

# **The Search for Balance: The Priorities of Midtown Churches and the Benefits and Challenges Inherent in the Church Budget Process**

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“Budgets are moral documents!” Jim Wallis took America by storm this past year with this statement along with many others in his new book, God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It.<sup>1</sup> He points to the obvious fact that that any distribution of money, an extremely important tool in our country, gives a great deal of insight into the priorities of the distributor. While Wallis is looking to “expose” the priorities of the US government, I took his statement as an indication of the importance of budgets in general, specifically of churches in this research, as an area of study. While research dealing with church giving has received much attention, this paper focuses primarily on church budgets; the subject of giving as well as church teachings about money are addressed briefly toward the end of the paper. My goal is to identify church priorities by collecting and presenting specific budgets and to learn about the budget process by conducting interviews with those people most involved in the process at each church. I also use these interviews to discover what difficulties church leaders face in creating spending plans and the benefits reaped from a well thought-out budget process.

The method used to conduct this research is first outlined, along with some basic information about the churches involved in the project. The paper then lays out an analysis of what churches are actually spending their money on, followed by a description of the basic budget process. The next section addresses the topics of teaching and tithing, and how they are related to the issue of church spending. The paper

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Wallis, God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 241

concludes with the desires that those people who are in charge of the budgets at their churches have expressed for the future, along with general conclusions.

### **Method and Sample Information**

I carried out this project by conducting interviews with churches in the Midtown area of Memphis, Tennessee, specifically talking to whoever at each church is most involved with the budget process. I chose the 38104 zip code as my specific area for research, and included two other churches that border that zip code as well. The reasoning behind the choice of the 38104 zip code is simple—it is one of three in a definition of Midtown that appeared in Meet Memphis magazine, and I chose this one specifically because although I initially wanted to do all three, I realized that would be unfeasible in the scope of my project and at the time of this decision this was the only zip code in which I had conducted interviews. I compiled my list of churches in the 38104 zip code primarily from the yellow pages and supplemented it when necessary through other sources. This resulted in a preliminary list of about 35 churches, but after calling each phone number and removing from the list those phone numbers that did not work or and those which did not have answering machines, I was left with 26. I called all of these churches and left a message at those without a secretary answering the phone. Whether I was leaving a message or talking to a person, I stated my name, my college, and explained that I was doing a research project on church budgets and would like to talk to the person who is in charge of the budget process. I left a message at five churches and never got a response. Four churches were too busy and two were not comfortable giving me the information.

Five said they would call me back and never did, and so in the end I was able to conduct ten actual interviews.

Five of the interviews were with staff members who are specifically in charge of finances at their churches, one was with a local elder and four were with the primary pastor. The financial staff titles varied: I talked to a Church Life Administrator, Administrative Assistant/Financial Secretary, Chief Financial Officer, Director of Missions, and Parish Administrator. I had a list of 24 questions that I asked each person, the first eleven of which were to inquire about the church and the rest specific to my project.<sup>2</sup> In most interviews we addressed all of the questions, and all but one interview were conducted in person. I also conducted two additional interviews, one with a financial director from Springdale, Arkansas, who is especially interested in the philosophy and theology behind church finances and money in general who was kind enough to assist me greatly in this project. I also use information from our email correspondence in this paper. The other person whom I talked to is a layperson at one of the churches in my sample, and I interviewed him briefly because of a reference made to his views on church finances in my interview with the financial administrator at his church.

At each of these churches where I interviewed, I requested a copy of their budget, and seven out of the ten churches gave me a copy without hesitation. The people that I interviewed at two of the churches said that they either are not comfortable or are not

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<sup>2</sup> I took the first eleven questions from a survey conducted previously by Robert Wuthnow on the subject of giving to churches. They can be found in Robert Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 247-8. I created the rest of the questions myself. The complete list of questions is listed in Appendix A.

allowed to disclose that information, and one church is in the middle of creating its new budget and therefore did not have an up-to-date version at the time of the interview.

The churches that participated in my project include three Presbyterian churches (one EPC and two PCUSA), one Episcopal church, two United Methodist, a Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, Jehovah's Witness, and one church without denominational ties. The church memberships ranged from fifty to four thousand members, with an average of about 850. Since the average congregation size in America is 70 members, I do not have a representative sample of the US church population.<sup>3</sup> This can be explained in part by the fact that larger churches with more staff were probably more able to respond affirmatively about participation in my project. The average Sunday attendance ranged from five to two thousand people, with an average of about 375. On average, attendance is 50% of membership, although most churches in my sample differ widely on either side from this mean. Eight out of the ten churches were started by 1950, and two of those were started as far back as the nineteenth century. The other two churches were started in the past several years, indicating a possible trend in Midtown church growth: many churches were started in the first half of the twentieth century, but for reasons discussed later there were either not many churches started in the second half in this area or they were those churches not accounted for in my research. Seven churches said that their membership is growing, although three of those qualified their statements by saying that it is beginning to grow or growing slowly. One pastor mentioned that his church is growing currently, but this is a recovery from a severe loss of membership associated with the middle-class migration to suburbs out east as a response to school integration in the sixties and seventies, commonly referred to as "white flight." There is

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<sup>3</sup> Author interview with Waring Porter, July 13, 2005

