



Should pastors **know** what church members give?

by Ben Stroup

THERE IS NO QUICKER WAY to polarize a group of pastors than to introduce the subject of money, particularly whether or not senior pastors should know what members give. While money is discussed more in the New Testament than almost any other subject, it is one in which pastors are acutely sensitive.

Let me save you the suspense. My answer is a resounding "yes!" Knowing what your members give is essential and vital to performing the pastoral (practical) and

priestly (spiritual) functions asked of one who occupies this sacred office.

There definitely is a strained relationship between ministry and money in American Christianity. Some might call it a love-hate orientation. Money has been the bane of so many in such public positions; yet, even the small church pastor recognizes that without the ability to fund the work and ministry of the church the organization itself is paralyzed in its ability to accomplish the vision that God has given the church leader.

As more churches and pastors are embracing the generosity movement, this age-old debate is rising to the surface again: should pastors know what their members give? I want to take a few sentences to unpack "debate" and "age-old" because I believe they are key to understanding how we form our practices and opinions on the subject.

I use the word "debate" because this issue is certainly not settled. That does not mean I should not take a position on the subject, nor am I suggesting that you shouldn't either. There are many churches who are experiencing tremendous finan-

cial health when it comes to giving who are led by pastors on both sides of the issue. I feel the word debate appropriately describes this conversation and suggests there is room for both sides to learn from each other.

I use the word “age-old” because I believe in what Dan Pallotta writes about in his book *Uncharitable* (Tufts, 2008) when he suggests the Puritan influence upon American Christianity has been significant with respect to charity. One of the lingering effects is related to the subject of money. I still remember learning early on that it was inappropriate to ask someone how much they earned in a year or how much they paid for something. Money was not a subject to be celebrated but kept secret; it was a private, family matter.

Furthermore, money and charity have historically been subjects that were responsibilities of the Christian and faithful churchgoer but were certainly not information pastors needed access to in order to perform their duties. And the pastor, of all people, was to be the least concerned with money. Knowing what someone gave financially would surely taint his or her ability to minister without showing favoritism.

These combined assumptions contribute to the context into which many people reside when they enter into a conversation about ministry and money. The rub lies in the fact that no matter how much a pastor wants to ignore the subject of money, it is a haunting reality that lingers in the corners of institutional ministry. The good news is that ministry and money are not mutually exclusive. They are, rather, deeply connected to one another. There is much to be gained in arriving at a healthy and balanced understanding of the connectedness of ministry and money.

If it is, in fact, important for the pastor to know what members give, then why do so many pastors think or feel differently? After having this same conversation with pastors across the country, I have discovered there are four main reasons why

some feel so strongly about not knowing what church members give:

1. Personal finances. Some pastors are financial wrecks. They are unable to give themselves, and they do not dare broach the subject of giving in the pulpit knowing that someone in the congregation knows they, themselves, are not giving a dime. Unfortunately, this is a more common reality than it should be.

2. Perceived paranoia. Citing a few, very public misuses of money within the context of ministry, some pastors believe that dealing with money, especially church member giving, will earn them the reputation of only being concerned with money. Furthermore, what would they do with the information once they had it? Without a clear plan for use, it is easy to reason away the need to know.

3. Pastoral purity. Some pastors believe that knowing what people give will leave them tainted and unable to perform their duties impartially. They fear being perceived as “that kind of pastor,” that is one who seeks to give special attention and particular positions of authority to those who give the most.

4. Professional gaps in training. There is little training for the pastor related to the subject of money and ministry outside of a few administrative classes in seminary that focus more on expense management rather than ministry funding. It is natural for pastors (or anyone) to shy away from a subject matter that is uncomfortable and instead focus on more traditional disciplines that are part of their core training such as preaching and counseling.

Now that we understand some of the most common reasons why some pastors refuse to know what their members give, it might be helpful to understand why it is important to know what church members give. What could a pastor possibly gain from knowing this information?



