

The Stewardship of Dust

by Pastor Helga Jansons Director for Evangelical Mission

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return”. Once we remember, then what? Lent can be a good time to act on this inevitable fact by planning for it. One way a church can plan for it together is to talk about what it means to “die well” and to help people know how to leave a legacy. Christian business consultant Steven Covey said that everyone had three basic desires in life: “to live, to love and to leave a legacy.” There are many ways to leave a legacy, and they are part of good stewardship.

Estate Planning is a topic that congregational leaders and pastors are hesitant to talk about. Pastors may feel that they “didn’t sign up for this” conversation when they entered seminary. I suppose you could say none of us signed up for death nor for conversations about that when we were born.

Nevertheless, when we face the reality of our mortality during the Lenten season as the church, we also know that new life in Christ is always possible after any kind of death. So too, once we die we can leave a legacy to the church that will bring new life, just as we have received new life through the church. Our faith has been sustained and we have been strengthened as we worship God and receive the sacraments as part of the body of Christ.

If asked, many of us would like to leave something for the church that we love, once we die. As with any financial stewardship “The principle reason people don’t give is that they’re not asked” (ELCA, Ventures for Growing Stewards). We tend to be shy about asking, but it is essential to encourage people to include their church, synod and/or ELCA in their Estate Planning. To help leaders get the courage to encourage parishioners to do this “Look at giving through the eyes of the giver, not through the eyes of those who are focused on support for only the annual budget.” Kennon Callahan (in Ventures). Remember that most people in the Church want to give and be generous, and want their church to survive and even thrive. Reminding ourselves that we are not only going to return to dust, but that we can bring new life to the Church even from the grave, is part of being a leader in stewardship.

It isn’t just about the reminder though. People may need help. Some may just need resources like the ELCA Foundation Will and Trust Workbook (www.elca.org search box) that helps to think through all the different issues. The workbook even encourages people to write a short Christian preamble in our wills so as to take the opportunity to share our faith as part of our legacy. The workbook helps people to think through questions like whether we want one Durable Power of Attorney for finances and another person for their health. Others may need to know of a good legal advisor. There are many decisions to make and a trusted friend from the church can walk alongside someone.

Because we know we are going to return to dust, and because we know Easter Sunday is coming, we can be bold enough to talk about the stewardship of dying well. Part of dying well is knowing we have planned for it, have things in order, have discussed our plans with our family and perhaps our church. I think Lent is a great time to challenge, invite or encourage people to remember to include the church in their end of life planning. We don’t always think of it, or remember to act and follow through on what we may even think is an important thing to do.

It could also be something that the whole congregation does on a larger scale as a faith community. It may be the time to develop clear policies about Memorial Funds and Endowments. These can bring new life to a church as well if they have a broad missional focus and are not too narrow.