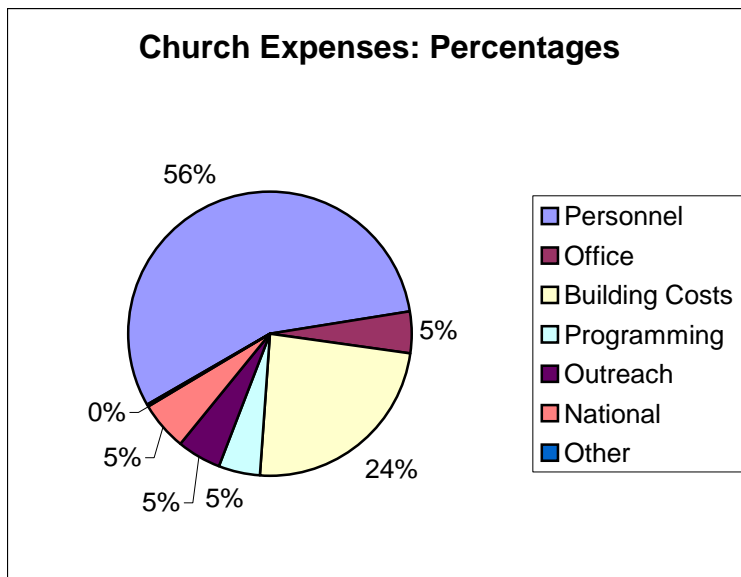
reason to believe that many of the churches in my sample group suffered from the same plight, and that would explain why fewer churches were created during the second half of the past century. However, all of the churches at which I interviewed except two are predominately white. It is possible, perhaps probable, that some of those other 16 churches in the 38104 zip code are small, African-American churches that were started during the second half of the twentieth century when the racial makeup of Midtown became more heavily African-American.

The churches, although not diverse in terms of race, are diverse in terms of family style and age. The churches are fairly evenly divided in terms of whether they have an older population, a younger population, or a diverse population in terms of age. Four of the churches describe themselves as Bible-based or theologically conservative, while three said they are slightly or more on the liberal side. One church said that their congregation is more conservative, while the clergy are more liberal, and I noticed similar situations at a few of the other churches. The churches are less diverse economically, as most describe their core membership as middle- to upper-middle-class. Several of the churches do have a small portion of lower class or homeless attendees or members as well.

### **What Are Churches Spending Money On?**

While the process by which budgets are created is discussed in the next section, the current section focuses on those budgets collected during my research. The average size of the church budgets in my sample is a little under one and a half million dollars. The standard deviation of these budgets is over one and a half million dollars, meaning that

68% of the seven budgets in my sample fall within that many dollars of the average. There is therefore quite a range, the smallest budget being just under two hundred thousand dollars for one church that is operating at bare minimum and the largest summing up to just under five million dollars. Of the two churches that refrained from giving me a copy of their budget, one church says that they do not spend money on anything but maintenance and the other says that their budget stays around ten to fifteen thousand dollars per year. This is significantly less than the smallest budget in my data, but unfortunately those churches could not be included because I was not allowed access to their budgets. The average church in this group spends 1233 dollars per member, although the standard deviation for this is also rather high at approximately 400 dollars per member.



## **Personnel**

Personnel is the largest expense of every church whose budget I had access to. In my data, each church spends an average of 55.8% of their budget on personnel expenses. The standard deviation of the percentage of budget spent on personnel is 5.8%; even the church that spends the least on personnel still devotes slightly more than fifty percent to staff costs. When defining personnel, I included any person who the church paid for services, from the senior pastor to housekeeping to nursery workers. I also included continuing education expenses for the staff, as well as travel expenses for staff, benefits like insurance, and housing and utility allowances. Although it at first appeared that there might be a relationship between church size and the percentage spent on personnel, I found no evidence to support this or any other trends in this particular data set.

As personnel expenses take up more than half of each church budget in the group, it is important to evaluate this expense. Another way to look at this expense is putting it into the context of the final product of personnel: money spent on personnel is in large part money spent on teaching and outreach, the desired product of the labor of personnel. Many churches view the expense of personnel in this way, as can be seen by their budget structure; some separate each staff member into their ministry category (outreach, youth ministry, etc.). It is clear that the money going to the youth minister is seen by these churches as money invested in the youth of the church.

Several of those interviewed spoke on the importance of taking care of those whose job it is to serve a specific congregation. Many pastors go without basic cost-of-living increases in salary when there is not enough money to go around, although most stories about pastors that hit the news have to do with excessive salaries. In some respects, the

larger the staff, the more a church can address some of the needs of the congregation, and more staff members can apparently lead to church growth. One financial staff person said that her church hired a consultant this past year who said they needed more staff to grow. Now, they have hired a full-time staff person for adult ministry.<sup>4</sup> This growth in staff can be important to guard against a celebration of numerical growth without creating the resources to spiritually feed all of those people.<sup>5</sup>

In the churches I interviewed, most pastors are well provided for, with their salary plus a housing allowance in several denominations. These housing allowances are non-taxable, and one member of the clergy told me that he thinks this is unfair, because a tax break for him gives a greater burden to someone else. He said that in some churches the people at the top are treated like CEOs, but in his opinion if we were to take the Bible seriously we would want to lift up those on the bottom. Incidentally, he mentioned earlier that his church when acting tends not to look to the Bible for specific verses but for the overall message—he feels like this is part of that overall message. He went on to say that he thought the church should give flat raises instead of cost-of-living increases, because the compounding of percentage increases widens the gap between the higher- and lower-paid on staff. It still costs the secretary and the pastor the same for a loaf of bread, he pointed out. The Bible says that people are all equal, but they are not equal in the economic system, so the church should take a stand on this issue, as well as that of the inequality of men's and women's salaries—unfortunately, he said, the church has not yet done this.<sup>6</sup>

### **Building Costs**

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<sup>4</sup> Author Interview with Virginia Dunaway, June 30, 2005

<sup>5</sup> Author Interview with Kenneth Letterman, June 29, 2005

<sup>6</sup> Author Interview with Joe Porter, July 14, 2005

Costs associated with the church building are the second largest expense, coming in as an average of 24.0% of the budget. This area had the largest standard deviation out of the six budgets divisions at 8.4%, meaning that building costs is the category that varies the most according to the particular church. These expenses include such things as basic repairs and routine maintenance of everything from organs to air-conditioning to the church van, insurance and utilities, and care of the church grounds. Those interviewed continually referred to their feeling of responsibility to be good stewards of the buildings that they are left with, a pressing issue for many churches in Midtown that own beautiful but old and decaying buildings that need serious maintenance. One financial director referenced a scripture in 2 Chronicles that refers to fixing the temple as an example of being a good steward, which would help to explain the responsibility that these people feel and the language that they use in describing this responsibility.<sup>7</sup> Several of them did say that they wished they could spend less on their building, but that it is just a necessary expense. One, however, made an interesting point. She said that church people, specifically some in her congregation, tend to view some expenses as completely necessary, such as the repair of a broken boiler. However, the broken boiler only needs to be fixed because people view the standard of Western comfort as necessary. When this church moved into a new building, some people said that the broken windows needed to be fixed immediately, but several years later the windows still have not been fixed. She concluded this example by saying that the real necessity is to become a viable faith community in the area that church is serving. Despite some decisions such as this one,