Summary

- There is no quicker way to polarize a group of pastors than to introduce the subject of money, particularly whether or not senior pastors should know what members give.
- Even the small church pastor recognizes that without the ability to fund the work and ministry of the church the organization itself is paralyzed in its ability to accomplish the vision that God has given the church leader.
- There are several factors which cause many pastors to think knowing what members give is not important:
 1. Their own personal finances.
 2. Their perceived paranoia.
 3. Pastoral purity.
 4. Professional gaps in training.
- Knowing what people give could be valuable:
 1. Reveals key influencers.
 2. Justifies positions of leadership.
 3. Uncovers potentially missed ministry opportunities.
 4. Indicates spiritual growth.
- Knowing the giving habits of your membership is essential to funding your ministry fully and moving your congregation from a place where money is a possession to a place where money is a resource to be invested in the Kingdom.

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- **Reveals key influencers.** People who give financially are the ones who have “skin” in the game and have a vested interest in seeing the organization be successful. Pastors absorb a lot of feedback. They need to know whom to listen to and who is just a noisemaker.
- **Justifies positions of leadership.** People who do not give to your church should not occupy leadership roles or have decision-making authority. Period! This includes staff. If people are not giving, then they have not fully committed to your congregation. Giving is an outward sign of an inward commitment.
- **Uncovers potentially missed ministry opportunities.** Before people leave churches, they often stop or slow their giving patterns. If you discover that someone’s giving habits alter significantly, it may be a ministry opportunity in disguise. Perhaps someone has been overlooked or for some reason is sideways with the pastor or organization. What a great opportunity to address a personal, spiritual issue that may have gone unnoticed until it was too late.

There is much to be gained in arriving at a healthy and balanced understanding of the connectedness of ministry and money.

- **Indicates spiritual growth.** The pastor’s responsibility is to facilitate spiritually transformative experiences whereby church members can encounter the living God and be changed forever. A giving problem is first a spiritual issue and second, a financial one. Giving is a key part of spiritual growth, but you cannot manage what you do not measure. Too, noticing an increase in giving may offer the chance to celebrate God’s work in a member’s life.

There is one additional benefit that is experienced when pastors know what their members give. It is not a direct benefit to the pastors, but provides the church member with something essential to consistent practice of biblical stewardship and generosity. If members know that no one but the church treasurer, business administrator, or outsourced accounting firm knows what they give, then it becomes easy to explain away inconsis-

tent giving habits. Who will know if they miss a week or two of giving, decrease their giving for a period of time, or stop giving completely?

The risk a pastor runs when he or she explicitly states that no one knows what any member gives, is the removal of a sense of accountability that comes with the knowledge that someone does know what an individual gives. It would be like a professor allowing the student to grade his own paper, or the doctor allowing a patient to weigh herself. Even if the pastor never has a direct, personal conversation with the member about his or her giving habits, the fact that the member knows he or she is looking (or might be looking) is enough to encourage some to be consistent and faithful.

Overcoming the stigma of money within ministry is an obstacle that this article will not resolve; however, it is one worth revisiting and wrestling with often. Those church leaders who do will find that money is simply an external, measurable reflection of what someone really believes. Knowing the giving habits of your membership is essential to funding your ministry fully and moving your congregation along the spiritual continuum from a place where money is a possession to be protected to a place where money is a resource divinely given to be invested in the Kingdom.

The greatest tragedy is that a pastor will let his or her personal inhibitions on the subject prevent a central concept and biblical discipline from being championed in and out of the pulpit. We must never allow culture to define the practice of ministry, even when it deals with such a controversial subject as money. 

What to do with the James argument

The most common Bible verse quoted related to pastors abstaining from knowing what church members give is James 2:9, “*If you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors*” (HCSB).

There are three questions pastors should ask themselves when holding to this verse as biblical justification for not knowing what church members give:

1. Are you concerned about practicing favoritism or fearful that you might not like what you find out about specific church members whom you trust and who hold key leadership positions?
2. Just as much as it is favoritism to ignore the poor and give one’s undivided attention to the rich, is it not favoritism to show greater preference for the person at the bottom end of the earning scale while completely ignoring those whom God has blessed financially?
3. If people can come to faith in Christ through Bible reading, prayer, mission trips, then why can someone not find salvation or a renewed faith in Christ when challenged to practice Biblical stewardship and generosity? If such is possible, then should we favor subjects that may be easier to discuss only to avoid subjects that may be more difficult to navigate?