

## Pastor's leadership in tithing has paid dividends

When St. Paul Lutheran, York, interviewed the Rev. Stan Reep as a potential pastor, they asked how he'd advise the church to use its \$3.6 million of inherited wealth. He said the first step is to tithe it—give away 10 percent.

"And everybody looked at me like I had three heads," said Reep, who explained that he and his wife, Emily, believed strongly in tithing and practiced it faithfully. "I said, well, it's the same theology. If you want the congregation to do this, if you want the members to do this, you have to lead by doing it."

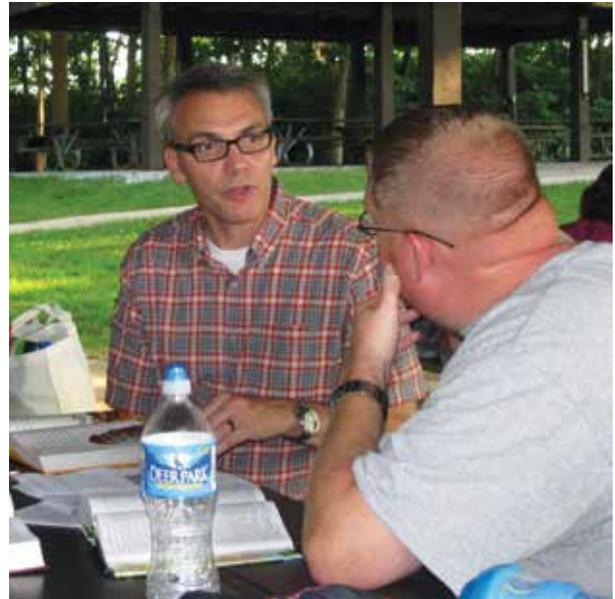
When Reep was called as pastor there in 2004, he followed through. St. Paul gave away \$360,000 and made it a policy to tithe all future gift income. "In the 12 years I've been there, I think we've given away \$1 million," he said. "There's a loaves and fishes crazy, crazy situation!"

Tithing isn't only the policy for new bequests, but also an undercurrent of St. Paul's annual campaigns, where people are subtly invited to consider tithing. St. Paul also recently held a "Try a Tithe Sunday," where members were asked, just for that Sunday, to donate 10 percent of their weekly income. The offering was about \$6,300, compared to the usual \$4,000. "Imagine if people could do that every week," he said.

Tithing is personal for Reep, whose parents modeled the practice even with a family of six children. They looked at the big picture. "My dad used to say, 'What if our church wasn't there? What would our community be like?'" he said.

Now Reep and his wife, a schoolteacher, model tithing for their family, as well as the church community. "It's what we do," he said. "If we can't figure out how to live on the 90 percent, then there's something wrong."

Emphasizing tithing is just part of St. Paul's overall effort to help people connect their finances with how they live their lives as disciples. For many churches it's a daunting task because of the great taboo. "In our culture people will talk about everything under the sun except money," Reep said. "We've been trying to get people to understand



The Rev. Stan Reep (left) talks Bible with Tony Culp.

the importance of generosity and also the faithful stewarding of the resources entrusted to us."

In addition to asking people about their giving, the annual stewardship campaign invites people to think about their time, their abilities, and how they or their families can get involved in mission. Reep affirms the truism that people who are more engaged in ministry are more likely to support the church in all aspects.

St. Paul has found financial stability through its broad-based approach, which also includes asking for planned gifts and bequests. Years ago the church paid a lawyer to help members with their wills and estate planning. The \$14,000 investment has paid off handily.

If this pastor's approach to stewardship seems bold and creative, it's one he learned the hard way. "I started too late as an ordained minister not insisting," Reep said. "I listened to people say this would never work." It has made an enormous difference, encouraging generous giving and inviting people to tithe. "I wish I would have had someone talk to me sooner about the importance of getting the whole congregation to do what I grew up doing," he said. 4



## As a spiritual discipline, giving reaps rewards

By Bishop James S. Dunlop

*Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on" (Luke 21:1-4).*

In the story of the widow's mite, Jesus lifts up giving to the institutions of God as a good and normative practice. But the passage invites discussion over just what is an appropriate level for individual giving—still a hot topic among God's people!