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<sup>7</sup> Author Interview with Anthony Brown, July 11, 2005

however, that specific church still spends more money than she is comfortable with on renovation.<sup>8</sup>

Looking at this issue from another side, one pastor talked about his arrival at his current church and the lack of maintenance programs. This changed when he became pastor, and they now have routine maintenance done on the sanctuary in addition to the large amount of catch-up work that was needed when he arrived. They make sure now to keep the grounds clean because “God gave us land, so we should keep it nice.”<sup>9</sup> Another point made by some is that if routine maintenance is ignored, it can come back to haunt the church when the small problems culminate in the need for major repair that would have been unnecessary had the property been better cared for.

While usually not included in a regular church budget, special building projects are generally extremely expensive. Additions to churches are not uncommon, spoken to in part by the fact that there are specific construction companies whose sole business is constructing church additions. Although, as said before, the process tends to be separate from the budget process, it can include some of the same elements and appeals. The one church that I interviewed that is involved in a building project explained the project as addressing the need for meeting, storage, and school space. This new addition being considered is estimated at this point to cost twenty-three million dollars.

Since there is only one church that I interviewed that is in the midst of a building campaign, I will have to rely on that as the sole representative of its kind in this paper. The process seems to be being carried out with an impressive deal of care and caution. Initially, the church underwent a discernment process, where certain members of the

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<sup>8</sup> Author Interview with Julia Hicks, July 13, 2005

<sup>9</sup> Author Interview with Kenneth Letterman

church met in small groups for prayer and discussion and then had a large meeting to present the idea to the church. This process is described as “giving the gift of information” by the consultant that the church has hired for the project. Presently, they are embarking on a feasibility study by sending a questionnaire out to the members of the congregation to see whether they think the project is a good idea and, more importantly, whether they will support the project. While there were some fears among the staff and are still some among the congregation that this project would negatively affect regular giving, the consultant reassured them that it probably would not. The financial director at this church emphasized to me that this is a reasonable process compared to past building projects that they jumped into without much preparation. The slogan for the project is “Building to Serve”.<sup>10</sup>

### **Outreach, Programming and Other Expenses**

Outreach and programming are 4.8% and 4.7% of the average budget, respectively. I tried to come up with a consistent definition for each category. Programming includes most services inside the church, including the worship budget. It also includes such things as congregational care and Vacation Bible School, and other programs that are geared primarily toward serving the congregation. Outreach includes programs directed more toward serving the community, such meals for the homeless that are served at many Midtown churches, although some such programs are funded by separate or special donations. I also included the recreation programs in this section because those churches with recreation programs described them as a way that they served their neighboring community, although church members do participate as well. The pastor at one church said that their playschool and after-school program are the things that most drain the

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<sup>10</sup> Author Interview with Linda Stein, July 5, 2005

church financially. He said that they could never close either one of them, because a church cannot close itself off to mission: “you must die to yourself so that you will live”.<sup>11</sup> A few churches also told me that they like to donate financially to other organizations that serve the Midtown area of Memphis when they are able.

The other two categories are Office and National, both of which are rather simple. Office expenses make up 4.6% of the average budget, and consist of those expenses involved with running an office—copiers, paper, etc. The National category takes up an average of 5.4% of the budget, and refers to money given to the national organization of which the church is a member. Most churches are attached in some way to a national denomination, although some attachments are stronger than others; this usually depends on the denomination. This money, called apportionments in the United Methodist church, goes to support things like national clergy, the yearly conference, missionaries, and any universities or camps associated with or run by that particular denomination.

Some of the larger churches have schools that either meet in or are connected to the church; sometimes these schools are included in the budget, and sometimes not. I chose to take the school expenses entirely out of the two budgets that included them so as to make the different budgets as similar as possible. I tried to account for shared expense as best as possible, such as building space and utilities.

### **Regional Challenges**

I did in fact try to discover Memphis- or region-specific challenges that these churches face in deciding how to spend their money but my findings outline problems that are probably faced by most churches, at least in the south, that are located in areas

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<sup>11</sup> Author Interview with Kenneth Letterman

similar to Midtown in other cities. However, they are interesting challenges to note and examine.

One major factor included in the discussion of maintenance is the large number of decaying church buildings. Most of these were built up to a century ago, and now are in need of major repairs in addition to the routine but already expensive maintenance. This is primarily a problem because of the movement to the suburbs that was mentioned earlier which resulted in many churches losing a bulk of their members, as indicated to me by a few of those interviewed. Those churches that chose to stay in Memphis instead of following their members out east have now been faced with the challenge of operating without the significant financial support of those members. As one pastor pointed out, Memphis is not a wealthy city, and Midtown is an interesting mix of upper, middle and lower class, including a large homeless population.<sup>12</sup> One pastor spoke specifically of the location of her church as the bottleneck between the affluent northwest and the poor Orange Mound area in the southeast.<sup>13</sup> In the past several years, the Midtown area is now changing again as young families are relocating to this area and it becomes less rundown. Still, as churches try to reach out to the community, many of those in the community today are not able to support the church as the old members were.

