

A Deposit of Faith

Ten years ago, I attended the 2000 Annual Conference of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians. The Covenant Network is an organization of Presbyterian pastors and lay leaders dedicated to fostering a church as generous and just as God's grace.

That year, the Covenant Network's annual conference met in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and was hosted by East Liberty Presbyterian Church. The well published, highly regarded keynote speakers were Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, New Testament scholar Brian Blount, and theologian William Placher. The lectures, the worship services, the seminars and workshops, the food and fellowship were all outstanding.

But do you know what I remember most about that conference? What I remember most is one of the choirs that sang for us while we were there. That choir was one of many given birth by the faith, life, and ministry of East Liberty Presbyterian Church.

This particular choir was an a cappella chorus of about twenty-five or thirty women, both young and old. They sang from the classical Christian repertoire, and they sang exquisitely. Beyond the beautiful and inspiring music they made, this gifted ensemble was also distinguished by the fact that every woman in that choir—every woman in that choir—either was or had been homeless and living on the streets of Pittsburgh in the neighborhoods surrounding East Liberty Presbyterian Church.

East Liberty actually refers to the section of the city in which the church is located. In its heyday, East Liberty was the flourishing commercial center for Pittsburgh's most affluent neighborhoods. But that heyday came and went. In 1959, a hustling and bustling East Liberty could boast of nearly six hundred thriving businesses; by 1979 there were only 98, with none of them thriving, and all the hustling and bustling was of an altogether different kind. East Liberty became an urban ghetto and the surrounding neighborhoods pockets of multi-ethnic poverty.

More recently, I am happy to report there have been many promising signs of renewal, perhaps in no small measure fueled by the resilient and faithful ministry of East Liberty Presbyterian Church. And what a ministry that is. Their a cappella chorus for homeless women is just one compelling example. That church is a perpetual beehive of activity.

There are so many events, programs, and activities going on all the time with so many of them involving food and meals that the church employs its own full time kitchen staff. In fact, when the Covenant Network met there, East Liberty's kitchen staff along with help from church volunteers prepared and served all the meals for all four hundred and fifty of us. And all four hundred and fifty of us were easily seated with room to spare in their spacious fellowship hall.

There are so many services, of so many kinds, being provided to so many people that East Liberty has eight pastors on staff; not to mention musicians, educators, counselors, and administrators. Every year also brings with it a variety of scholars, artists, and other professionals in residence.

East Liberty founded and continues to operate Hope Academy. Hope Academy is a neighborhood after school School of Music and the Arts for children ages four to eighteen. More than two hundred fifty young people are enrolled. Hope Academy has its own theater company, its own choruses, its own orchestra, its own ballet troupe.

Every Sunday, in a soaring sanctuary seating more than fifteen hundred, there are three entirely different worship services, with other worship services offered throughout the week. And I could go on and on and on.

All of these transforming ministries flow out from a magnificent gothic cathedral that occupies an entire city block in the heart of East Liberty; a gothic cathedral that boldly stands as an inspiring monument to faith and faithfulness; a gothic cathedral that is beautifully maintained in every sense of the word; a gothic cathedral that is known throughout Pittsburgh and beyond as the Cathedral of Hope.

How many members do you suppose East Liberty Presbyterian Church has? Two thousand? Three thousand? More?

East Liberty Presbyterian Church has only about seven hundred members. In fact, if you combine the attendance in their three Sunday services, East Liberty has more people in worship every Sunday than they do members. And several times more come and go through their many church doors week in and week out.

How do they do it? How does a congregation with only seven hundred members support and carry out such a vast transforming ministry? They do it with their endowment. East Liberty's large endowment is not used merely to cover the needs of a seven hundred member congregation. The congregation's own faithful

stewardship does that. Their endowment, this amazing deposit of faith, is reserved for funding and carrying out extraordinary ministries that a seven hundred member congregation could only dream about. Blessed as they are with such a generous endowment, East Liberty not only dreams dreams, they fulfill dreams, which is precisely why the endowment was given in the first place.

Endowments are like the twelve stones that Joshua commanded the Israelites to take from the river Jordan and set up in the place where they camped; twelve stones left behind as a deposit of faith that would be a sign and memorial, an inspiring sign and memorial, a facilitating sign and memorial, forever. And did you hear how the story ended? They are there to this day. They are there to this day is a phrase that recurs like a refrain throughout scripture marking deposits of faith that out of the past and into the future continue to inspire faith and facilitate faithfulness.

Endowments are like the faith of Abel, and the faith of Enoch, and the faith of Noah in the litany from Hebrews; they still speak. And along with the faith of Abraham, and the faith of Isaac, and the faith of Jacob, and the faith of Joseph, and a long list of others they form a great cloud of witness, a deposit of faith that out of the past and into the future continues to inspire faith and facilitate faithfulness for the sake of the race that is set before us.

You know, there are many people who firmly believe churches should never have endowments. Those people believe endowments are a corrupting force that leads congregations toward complacency and negligence, not only in their giving, but also in their vision of what God is calling them to do. They see too many congregations that depend on their endowments to cover needs that should be met by that congregation's own stewardship. Well, when that happens, I believe those people are right; endowments have then become little more than a mixed blessing, at best.

Endowments are never meant to replace our own faithful stewardship. Whether or not a church has an endowment and no matter its size, that has nothing at all to do with God's call on us to tithe, God's call on us to give a full ten percent of our total household income to our local church. Endowments are wrongly used when they are used to provide staff and programs that congregations should be providing for themselves through their own tithes and offerings.

Endowments, these deposits of faith out of the past, are intended to supplement, to complement, to combine with, our own faithfulness in the present for a cumulative effect; a cumulative effect through the ages like a snowball rolling down a mountain, an ever expanding dynamo for advancing God's present and coming kingdom.

Endowments, these deposits of faith out of the past, are rightly used as insurance policies against unforeseen calamities. Endowments are rightly used to bridge short term gaps. Endowments are rightly used to faithfully maintain facilities that otherwise would not be affordable, but only so long as those facilities boldly stand as an inspiring monument to faith and faithfulness for the sake of the world around them. And, endowments are rightly used to fund and carry out extraordinary ministries that other congregations might only dream about, like a snowball rolling down a mountain.

For the last several months, we have been talking about God's promise to open the windows of heaven...“Thus says the Lord: bring the full tithe into the storehouse and thus put me to the test. See if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.” Those are the windows of heaven we have been talking about.

Last fall, in answer to both God's call to tithe as well as God's promise to open the windows of heaven and pour down an overflowing blessing, the leadership of this church set this congregation on a journey toward becoming a tithing church and everyone was asked to increase their pledge by twenty percent or more this year and every year until you are tithing to this church. The heartening response by so many of you to this faithful challenge has been nothing short of tremendous, and this congregation is well on its way.

One of the great benefits of your demonstrated commitment to becoming a tithing congregation will be your ability to wean yourself off of your endowment, something you have rightly proven not only willing to do, but eager to do. And you will then be able to combine this gracious and generous deposit of faith out of the past with your own faithfulness in the present and thus run, not only with perseverance, but faster and faster and faster and faster the race that God has set before you. Amen.