

AMERICAN BAPTIST UNITED MISSION
“Spiritual Anxiety and United Mission”

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November 2010

**When we are united in God’s mission,
our United Mission will grow.**

**As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
Psalm 42:1-2a (NRSV)**

What is stewardship? Church leaders sometimes deny it and argue otherwise, but stewardship is a critical component of the life of a congregation. One reason for such a negative opinion of stewardship is that, over the centuries, stewardship in the life of the church has usually been linked exclusively to raising money for the church and its institutions. Stewardship is about money, but it is also about much more than money.

Robert M. Martin offered these intriguing thoughts on happiness and desire: Let’s put the problem in more picturesque terms. I know a genie who lives in a lamp and will grant you three wishes—change three things to make them the way you want them to be. I know you’d like to meet this genie; unfortunately I’ve lost his address. But I can get you in touch with his cousin Fred who is also a genie who can make the world match your desires. Fred does this not by changing the world, but by *changing your desires*. *If something isn’t the way you want it to be, Fred will change what you want*. Are you eager to avail yourself of Fred’s services? Why? Why not...? Is it possible that there’s more to life than getting what you think you want?

We live in a time of *critical spiritual anxiety*. Walter Brueggemann wrote about the experience of being pulled in two directions—being haunted by two different versions of one’s life. He described two stories that operate in his life:

- One story that competes for our loyalty is *the money story*.
- But we also know about and take seriously a different account of our lives, *the story of the gospel*.

The money story is the story of self-sufficiency and merit and being safe on our own terms. The sign of this story is *more*. It insists that no matter how much one gathers together, it is not yet enough for happiness and safety. The outcomes of this story are *anxiety and worry*.

The second story is *the story of the gospel*: It is an account of God's generosity that we are able to see in the mystery of God's creation, that we know crucially in God's love in Jesus of Nazareth, and that we trust because we have experienced it in intimate, concrete ways in our own lives. The outcome of the story is a life of communion with God shaped like gratitude, a capacity for deep generosity because all that we have is a gift, and a valuing of neighbor, whereby we live to transform our world into a viable neighborhood where *justice and mercy for all brothers and sisters* is assured.

The first story of anxiety and greed—the money story—has great power and is the dominant story of our culture.

The question then is how do we move our lives toward the second story? The move from the story of anxiety to the story of generosity does not happen by accident or by osmosis. It happens by intentional resolve and by incremental discipline. It happens not only with our money but with every aspect of our lives. Stewardship, thus, is a practice of *our true selves*.

Drawing from his observations of commercials during the time of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta and also from his trip to Kruger National Park in South Africa, Brueggemann talked first about commercials that had the theme "Follow Your Thirst." His point was that the underlying motif of the commercial was to urge more—"more thirst, more drink, more self-indulgence, more satisfaction."

Psalm 42 begins with the metaphor of a deer thirsting for water. The psalmist links this deep thirsting with the believer yearning for communion with God the way that a deer yearns for water.

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
(Psalm 42:1-2a)

Our true thirst is for God. Brueggemann wrote: "That is who we truly are, and only that will quench." But there is danger and risk in coming to the waterhole, as Brueggemann observed in a visit to Kruger National Park. When an animal leans down to drink, it is vulnerable, off-guard, and easy prey. But because the thirst is so great, the animal must come despite the danger.

For us as Christians, there are also dangers and risks that must be taken. Because it is the waterhole of the gospel, when we drink there God will draw us into new purposes that will be costly and demanding. Drinking there will change our lives.

Stewardship is based on the human being's need for God, which can be described as an all-consuming thirst. It is a move from thirst based on anxiety and the felt need for "more," to a thirst for the gospel of God. In the words of the prayer of St. Augustine, "You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

Stewardship then may be defined as drinking deeply from the waters of the living God by moving from the stagnating waterholes of "more" to the living water of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and inviting others to do the same.

The living water of the gospel of Jesus Christ leads us to a desire to participate in God's mission throughout the world. Our giving to American Baptist United Mission helps accomplish all these things:

- Your church's United Mission giving supports your local region, which makes it possible for the region to provide more effective support for your church and others. In fact, most of the income for each of our regions comes from **gifts to United Mission**. Our giving to UM pays the major parts of the salaries of our region's staff who provide:
 - staff service for search committees;
 - assistance resolving church conflicts;
 - area ministers to maintain contact with individual pastors and with associations and small groups of churches;
 - camping ministry;
 - resources to assist your church in growth and spiritual health; and
 - education and training of pastors, youth, and lay leaders in congregational empowerment.UM giving also supports:
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THANK YOU for your support of American Baptist United Mission!

Ron

P.S. Again, I encourage you to share this letter electronically or in print with others in your church.