The challenge to reach out to the people who live in Midtown today is a serious one, especially to those churches who have lost so many members, either to age or to white flight. This has caused at least a few churches to reach out and embrace the large gay and lesbian community in the Cooper-Young district of Midtown, some intentionally moving to the area and others because they would otherwise be forced to close their

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<sup>12</sup> Author interview with Waring Porter

<sup>13</sup> Author interview with TroyAnn Pouloupoulos, July 7, 2005

doors. Even those who did not speak specifically about that community spoke of the need to learn to reach out to the community that now surrounds them. One staff person spoke about the financial difficulties associated with reaching out to the many in the Midtown community who they consider marginalized, saying that those are often the ones who are struggling financially. Most churches, she said, want to attract families because they tend to bring more money with them and they will probably continue to attend that church for a long time. In the Bible belt, of which Memphis is sometimes described as being the buckle, she feels that her church must make decisions that cause them to lose money in order to stay true to their principles. She pointed out that in the choice of music, sermons, and art, a church is really saying what kind of people they want at their church, and for these marginalized a neutral environment such as a brightly lit hallway with paintings of flowers on the walls is a hostile environment. Therefore, it really must be an intentional choice to attract the marginalized, who are often alone or in broken family situations, over families.<sup>14</sup>

This monetary setback in combination with the challenge to reach out to the community may seem daunting. However, some churches have come up with constructive ways to deal with the lack of resources in the face of such great need. As one pastor told me, just as with the early Christian church, churches with budgetary problems need partnerships. He told me about a program that his church is involved in to help the homeless acquire copies of their birth certificates in order to get IDs so that they can become eligible for jobs. A church downtown has homeless people at their church for a soup kitchen every week to transport, and this pastor's church supplies the van for transportation. A separate church provides the drivers and the gas, and there you have a

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<sup>14</sup> Author interview with Julia Hicks

complete ministry with the help of three different churches. The pastor made an additional comment that according to the Protestant work ethic it sounds like communism, but it has been an effective program so far, serving fifteen people per trip once or twice a month.<sup>15</sup>

One church has started a large recreation program that serves both members of the church and people in the community, with about 55% of those participating not being members.<sup>16</sup> This has served to bring together the children at the church with the children in the community. This is one solution to the unique challenge of these Midtown churches: the need to balance serving their own congregation and serving the community they are seated in. One person spoke of the difficulty of serving the members who live far away and the need to find times for programs that will ensure that as many members as possible are able to attend, specifically mentioning one member who lives an hour away.<sup>17</sup> This challenge is a serious one, because one pastor pointed out that those who refuse to address the surrounding community cannot survive. He spoke of a church that he left because they refused to serve the community; they are shutting their doors in two months.<sup>18</sup>

Most churches that have been established for a good deal of time have been able to find ways to reach out into the new community, through financially supporting or donating space to community service organizations in Midtown, starting their own soup kitchens, or facilitating other outreach projects. One financial director specifically said

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<sup>15</sup> Author interview with Kenneth Letterman

<sup>16</sup> Author interview with Virginia Dunaway

<sup>17</sup> Author interview with Virginia Dunaway

<sup>18</sup> Author interview with Kenneth Letterman

that you have to feed and clothe the hungry before they will listen to anything you say.<sup>19</sup> Some of the organizations that churches I interviewed donate to are: MIFA (Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association), Advance Memphis, Church Health Center, Planned Parenthood, and Memphis Area Gay Youth. Churches that are currently unable to give monetary donations often offer space in their buildings to these and other organizations for the time being. Sometimes these programs can become controversial, as was seen in a recent controversy over a soup kitchen run by a local church. Members of the church and residents of the neighborhood complained because of the people who were being brought into the area and the kind of behavior they were exhibiting.<sup>20</sup>

### **How Does the Budget Process Work?**

There are many ways in which a budget helps a church to deal with their money more responsibly. First of all, budgeting money enables people to consider the consequences before spending emotionally. It requires careful planning, and knowledge about the history and activity of the congregation. There are always difficulties when people deal with money—financial questions often put pressure on marriages as two people come together and decide how to spend their money collectively. That pressure often strengthens the relationship, however, and provides a greater sense of connection to the same community. This can also happen as a church comes together to deal with its own finances. The process usually gets many people involved and committed to the church, and if done well it can give the congregation greater confidence in its leadership. Many of those interviewed said that they do not feel pressure in dealing with the money at the

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<sup>19</sup> Author interview with Anthony Brown

<sup>20</sup> The Commercial Appeal, June 26, 2005

church because of the relationship of trust that has been built between the staff and the congregation over the years. A budget also provides a way to monitor spending throughout the budget period, and can be an asset if the church needs to borrow money.<sup>21</sup>

Budgets often help churches spend money more efficiently; one financial assistant pointed out that it helps people to be more careful with church money when they see how much they spend on expenses such as copying laid out in the budget.<sup>22</sup> Of course, efficiency must be thought of in at least a slightly different way in a church setting. As one layperson put it, you have to take risks and cast out money trusting God will bring in a crop, referring to Jesus's parable of the farmer sowing seed on many different soils.<sup>23</sup> He also spoke of the need for a budget, however; there has to be some basic organization of human labor and capital in order to accomplish anything.<sup>24</sup>

A budget is especially important, as many of the people that I interviewed pointed out, as a way to outline the priorities of the church. The financial officer at the largest church of the group spoke of the budget in definite favorable terms, saying that it provides a road map for the church, eliminates confusion, and outlines church priorities.<sup>25</sup> One financial director said that the church budget is one of the most important ways that a church can show who they really are.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Role of the Financial Administrator**

As mentioned earlier, the person whom I interviewed at each church is the person who is most involved in their church's budget process. In a few cases this was the pastor,

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<sup>21</sup> Rev. Manfred Holck, Jr. C.P.A. and Rev. Manfred Holck, Sr., C.P.A, Complete Handbook of Church Accounting, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), 79-80

<sup>22</sup> Author interview with Cathy Jessee, June 30, 2005

<sup>23</sup> The Holy Bible, (Nashville, TN: Cornerstone Bible Publishers, 1999), Matthew 13: 1-9

<sup>24</sup> Author interview with Joe Porter

<sup>25</sup> Author interview with Anthony Brown

<sup>26</sup> Author interview with Julia Hicks

but half of the churches that I visited have a separate staff person who deals with church finances, whether this is their sole duty or they have other responsibilities within the church. The average membership of the churches with someone other than the pastor who deals with finances is 1520, while the average for churches with finances run by the pastor is 173 members. The transitional line seems to be around three or four hundred members. As mentioned earlier, the average membership of churches in the United States is only seventy members, but those smaller churches are underrepresented in this project because of the method used to gather the information.<sup>27</sup> However, it is important to note that many of these smaller churches have more problems actually handling their money related to the fact that the pastor, who likely has little or no financial experience, is in charge of the budget.