We draw the implication that the widow sacrificed much more than she could easily afford, whereas the rich people sacrificed less than they might have.

The story supports the concept of "proportional giving"—that the financial wherewithal of the individual or family determines the "right" amount of giving. It's something every Christian must determine through prayer and study of Scripture.

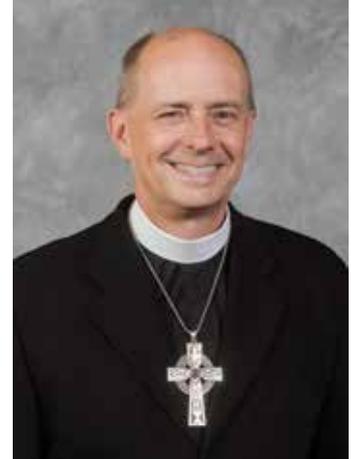
When Connie and I were first married, she asked me to read a notice inviting us to become tithers. Being unfamiliar with the term, I assumed the word rhymed with "dither," so I asked, "What's a 'tither'?"

Connie corrected me: The word has the long "i" sound, as in "tiger." A tither is someone who commits to giving 10 percent of their income to the work of God. At the time, we had young children and a mortgage, so 10 percent seemed a fortune.

But we learned that the Bible establishes 10 percent as a benchmark for faithful giving. After discussion, prayer and discernment, we took the plunge and committed to become tithers. It has made a huge difference in our lives.

By committing to a tithe, we turned our giving into a spiritual discipline, and that has made the difference. Disciplines change us from the inside, awakening us spiritually and bringing us into a closer, more intimate relationship with God.

For us, committing to give 10 percent was a sacrifice, at least initially, but one that brought blessings. In managing our money to enable us to tithe, we learned to control our spending, to prioritize our buying, to limit our debt, to discern the difference between "wants" and "needs," and to save.



Bishop James S. Dunlop

More importantly, we learned the joy of generous giving. We felt connected more closely to the ministries of God, and we also felt a closer connection to the Almighty. As we gave from the financial blessings that God had given us, we felt more blessed.

As a spiritual discipline, tithing is embraced by few of us Lutherans, who give on average 1.6 percent, or about one-sixth of a tithe. So if every Lutheran tithed, it would increase by 600 percent the resources for ministry that our congregations have to work with. What could your church do with six times as much money as it has now?

As you will read in this supplement, we are urging Lower Susquehanna Lutherans to tithe to their congregations as a spiritual discipline, and we are offering resources on our website for self-study and for congregations to educate people about tithing. Similarly, we are asking congregations to commit to tithing their income as mission support to our synod.

Remembering the story of the widow's mite, we understand that some people may not be able to afford to tithe, or tithe right away. Some may wish to build up to it, or simply advance their giving as much as they can. Yet others may be able to exceed a tithe. Whatever you decide, may God bless you and fill your life with goodness and mercy. ✚

# The Malachi Challenge: Give and be blessed

*Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing (Malachi 3:10).*

Read the passage from Malachi again. Can you believe it? God's promises could not be clearer. God not only dares us to tithe, but God actually promises an overflowing blessing.

Tithing—giving 10 percent of income to God's ministries—is a biblical standard for giving (see below) that many Christians and churches set as a goal, an ideal, a benchmark.

In our time, when Lutheran churches need resources to meet the needs of God's people for the 21st century, our synod is urging that Lower Susquehanna Lutherans take "The Malachi Challenge" and commit to tithing or working toward it.

We are similarly suggesting that congregations commit to tithing their income in mission support. It would be a blessing to our congregations, to the wider church and, as Malachi promises, to the givers themselves.

For many families and congregations, tithing may represent too big of a jump in giving to take all at once. For them, it may be better to set tithing as a goal and move forward incrementally, beginning with a switch from lump-sum to percentage giving (see "Four steps toward tithing").

Also, many families and congregations simply won't be able to afford to tithe. That's totally

understandable. Instead, they may prayerfully and carefully determine what is the best, most generous offering they can afford. They may wish to commit to being faithful at that level and pray that God will prosper them to where they may be able to tithe. ☞

## Four steps toward tithing

For those who find tithing too big an initial hurdle, here are four steps to help get you there.

