

POST-PANDEMIC STEWARDS

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This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards [oikonomos] of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1).

DEFINING STEWARDSHIP [oikonomos]

This word rendered, “stewards,” is a word from which the English word **economy** is derived. In fact, when we speak of “stewardship,” we are often speaking of personal money management in relationship to Christian **giving** and **living**.

The steward was the master’s deputy in regulating the family's concerns, providing food for the household, and seeing it served out at the proper **times** and **seasons** and in appropriate **quantities**.

He received all the cash, expended what was necessary for the support of the family, and kept exact accounts, which he was obliged at certain times to lay before the master.

In relation to his lord, the steward was a **slave**. However, he was a **master** over the other slaves in the house and **overseer** of the rest (Luke 12:45, 16:1; Mathew 20:8). Stewards were entrusted with the power to purchase and dispose of goods for the family at their own pleasure.

In the absence of his lord, the steward exercises **agency**, even decision-making, for the most extreme of situations. For example, Abraham’s steward, Eliezer of Damascus (Genesis 15:1-2) was charged with selecting a **wife** for Isaac (Genesis 24:1-4).

DEMONSTRATING STEWARDSHIP

As we strive to move the church forward, the Christian leader must exercise administrative oversight in specific ways. To do this, let us consider three persistent questions posed by Rebekah Simon-Peter in her book *Forging a New Path: Moving the Church Forward in a Post-Pandemic World* –

Question #1 – When do things go back to normal?

As people journey back to whatever their pre-pandemic normal was, let us begin with bad news. **Normal** doesn’t exist anymore. 2019 doesn’t exist anymore and if we’re honest, it wasn’t working anyway.

And, even if churches could go back to normal, the rest of the world around us wouldn’t be joining us anyway. That’s because lives have changed. People have picked up new habits and established new patterns of living that are going to make it impossible for you to re-create the way things were.

More than 3.4 million people die in America every year. COVID killed an extra 1.2 million over three years. Beyond the death rate, when you factor in those that relocated, changed membership (away from your church) or withdrew from the faith altogether (11.7 million per year), the numbers are not in your favor.

The Barna Group estimates that in-person church attendance is roughly **30 to 50** percent lower than it was before the pandemic. And the net result is that many of us must rebuild with a completely different set of personalities, gifts, and budgets.

I understand how badly you want to go back to the way things were, but there is no going back. The transmission of heaven doesn't have a reverse and the circumstances before you are a sure sign that you shouldn't either. The normal way of doing church had actually become a verified model for decline.

2019 is not **Lazarus** and you're not **Jesus, Jr.** You can't just pull out your calendar and put the same stuff back on it and you cannot pull out your budget and drop the same line items back on it. The church needs a new economy for our witness, service, and worship. We need good stewards!

Question #2 – How do we get people back to church?

A recent study shows that more than one-third of worship services have decreased by 25 percent or more during 2019-2021. And the sad fact is, many of us are facing a wilderness of empty pews every Sunday.

Imagine walking into a sanctuary that seats 400 people and seeing 50 assembled. That is a very real probability. And it doesn't matter how many people Facebook tells you are watching on Sundays, it's discouraging to the people sitting in the room, including you, to walk into an empty building every week.

So how do we get people back to church – or even get them there for the first time? This is the second question on most people's minds because worshipping together is the heart of the church.

Let's first acknowledge that this is not a new question. We've been wrestling with this since long before we knew what COVID was. But this question begins with the assumption that what we were doing before the pandemic was sufficient and it was not.

The lives of the people sitting at home (whether members or unsaved) and ours will be enriched if we can get people back into the same room. It is difficult to plan ministry around **absent** people.

Here is another sad truth, you wouldn't have to figure out how to get people back into the church if they never left in the first place. Many studies have demonstrated that religious affiliation has waned in the decades since the Third Great Awakening of the 1950s.

Church attendance has dropped year by year since 1960, with the most dramatic declines in the last ten years. While church attendance regularly fluctuates based on societal changes, studies indicate that beginning in 2000, the decline was twice as great as it was between 1960 and 1970, marking the current period as the Great Decline.

Research shows the top four reasons people leave the church are as follows:

- A change in life situation (e.g., they move out of town, divorce, encounter health problems, or sadly die. These changes in circumstance are part of the ebb and flow of life).
- The church changes for the better (e.g., change locations, staffing changes, adjust worship times, stop/start programs, etc., not everyone wants to be part of the change).
- The church changes for the worse (e.g., the church no longer feels like community to them).
- Growth of the spiritual but not religious movement (e.g., beliefs change, they no longer find answers to their questions there – the church no longer engages them spiritually).

Here is a reality – people are not going to spontaneously come to knock your door down begging to build community there. You must find a way to change the economy of **evangelism** and **discipleship** find new fish and better keep the fish we've already caught!

Question #3 – How do we do more with less?

This question worried many churches even before the pandemic. In other words, churches already operating from a model of decline were struggling. And the shutdowns exacerbated their sense of lack in three areas: togetherness, resources, and the experience necessary to weather dramatic change.

As church closures and social distancing forced people to find new ways to connect and locate the sense of community that Christians naturally crave – they found new ways to connect and located community in other places. The lack of togetherness drove people away. We're still trying to figure out where they went.

Even when people are present, there is a lingering sense of absence. If you had been starting from scratch, twenty-five souls in worship might feel like a win. But if you had fifty souls in worship before the shutdowns, twenty-five souls in worship are a whole different story. Missing half your people is a shocking loss.

When contributions decrease, so does our ability to impact the community for good. Faithful tithers pass away, attendance decreases, and the offering plate takes a hit.

Without enough money, missions, ministry, and the process of disciple-making get decreased or eliminated for the sake of payroll, keeping the lights on, and maintaining the building.

Most Pioneers and Boomers operate in **subscriber** mode. Just as they pay for the newspaper whether they read every issue or not, they tithe to the church whether they attend each week or not. Their giving comes from a sense of duty, ownership, loyalty to God and the institution, as well as commitment to the community.

Younger generations, however, are more likely to give according to the **pay-per-view** mode. They give when they're in church and don't give when they're not. Since the notion of "regular" church attendance has dropped from weekly to monthly or every other month, this too creates a sense of lack.

Collecting less money signals that a church may be less engaged in active mission and ministry. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research conducted a broad study on how churches fared during 2021, the second year of the pandemic. They surveyed 2,074 churches spanning 38 denominations, and a mere 15% of regular adult attendees volunteered in the second year of the pandemic.

According to another study by *Faith Communities Today*, that's less than half the number of people who volunteered pre-pandemic. *Faith Communities Today* reported that 40% of attendees could be counted on to volunteer pre-pandemic. Dropping from a 40 to 15 percent volunteer rate is a significant slide.

As the church's administrators, you must find creative ways to change the economy of **giving** and **mission** to carry out the work of the ministry!

You, not the board, not the deacons, and not the saints, are the Lord's deputy in regulating the family's concerns. You are responsible for providing what the family needs and ensuring that it is served out at the proper **times** and **seasons** and in appropriate **quantities**.

You can use others to help roll out the plan, but you must find a way to feed the family. And they need the right food, at the right time, and during the right seasons, in the appropriate quantities. They won't **grow** without it, and they won't **go** without it.