Those staff members who deal with finances have numerous duties under their financial role. They are the key player in the budget process, getting the budgets from last year out to all the committees and entering all old and new budget information into the church accounting system, if the church has one. They are sometimes involved in the process of ‘selling’ the budget to the congregation. Throughout the year, they deal with paying the bills and doling out the money to various projects included in the budget.

One financial assistant talked a good deal about the new financial software that her church has switched to in the past year: QuickBooks. This new software changed the budget process drastically, giving everyone involved easier access to different budget components and maintaining a much higher level of organization, as well as making her job much easier.<sup>28</sup> There was an initial slowdown due to the learning curve, but it is really

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<sup>27</sup> Author interview with Waring Porter

<sup>28</sup> Author interview with Cathy Jessee

helping the church to make the budget process proceed much more quickly than in previous years.

Most of these financial administrators have little actual decision-making power apart from their recommendations, but work with a budget and finance committee. The budget, or finance, committee usually consists of this financial staff person and several members of the congregation. A few mentioned the need for balance on this committee, saying that when there are both financial and laypeople on the committee it creates a healthy tension between the practical business minds and spiritual vision. One pastor mentioned that the financial people tend to want to hold onto or invest the money, but the tug-of-war is good and produces healthier end results. He also mentioned that the church had run into trouble in the past when the budget committee consisted only of businesspeople.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Actual Process**

The budget process may start anywhere from June to October, depending on the church. Almost every church involved in my survey creates a new budget yearly on the calendar year system starting in January. Only one church ran their budget on a fiscal year system. This was curious to me, so I asked for an explanation. The pastor of this church said first that it is because the church that ‘planted’ them a few years ago did it that way, but also because it makes fiscal sense. Historically, he told me, summer months are the lowest giving months and the highest are around December and January. He said that it makes sense to have the highest giving months in the middle of the fiscal year, and noted that the calendar year system had been problematic at a former church at which he was employed.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Author interview with Kenneth Letterman

<sup>30</sup> Author interview with Waring Porter

There are a few different approaches to the budget formation process that I observed and consequently categorized and named: the “dream budget” approach, the past budget approach, or the necessity approach. The first method involves collecting ideal budgets from each committee in the church. Most churches that were interviewed had committees for different ministry areas within the church, such as evangelism, stewardship, youth ministry, and music. The first method involves each committee submitting their ideal budgets for their area of ministry without consideration of monetary restrictions. These churches tend to be the ones that start their budget process earlier because of the time required to request and collect the individual committee budgets. The budget committee then compiles these and makes other necessary adjustments in other budget areas, such as cost-of-living increases in staff salaries. No matter what, as one financial director noted, the budget increases.<sup>31</sup> This budget is then presented to the congregation. The basic idea behind this method is to show the congregation what ministries the church wants to support in hopes that the congregation will respond generously. One pastor mentioned that seeing the budget helps people to give.<sup>32</sup> After collecting the pledges, the budget committee adjusts the dream budget to the funds available. A few of the people interviewed with this process explained the 80% rule to me: if the pledges will bring in eighty percent of the needed funds, they count on the fact that the rest will be brought in through plate offerings.

Another way to approach the budget process is by coming up with a budget after the funds are brought in from the pledge drive, and adjusting the previous year’s budget to the available funds for the coming year. The necessity method that I mentioned third is

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<sup>31</sup> Author interview with Virginia Dunaway

<sup>32</sup> Author interview with Kenneth Letterman

less of a method than simply the only option for churches in tight financial situations. It simply involves cutting the budget down to the bills and other non-negotiable expenses.

Regardless of method, after the budget is adjusted it is usually necessary that a governing body within the church approves it, be it a committee or a session. This is done in the last few weeks of December for those churches that operate by the calendar year.

One church at which I interviewed is not actually a church yet, but is still considered a mission and has been in existence just a few years. The pastor spoke to me about the changes that are about to take place in the church as it begins to move into a budget process like the ones listed above. Right now, the budget is created and approved by a leadership team but this fall they will begin to make the congregation more aware of the budget process because the church is moving toward becoming self-supported. Currently, the mother congregation supplies 35-40% of the budget and the rest is collected in the plate offering, as the church has not yet started using pledge cards. The pastor talked a good deal about how important it is to make the congregation aware of the budget, as it serves to transfer the feeling of ownership and responsibility to the members of the church. He used the example of a young adult moving away from home—when he or she sees the bills coming in, they will be more likely to see the importance of working hard and regulating spending.<sup>33</sup>

There is only one church in the sample group that has a congregational vote, but the budget at other churches is usually made available to the congregation in booklet form or presented during a church service either during the pledge drive or after it is completed. At any rate, I had no difficulty gaining access to any of these budgets, aside from the ones mentioned earlier. The United Methodist church actually has a book published each

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<sup>33</sup> Author interview with Waring Porter

year with the budgets of each of the churches, including the salaries of the pastors; there may be other denominations with similar books, but this is the only one that was brought to my attention.<sup>34</sup>

### **Pledge Drives**

Churches bring in money to fund their budgets by conducting pledge drives, which usually take place in the fall in the middle of the budget process. There is often a ‘Stewardship Sunday,’ where the service and sermon focus on the Christian call to be a good steward of the resources God has given. On this Sunday, the churches give out pledge cards for the members of the congregation to fill out and return, outlining the amount of money they are committing to the church for the next year—this is usually paid in monthly segments throughout the year. The financial advisor at one church mentioned that they were switching budget methods this year by showing the congregation the budget before setting it in response to a request from the stewardship committee (separate from the budget committee), adding that some years they choose a “budgetary strategy” and sometimes they choose a “biblical strategy” to raise money.<sup>35</sup> Some churches are more aggressive than others; one church actually goes through the roster of members and calls those who have not turned in a pledge card. The pastor who told me this also told me that some churches require that the members turn in their W-2 forms to the church, and they post them next to the amounts that each member gives; this, however, is not verified information.<sup>36</sup>

