

## TEACHING STATEMENT

### ON FAITHFUL STEWARDSHIP & REDIRECTION OF CONGREGATIONAL BENEVOLENCE

Rev. Steven King, Education Director – WordAlone Network, October 2009

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*The Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and prudent steward whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions.”*

*(Luke 12:42-44)*

#### On the Nature of Faithful Stewardship

The biblical word “steward” refers to someone who takes care of something that belongs to another. As the people of God, our Christian stewardship acknowledges the fact that everything we have comes from God. God has entrusted to us what belongs to Him, and he wants us to use it in a way that serves His will and work in the world.

Jesus described what this is like in his parable from Matthew 25:

*It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. (vv. 14-15)*

Like the master in the parable, God expects us to use the resources He has given us to do His business as the Church. The wise steward is the one who takes seriously this task, always asking the question: “When I use God’s money and give of what has been given to me — am I being obedient to God? Am I doing His work and serving His mission, according to His Word?”

We’ve all heard the old saying: “Put your money where your mouth is.” It is a way of expressing the need for our actions to match our professed beliefs — especially in terms of the things we invest in.

In our case as Christians, this faithfulness might best be expressed as “Putting our money where **God’s** mouth is” — that is, investing the resources we have been entrusted with, according to God’s own Word and command. Jesus tells us that the faithful and prudent stewards are the ones who do God’s work with what God has entrusted to us — both as individuals and as congregations.

#### Redirection, Not “Withholding”

Our obligation to give to the mission of God — both as individuals and as congregations — is not an option for people of faith. We are commanded by God to share what has been entrusted to us.

This has been true since the days Israel worshipped in a tent in the wilderness:

*The choicest of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God. (Exodus 23:19)*

— just as it was true for the first Christians:

*Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:7-8)*

The question for faithful stewards is not **whether** we are required to give, but **to what** we will give. God does not allow us to “withhold” offerings, but God *does* expect us to direct our offerings to what faithfully serves His mission in the world.

#### Making Sound Stewardship Decisions

Given the changes that are taking place in the broader Church at this time — as Christian denominations depart from the historic faith and the clear teaching of Scripture — faithful Christians cannot take for granted that denominational institutions are using their benevolence dollars in a manner that truly serves the mission of Christ. As faithful stewards, we are called not simply to be the supporters of a human institution; we are accountable to God.

In their budget planning, it is important for congregations and church councils to be mindful of this calling. If we are to be faithful stewards of the resources God has given us, we must pay special attention to the ministries that we support with our benevolence dollars (i.e., the money we use in support of ministries outside the walls of our own congregation). We need to make sure that our investment of God’s resources go to support faithful ministries that actually serve the mission of God.

## Real Service to the Neighbor

As Christians, we are called to love and serve our neighbors. In many places Scripture tells us that we must serve those in need rather than supporting institutions for the sake of the institutions themselves.

For example, God speaks through the prophet Amos, announcing His judgment upon ones who have built up their own houses at the expense of the needy. Because of a lack of faithfulness on the part of Israel's leaders — specifically, their willful rejection of God's Word — God himself promised that he would redirect His blessings to others:

*They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. (Amos 5:10-11)*

Jesus himself often criticized those who propped up their own position and privilege at the expense of the neighbor and of serving real people in need:

*Jesus said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." (Mark 12:38-40)*

Jesus never advocated the "withholding" of offerings to the temple, but he did remind his disciples that there are many other urgent and pressing needs for their help and assistance.

*Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. (Jeremiah 23:2-4)*

## Institutions or Mission?

In recent years, it has become popular among church leaders to use the term "Mission Support" to refer to funding of the denominational institution as a whole, when only a small part of this money goes to the actual mission of the church, as defined by Christ's own Great Commission:

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20)*

Admittedly, there are many worthy things that are done by church bodies in service of the neighbor — hunger and disaster relief, evangelism and education — just to name a few. However, denominational bodies do not hold the monopoly on such ministries.

There have always been many faithful para-church ministries and independent organizations that serve these same functions — often more effectively and with less "overhead" than denominational offices.

## What Can We Do?

At this critical time in the history of the Church, it is important for Christians to consider whether their continued financial support of a denomination is faithful when that institution has officially made key aspects of Christian faith optional. There are many ways offerings might be used more faithfully:

- Local congregations can consider redirecting benevolence gifts away from the national denomination and perhaps also their local synod. Some synods already have the option of giving to the synod only, others are creating that option in the wake of the churchwide assembly.
- If a congregation is not willing to re-direct all or part of its benevolence, the local church council can create an option for individual members to do so with their own offerings by designated giving.
- Congregations and individuals can give their benevolence directly to many of the countless independent, faithful ministries that have had a long association with the Lutheran church.

Please refer to the websites of the WordAlone Network ([www.wordalone.org](http://www.wordalone.org)) and Lutheran CORE ([www.lutherancore.org](http://www.lutherancore.org)) for recommendations on ministries that faithfully serve the mission of Christ.