Thoughts on Giving
John Page

These thoughts were originally shared with the congregation in 2009 as a part of the 2009 stewardship emphasis. I hope they prove useful as you consider your planned giving commitment for 2012. The topics addressed in these thoughts are:

- Giving is Hard; Giving is Essential;
- Giving Guidelines In Scripture;
- Modern Challenges to Generous Giving;
- Why Planned Giving?;
- Giving and Personal Growth; and
- Family Matters.

Giving is Hard; Giving is Essential
Giving is hard. Yet, giving is essential for the sake of our spirit and for our oneness as a church family. In giving we find –

joy, in outreach to others

security, in our greater reliance on God to supply our needs

contentment in our lessened reliance on possessions to give our lives meaning

abundance, in our greater reliance on the shared resources of a family of faith

Giving Guidelines In Scripture
Scripture provides numerous guidelines for giving. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were told to share the tenth part of certain possessions as an offering (Lev. 27:30-32), to give from the best or first fruits (Prov. 3:9; Ex. 23:19), make provisions for the poor (Lev. 19:9), and to observe a time when all was restored to the condition God intended or jubilee (Lev. 25). In the New Testament, we are
called to give generously (2 Cor. 9:6), sacrificially (2 Cor. 8:1-4), cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:7), quietly (Matt. 6:1-4), proportionately (Mk. 12:41-44), and systematically (1 Cor. 16:2).

These guidelines are helpful when considering our giving. The Church of the Brethren in their statement on stewardship, however, adds an interesting take on Christian giving. They observe: “Jesus was concerned with all of a person’s life and possessions.” They further observe that, although the tithe, for example, is of “illustrative value,” as “Christian stewards, we do not have the ease of a law or formula to determine whether or not we are ‘faithful and wise.’ There is no percentage of our income and accumulated wealth that, if shared with the church, automatically discharges our obligation to God, other persons, and the faith community. We must be aware of the use of all of our resources, even those we use to maintain ourselves. We have freedom to choose the portion we share with the church, but it is freedom with responsibility. We are ultimately accountable to God.”

**Modern Challenges to Generous Giving**

According to a 1998 survey, 22 percent of Christians in the US give nothing to church or charity; 71.7 percent give less than 2 percent of their income. Given the expectations found in scripture and church tradition, I find surprising these statistics and others published in the book *Passing the Plate.* This book explores giving patterns of Christians in the US and asks “Why American Christians Don’t Give Away More Money.” The following thoughts from the book gave me pause and I thought were worthy of sharing and contemplation: “… the mass consumer economy and culture and the advertising industry that helps to drive them … focuses people’s attention not on the blessings and abundance in their lives but on all that they do not possess, on the myriad products and experiences that are just out of reach. In the process, regardless of their absolute abundance, many or most Christians come to feel a relative deprivation, a sense that they do not have all that they could, want, or should possess and experience. The system and culture are set up, in other words, to create permanent discontent. And so when people of all different social classes, including the quite wealthy consider giving money to religious and charitable causes, they actually find themselves … feeling pretty poor. It feels to them that they simply do not have the money to give. This perception is reinforced by the fact … For many families with money, a mere two buying decisions—the purchases of home and cars—are enough to lock household budgets into tight budgetary situations for decades.”
Why Planned Giving?

An article by Rob Moll in an issue of Christianity Today observes “Offering money, many Christians believe, should be like Hollywood’s version of romance: spontaneous, exuberant, and impulsive. Financial gifts should be joyful, we think, so we give only when the urge strikes.” Indeed, great satisfaction can be found impulsively writing a check when hearing of a great need. Structured systems, such as annual estimates of giving, however, can seem rigid and impersonal. Yet planned giving is a Presbyterian tradition and except for a few special offerings, our sole way of raising funds for the work of Cary Presbyterian Church, locally and in the world. In scripture we find the same emphasis in both the Old (Lev. 27:30-32 and Ex. 23:19) and New (Mk. 12:41-44 and 1 Cor. 16:2) Testaments. But why is this?

First, I fear that God knows us too well. In spontaneous giving, we give like a household that spends without a budget, haphazardly and without thinking through priorities. As a result, we give less than our hearts say we should, just like without a budget we find it impossible to adequately save for retirement or our children’s college education. Second, Moll notes that rather than being impersonal and legalistic, habitual giving can do more to form us spiritually. Habitual giving forces us to prioritize, placing a high priority on someone or something other than ourselves. Instead of just a warm fuzzy short-term feeling, we find our lives reoriented and we grow spiritually. Finally, structured giving allows our congregation to make commitments responsibly, confident that when we make commitments, whether it be to a mortgage bank or a foreign missions program, that we can meet those obligations.

Giving and Personal Growth

In 2007 and 2008, the theme of the annual stewardship emphasis was “Will You Grow?” Personally, while agreeing that generous financial giving contributes to a maturing and growing faith, I had feelings of ambivalence about the theme. Growth in faith comes from many aspects of our walk with God, and it seemed a little abstract. I am sure that as a theme, however, it resonated with others. In addition, when considering the concept carefully, I can see how my giving has led to growth.

Julie and I have tithed for more than 30 years. I say this not to boast, for any temptation to boast about anything in my walk with God is countered by reminders of many failings. I mention it only to indicate that my thoughts on giving and personal growth come from personal experience. I started tithing in
my mid-20s when I joined Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago. In the caring of that congregation and its pastors, I saw and got to know God. This habit of giving was initiated as an act of gratitude and by a desire to contribute to the good works of that congregation.

So, how did I grow? Over the years, the church and contributing to its work has consistently remained a high priority. I found there is much greater joy in giving than keeping. Childhood lessons in thrift were reinforced. Regular giving has been a constant reminder of God’s calling and the way-of-life to which I am called. I enjoy nice things, but I believe that having less to spend has led to a higher level of contentment with what I do have. Finally, I have learned the value of interdependence within a church family over individual independence.

**Family Matters**

I believe that to follow Jesus is to be part of a covenant family of faith. Cary Presbyterian is not a place one attends but a family to which one belongs. As one united body, we should find fellowship, support, affirmation, encouragement, guidance, discipline, and a place to serve. We are a family first called out of the world to belong to God and then sent back into the world to serve. I believe that once called and sent, and in the context of our service, we are to seek to grow and mature in our personal faith and as a family of faith.

As a part of a family, I believe that the primary purpose of our participation in the church is not an inward focus of personal fulfillment but the outward focus of service. Our gaze is not on our face, like a face in a mirror. Instead we turn our faces outward to focus on the people around us.

During this stewardship season, we ask that you consider how Cary Presbyterian might grow in faith and in our service as a family of faith. You might consider: what needs in our community and in the world go unmet that we could step up and help meet; who in our congregation feels isolated from our family that we might bring closer; how can our shared generosity provide mutual support during a time of economic downturn; how can we learn to ignore or reject distractions that turn our gaze inward instead of outward? Finally, consider how you as one member in our family of faith might participate and contribute financially to our continued growth.