One issue that two different people brought up in conversation in reference to the stewardship campaign process is the present controversy over the ordination of gays and

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<sup>34</sup> Author interview with TroyAnn Pouloupoulos

<sup>35</sup> Author interview with Linda Stein

<sup>36</sup> Author interview with Kenneth Letterman

lesbians. At one church, the financial director spoke of the difficulty of setting a date for their pledge Sunday this year because they are hosting a conference pushing for the ordination of homosexuals; they hope to have their stewardship campaign the Sunday afterward so that people can get through the conference and see that it is a good thing—assuming that will be their reaction—and it will not hurt their giving.<sup>37</sup> Another person said that the only time that money has been divisive in their church was during the period when the national church ordained a gay bishop. For a while, some members refused to give money that would be sent to the diocese, but it passed over within a year.<sup>38</sup>

Endowments are a subject that tends to divide those in charge of church finances. Some spoke of endowment money as a “death wish” to a church.<sup>39</sup> Big gifts, especially ones with lots of strings, can really be a problem. In contrast, one financial administrator told me about a seminar that her church held a few years ago to teach people about leaving money to the church in their wills.<sup>40</sup> As a side note, this issue of losing money as members die is pressing to many of these churches, and was mentioned several times in interviews. One church, which is on the verge of either going under or changing rapidly, is staying afloat with the help of only ten to fifteen families, but those families are all over seventy years old. This church is supplementing that by using the money in their bank account from selling the parsonage, but that money will run out in about a year and a half—however, it is keeping the church alive while they try to change and grow with the neighborhood.<sup>41</sup> The larger issue behind those churches that believe endowment money is dangerous is that the money tends to provide a safety net under the church in

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<sup>37</sup> Author interview with Virginia Dunaway

<sup>38</sup> Author interview with Linda Stein

<sup>39</sup> Author interview with Kenneth Letterman

<sup>40</sup> Author interview with Linda Stein

<sup>41</sup> Author interview with TroyAnn Pouloupoulos

the form of a large savings account. One church decided to use the money in their savings account to move to a new building, although before this decision they never had to worry about how much people gave because they had that endowment. It was an intentional decision, however, to become less endowment-dependent and they are continuing to wean off of that dependency. Some see it as a risk, but they feel that it was a good one to take and one in which the main hesitation was the money issue—I was told that their decision to buy the new building in Midtown is one of the reasons that they are held up as an example by their national church.<sup>42</sup>

### **Satisfaction Level**

Almost everyone interviewed said that they were somewhat satisfied—not completely but not unsatisfied—with the budget process at their church. Some expressed the wish that more people would give, if only a small amount so that they could understand what stewardship is about, while others simply wanted the congregation to be more interested in where the money is going. One woman pointed out that when the people are supporting the church with their money, it ties them in to the work of the church and makes them feel more committed, a fact echoed by others who were interviewed.<sup>43</sup>

Another financial administrator, in response to a question about congregational satisfaction with the budget process, responded that most of the congregation would say that they do not know anything about the budget process, despite the fact that it is published every year and the budgets from the past three years are posted on a bulletin board in the church.<sup>44</sup> Everyone said, however, despite this apparent lack of knowledge on the part of the congregation, that to their knowledge most of their congregations are

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<sup>42</sup> Author interview with Julia Hicks

<sup>43</sup> Author interview with Linda Stein

<sup>44</sup> Author interview with Linda Stein

satisfied with the budget process.<sup>45</sup> The only person who said that he is completely satisfied with the entire budget process at his church is the local elder from the Jehovah's Witnesses congregation.<sup>46</sup> This is a unique case, which I will address later on.

When asked if the process tends to be divisive or cohesive, those interviewed gave mixed responses. Some said a little bit of both, and referred to the conflict within the church over the giving aspect of the budget process. All of the churches with committees said that the people on the stewardship committee understand and get excited about the concept of stewardship, just as those on the budget committee get excited about the budget. The challenge was in stewardship education for the rest of the people in the congregation who are not involved, and who as mentioned earlier often do not even have a clue about their church's finances. One pastor spoke of the collaborative budget process as a strength, making reference to unhealthy past years in her church where the process had been in the hands of one "budget Nazi."<sup>47</sup> This same pastor also said that the budget used to be divisive, but they now have so little money that the quarrels have been set aside out of necessity because the budget is so basic. Another financial assistant said that the budget process can be divisive when it is necessary to make decisions about which programs to support. Fortunately, this stops as soon as the budget is set; this is one reason why she is trying to speed up the budget process from four months to one month long.<sup>48</sup> One financial director made this analogy while trying to describe the benefits and difficulties associated with the budget process. She said that dealing with money in the church can help people to come to terms with this issue of money in the context of

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<sup>45</sup> Author interview with Cathy Jessee

<sup>46</sup> Author interview with Dennis Taylor, July 2, 2005

<sup>47</sup> Author interview with TroyAnn Pouloupoulos

<sup>48</sup> Author interview with Cathy Jessee

spiritual matters, which can seem like they belong to different worlds, in the same way as living in a human body and needing to bathe and deal with illness and injuries helps strengthen the spirit.

### **Money in the Church: Teaching, Tithing, and Critical Views**

A wealthy banker was quoted in a book about the church and money as being annoyed by his church's teachings about money when he was growing up because they taught that money is the root of all evil. Being a banker, he decided that the best way to reconcile religion and money was to keep them completely separated. "Money is a technical matter," he said. "If you tried to follow the Bible, you'd never get anywhere!"<sup>49</sup> This man's statement would indicate that, at least in some cases, pastors that preach about money often fail to do it in a way that relates to their congregation's lives and concerns, such as when money is described as nothing more than a temptation in the way of salvation.<sup>50</sup> When the church speaks of money only in terms of giving to the church, this tends to frustrate people like this man who spend 40+ hours a week working when the church addressed that part of their life solely to condemn the fruits of their labor. However, putting aside awkwardness on the side of the clergy, people also just do not like to talk about money—it is seen as an uncomfortable, private, and "tacky" subject, even though it is a subject that people naturally think and worry about a good deal.