**Step 1:** After prayer and discernment, set tithing as a goal. Celebrate with family and friends.

**Step 2:** Figure your current percentage of giving by using your 2015 church giving statement and 2015 tax return. Find your percentage giving by dividing your church offering by total income (best to start with after-tax, or net income), then multiply that amount by 100. For example, if a family had \$50,000 in income and offered the church \$1,200, the percentage giving would be 2.4 percent ( $1,200 \div 50,000 = 0.024$ , times 100 = 2.4 percent).

**Step 3:** Commit to stepping up your giving by an additional percentage amount (1 percent, 2 percent, 3 percent—whatever you think is right) every year until you have reached a full tithe.

**Step 4:** Follow through faithfully.

## What does the Bible have to say about tithing?

Here are some Bible verses about tithing as a standard for giving:

**Genesis 14:19-20:** In response to what God has given him, Abram gives 10 percent to the priest.

**Leviticus 27:30-34:** Tithing codified in the law of Moses.

**Numbers 18:26:** Levites (priests) are expected to tithe from the tithes they receive.

**Nehemiah 10:35-37:** The prophet affirms tithing.

**Amos 4:4-5:** A tithe is just one kind of gift among many.

**Malachi 3:8-12:** "Robbing" God; the promise of blessings.

**Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42; Luke 18:9-14:** Jesus confirms tithing as part of discipleship, along with humility and concern for mercy and justice.

# Make tithing your benchmark for giving

By the Rev. Robert Blezard

People ask me all the time, “Just how much should I give to my congregation?” Similarly, “How much should my congregation give to our synod?”

Good questions! Faithful questions! And the answers have often been unclear or uneven because for a long time there has been no clearly established Lutheran expectation or goal for giving.

That’s why our synod is now lifting up the traditional biblical principle of tithing—giving 10 percent to the ministries of God—as a standard, an ideal for giving, but not in an inflexible, legalistic way.

Understandably, not everyone or every congregation can afford to give a tithe. But many can, and some can even afford to give more than 10 percent. Establishing the tithe as a goal encourages everybody to think about it, pray about it, discern for themselves what’s right for them—what level of giving is proportional to the gifts God has given them.

As a reference point for faithful giving, tithing is as

## You CAN lead in tithing

Money is often *the* forbidden subject in a congregation, so the idea of encouraging people to tithe is absolutely terrifying to many leaders. But fear not! Our synod is behind you all the way with resources, guidance and consultation.

Our synod website has some great links and ideas: [lss-elca.org/resources/stewardship](http://lss-elca.org/resources/stewardship).

Our synod Resource Center has books, DVDs, programs and other materials to lend.

Sign up for our synod’s monthly “Stewardship Toolkit,” which contains tips, links, bulletin blurbs for the month, cut-and-paste newsletter articles and more. Email [rblezard@lss-elca.org](mailto:rblezard@lss-elca.org).

Or invite a synod stewardship specialist to consult with your congregation council or finance team.



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old as the book of Genesis, when Abram gave 10 percent of his wealth to the priest Melchizedek in response for what God has already blessed him with (see “What does the Bible have to say about tithing?” page B).

And it’s as modern as the 21st century. Many Lutheran congregations already suggest tithing as a goal (see page D). Families and individuals that take up the challenge usually report that in return for their gifts they actually get back much, much more (see our bishop’s column, page A), not necessarily in material wealth but rather in satisfaction, joy and a closeness with the Lord. As Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35b).

Tithing will be a new concept, however, to many individuals and for congregations that have not emphasized stewardship over the years. To help folks understand tithing and to help our leaders lift up tithing in their congregations, our synod is offering stewardship materials that will equip leaders to teach, preach, encourage and talk about tithing (see “You CAN lead in tithing” on this page).

So how much should people give to their congregations, and their congregations to their synod? Pray about it and consider tithing—or steps toward a tithe! ♫

*Robert Blezard is an assistant to the bishop and editor for [stewardshipoflife.org](http://stewardshipoflife.org).*