación, Jesús afirma que, al igual que el mayordomo, todo el mundo debe elegir a su amo en la vida: «Ningún sirviente puede servir a dos amos; porque odiará a uno y querrá al otro, o será fiel a uno y despreciará al otro. No se puede servir a Dios y a las riquezas.» (Lucas 16:13).

¿Quiénes son entonces los mayordomos y qué es la mayordomía?

Al principio de esta parábola, las acciones del mayordomo son muy explotadoras e injustas. El mayordomo fiel extrae la riqueza de la tierra y de sus trabajadores para maximizar los rendimientos y los beneficios. Sin embargo, el mayordomo solo obtiene seguridad y salvación cuando comienza a enviar el dinero a la inversa, para aliviar las deudas, en un acto de jubileo económico. En esencia, el mayordomo fiel encuentra la salvación en un acto de antimayordomía.

Una crítica teológica

Todo esto puede parecer un juego de palabras, pero la forma en que los cristianos hablamos del dinero es una de las cuestiones más relevantes de hoy en día. Y no soy el único que cuestiona la mayordomía como un buen marco para hacerlo.

Al escribir en la década de 1930, el teólogo estadounidense Reinhold Niebuhr criticó la idolatría del cristianismo tradicional hacia los mayordomos y la mayordomía. En "¿Es ética la mayordomía?", un breve artículo que escribió para el *Christian Century* en 1930, Niebuhr rastreó los orígenes de la mayordomía hasta la influencia de los líderes empresariales y los gestores de la riqueza en el protestantismo clásico durante la acumulación industrial entre las dos guerras mundiales. Describe la mayordomía como un marco ingenuo que permite a la iglesia evitar plantear las preguntas más difíciles sobre sus fuentes de riqueza, incluidos los medios injustos con los que se hizo dicha riqueza.

Niebuhr da el ejemplo del "hombre de negocios piadoso" que es honesto y generoso, dos virtudes que "le dan la satisfacción de ser cristiano"⁴. Sin embargo, este piadoso hombre de negocios "considera su poder en su fábrica como los reyes de antaño consideraban sus prerrogativas". "Cualquier intento por parte de los trabajadores de obtener una participación en la determinación de la política, en particular la que afecta a su propio sustento, horas y salarios, es considerado por él como un intento de destruir el orden divino de las cosas". La doctrina de la mayordomía no ayuda a este empresario a ver sus

obligaciones morales más amplias, sino que solo sirve para "santificar el poder y el privilegio tal como existen en el mundo moderno mediante ciertas concesiones al principio ético".⁵

La crítica de Niebuhr resuena con lo que he observado en los últimos quince años de trabajo para la Iglesia Episcopal, que es la "mayordomía" utilizada para justificar la explotación continua. Ahora he observado personalmente múltiples casos en los que la "sana mayordomía" se convirtió en la justificación para que las organizaciones eclesiásticas *no desprendieran* sus legados de los combustibles fósiles. En estas conversaciones, ser fieles mayordomos de los activos de la organización significaba ante todo maximizar los rendimientos, sin importar la explotación de la tierra y de los pobres.

Niebuhr concluye su artículo insistiendo en que la mayordomía es un marco inadecuado para la forma en que la iglesia habla y piensa sobre el dinero. "No hay una iglesia entre mil en la que los problemas morales de nuestra civilización industrial se discutan con suficiente realismo desde el púlpito como para impulsar al propietario a pensar en su mayordomía en términos de estos derechos legítimos de los trabajadores". Niebuhr desafía a la iglesia a encontrar un enfoque mejor para pensar en la abundancia de Dios, uno que no solo plantee preguntas críticas sobre las fuentes de riqueza, sino que también reconozca "cuán necesarias y, en última instancia, éticas son las restricciones de una sociedad ética sobre la voluntad de poder del hombre y su ansia de lucro".

Por lo tanto, cuestiono la mayordomía como una forma sólida de describir cómo deben relacionarse los cristianos con la abundancia de Dios. Francamente, no veo mucho en la vida de Jesús o en los Evangelios que nos invite a ser astutos administradores de la riqueza. Lo que sí veo son repetidas invitaciones a unirnos a lo que el difunto defensor episcopal de la comunidad LGBTQ+, Louie Crew, describió una vez como la "generosidad promiscua" de Jesús, una forma de generosidad tan abierta que escandalizaba no solo a los mayordomos, sino también a los espectadores y a los discípulos.

Por lo tanto, al comenzar la temporada de mayordomía, espero que los líderes religiosos recuerden la notable verdad de la parábola del mayordomo injusto. Al final, el mayordomo gana una nueva vida al liberar la riqueza mal habida de su amo para el pago de las deudas; gana refugio al servir a los que antes había explotado. En otras palabras, este "primer esclavo" elige a qué amo servir, y creo que la Iglesia debe hacer lo mismo. Sobre la mayordomía, Jesús concluye esta parábola: "No se puede servir a Dios y a las riquezas" (Lucas 16.13).

Miguel Escobar es el autor de *The Unjust Steward: Wealth, Poverty, and the Church Today* (El mayordomo injusto: La riqueza, la pobreza y la Iglesia hoy), un libro que explora el tratamiento de la riqueza y la pobreza, la desigualdad y la justicia económica en la tradición bíblica y teológica de la Iglesia primitiva. Es director ejecutivo de la Escuela Episcopal de Teología en Union y escribe y dirige talleres y conversaciones sobre la compleja y contradictoria relación del cristianismo con el dinero.

Recursos:

- [Una Nueva Manera de Encarar la Mayordomía](#) por Greg Syler, Vestry Papers, septiembre de 2012
- [La Mayordomía Cristiana en la Comunidad Hispana](#) por Joel Almonó, Vestry Papers, mayo de 2007
- [Creación de mayordomía durante todo el año con intercambios sagrados](#) por Bill Cruse, Vestry Papers, septiembre de 2020