In regards to linking the Bible to money, in a survey that was taken in the mid-nineties less than 1/5 of church members said that they had thought a lot about the Bible's

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Wuthnow, God and Mammon in America, (New York: The Free Press, A Division of Macmillan, Inc., 1994), 153

<sup>50</sup> Robert Wuthnow, The Crisis in the Churches, 147

teachings about money in the past year.<sup>51</sup> One of the primary reasons is because pastors have not been teaching about the subject. Howard Dayton, the CEO of Crown Financial Ministries, says that very few pastors realize the necessity of teaching their congregation about financial stewardship, even though they address other areas such as prayer, evangelizing, and worship thoroughly.<sup>52</sup> Some noted that it is necessary to find a balance: some churches are always asking for money, and others are afraid to talk about it. More conservative pastors do tend to focus more on money because the Bible does<sup>53</sup>; according to one biblical scholar, there are 2,172 biblical references to money and possessions in contrast to 272 to belief, 371 to prayer, and 714 to love.<sup>54</sup> In an interview with one financial director, she told me that there are differing views at her church of the infallibility of their scripture and therefore they do not necessarily use specific biblical references to guide their teaching about money. Despite views on scriptural reliability, money is something that many realize needs to be addressed, whether that be through the use of specific verses or by taking a broader approach. Some pastors who realize this necessity, however, feel incapable of speaking well about the subject, as most pastors' strengths lie in areas other than finance.

One Sunday, I heard a pastor at a church in Midtown outside of my interview area speak about money. At the end of the service, he began to talk about the need for fifty thousand dollars for their move to a new building, which they are making because they are running out of space. He said several times that he felt uncomfortable talking about

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches*, 65

<sup>52</sup> Howard Dayton, "Teaching God's Truth about Money," Rick Warren's Ministry Toolbox at <http://www.crown.org>, Issue 215, July 13, 2005

<sup>53</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches*, 73

<sup>54</sup> Wesley K. Wilmer, sermon, "Stewardship: A Key Link to Commitment and Ministry" (1994, Talbot School of Theology) cited in Rollyn H. Samp, *The Final Tithe (A Christian Approach to Estate Planning)*

money, but that it should not be that awkward—but he admitted that nonetheless it still is. However, he continued on and laid out a very clear explanation of the precedent in scripture of asking for money to build a new building. He had three brief points: those whose hearts are stirred should give, everyone could contribute something, and this is freewill giving. By this he meant that they were asking for a gift above and beyond what is needed for monthly expenses.<sup>55</sup> The subject was brought up again at the next two services, and rather extensively at the second of those—by the third Sunday, they had brought in twenty-six thousand dollars and by the fourth the final total reached sixty-nine thousand, nineteen thousand dollars beyond their original goal.

One of the questions in the survey addressed the interviewee’s opinion of how well each church dealt with the issue of money in its teaching, with a follow up question about the Christian church in general. Most people responded to this question by talking about the need for better education about giving to the church. One pastor, who had arrived at his church four years ago, told me that he is the first pastor to have talked about tithing in a sermon—the topic was so uncomfortable that he did not do even that until this past year.<sup>56</sup> A financial assistant at one church said that in her denomination it was seen as “tacky” to talk about money, and she thought that some other denominations did a much better job of teaching about tithing.<sup>57</sup> One financial advisor said that the members of her church tend to be wealthy and give accordingly, although it wasn’t clear whether this led to better stewardship education or whether it was caused by it.<sup>58</sup> Some mentioned the need for stewardship education to start at a younger age, because adults tend to see it

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<sup>55</sup> Church Service in Memphis, TN, July 3, 2005

<sup>56</sup> Author interview with Kenneth Letterman

<sup>57</sup> Author interview with Linda Stein

<sup>58</sup> Author interview with Virginia Dunaway

as a business transaction as opposed to an action of faith; one pastor said that trying to get business people to think in terms of faith was like pulling teeth from a crocodile.<sup>59</sup> One man also mentioned the difficulty of keeping the church from becoming just another business, and also said that those leading the church are not very good at talking about money. However, he said that the church in general needs to address the fact that many people who go to church do not know how to deal with their own money and the church has a responsibility to teach them.<sup>60</sup>

This opinion that the church should teach people to better handle their own money was only expressed by a few, but those who mentioned it felt strongly that it is very much needed in the church today. One pastor said that the primary teaching the church should be putting forth in regards to money is the need for accountability, because in this country we spend freely because we have so much money and do not have to think about it; he noted that this carries over into church spending as well.<sup>61</sup> Another financial director began to talk about a book called Your Money or Your Life; this book is about simple living, one of the three main goals of her church. Throughout the book, the reader is asked to reflect on how much they spend on survival, comforts, and luxuries—all good things, but how much is enough? The book concludes by saying that people need to find their ‘enough’ point. By halting their constant reach for more they can be happier and more generous with their money because they do not harbor resentment every time they give it away. She told me that her church teaches about money in a very good way, and is getting better because the pastor is very intent on educating about the subject.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Author interview with Kenneth Letterman

<sup>60</sup> Author interview with Anthony Brown

<sup>61</sup> Author interview with Waring Porter

<sup>62</sup> Author interview with Julia Hicks

## **Two Critical Perspectives**

There are two churches that I visited that not only are very different from the others but are also very critical of the bulk of the Christian church in America. The first is a Jehovah's Witness church, and the second does not belong to a denomination. I will address their comments here.

The Jehovah's Witness congregation is in the care of a few local elders, who each work up to twenty hours a week without pay in addition to their other jobs. The only church's only expenses are for their individual congregation's facilities and the Kingdom Hall that they share, and they also collect money for the building of Kingdom Halls for poorer congregations around the world. A Kingdom Hall is a larger meeting hall that is shared by many congregations which generally each hold two meetings there per year; the Kingdom Hall in Memphis is shared by over a hundred congregations. When there are smaller decisions to be made, like the choice to buy new chairs or stick with the old ones, the congregation votes after being shown the cost. They do not give money to needy in the congregation or the community; I was told that the people in the congregation assist each other when needed. The local elder said that they are not a philanthropic organization, but are concerned with spiritual welfare. He added also that most of the people in the congregation take care of themselves, and help others by teaching them how to do the same.<sup>63</sup>

This church was actually on the verge of starting a building campaign when I visited, and needed to present their plan for revitalizing their Kingdom Hall to the congregation to get money for the materials. The project will cost 1.3 million dollars,

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<sup>63</sup> Author interview with Dennis Taylor

which just covers the materials, because all of the labor is volunteered, including the builders, the architect, and the contractor.<sup>64</sup>

This church is especially critical of the way that the Christian church in America spends its money and teaches about money. Several people there made references to the mainline denominations that they were a part of before joining this church, disagreeing strongly with the way that those churches dealt with money. They said their old churches were always asking for money; the change to the Jehovah's Witnesses was refreshing and stimulates more generous giving. The local elder that I talked to referred to a passage in the New Testament that says people should give freely and not under any compulsion, explaining that the teaching about money at his church frees people from the struggle to serve God over money. Other churches, he said, have money as part of their worship.<sup>65</sup>

The other church is the only non-denominational church in my sample; this church has been using the same budget since their relocation to Memphis from West Arkansas about a year and a half ago. Their expenses are very low because they spend less than one hundred dollars a week on their building, as they meet in space lent out by another larger church. Their greatest expenses are mailings that the church sends out and the seminars they organize to propose the word—the Bible—to others, because they do not ask for money for their seminars or speakers. People who have been touched by the teachings send money monthly to support them, providing much of this money, because the congregation consists of less than fifty people. The pastor told me that their vision is

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<sup>64</sup> Author interview with Dennis Taylor

<sup>65</sup> Author interview with Dennis Taylor

to minister to the Christian church in America, because she believes the church is has strayed from the example left by the early New Testament church.<sup>66</sup>

The pastor talked about televangelists, high on her list of those who do so much damage by teaching prosperity theology. She said that money is a great provision and should be used to glorify God by taking care of needs, not to gain material things and power and status. Many whom I have interviewed would agree and said themselves that having money is not the problem—money is a necessary and wonderful tool. However, when it becomes something that is held onto then a problem arises. The church is not doing enough, as this pastor said, because these people spend much of the church’s money building monuments to themselves. The Bible teaches that people should save money and prepare for themselves, but that their money is for their brethren. It is important, however, to fix individual problems associated with money management before those problems in the church can be fixed.<sup>67</sup>

I asked what she believed needs to be done to correct this problem in the church. She responded that the better path is to not attack money or property, because the problem is the spiritual condition. To fix this spiritual condition, the church needs to go back and rebuild the foundation. There are over three hundred denominations in the United States—while they obviously can’t all meet together in one building, there has to be something that can be done to bring the body of Christ together.<sup>68</sup>

Several people mentioned the prevalence of prosperity theology, also called Gospel of Giving, something that they all criticized severely.<sup>69</sup> The idea behind

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<sup>66</sup> Author interview with Amelia Turner Quinn

<sup>67</sup> Author interview with Amelia Quinn

<sup>68</sup> Author interview with Amelia Turner Quinn

<sup>69</sup> Robert Wuthnow, The Crisis in the Churches, 161

prosperity theology is that if you give, God will bless you. Some call it “psychological mind-bending” which comes from taking a marketing approach to teaching about money.<sup>70</sup> However, there are biblical references that have been used to verify the belief that certain blessings are reserved for those who give.<sup>71</sup> One woman that I spoke with outside of an interview setting told me that she is on the budget committee for her church, and wants to use one such reference as the basis for a new program at her church: she wants to challenge people to tithe for sixty days, but if they want the money back afterward it will be returned to them.

A recent article in the Northwest Arkansas Business Journal about the separation of church and business addresses the issue of prosperity theology from the business angle. The author, Gwen Moritz, pointed out that she had no problem with church advertising, which some find fault with, but complained about the use of Christianity as a marketing approach to entice people to choose one vendor over another. The writer goes on to say that although most of these Christian businesses claim to give a portion of their profits to some charitable organization, most of the profit goes to the business, which she calls “the living embodiment of the ‘prosperity gospel.’”<sup>72</sup>

## **Stewardship**

Most of the literature about money and the Bible available today deals not with church spending but with the personal side of stewardship—giving to the church and taking care of one’s own finances. While often used in connection with this, tithing has been described as just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to stewardship.<sup>73</sup> There are

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<sup>70</sup> Author interview with Julia Hicks

<sup>71</sup> The Holy Bible, Malachi 3:8

<sup>72</sup> Northwest Arkansas Business Journal, July 4, 2005

<sup>73</sup> Author interview with Rocky Parsons, June 29, 2005

many definitions of stewardship, one common one being the use of one's money and possessions to bring happiness to others and make the world a better place.<sup>74</sup> A Christian accounting equates good stewardship as "good care of finances."<sup>75</sup> Larry Burkett, the author of many books on the subject of personal finances and debt-free living, calls stewardship the care of another's property, which gives a different impression of the original ownership in the picture of stewardship.<sup>76</sup>

For whatever reason, the baby boomer generation and those following in their footsteps give less to the church than the previous generation; it takes approximately three young families to compensate for the giving level of one older family. Church members today are giving to their churches at a rate of approximately two to two and a half percent of their income; the number varies slightly depending on the source.<sup>77</sup> One possible explanation is that America is becoming less religious, but there is also more competition for the money usually given to the church. There are many options these days for those people who want to donate their money, in terms of charitable organizations other than churches. Some people do not give to churches because they do not believe that their money is being put to good use there, but 72% of church members in one survey agreed with the statement "churches use the money they get wisely and responsibly."<sup>78</sup>

## **Personal Finances**

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<sup>74</sup> Robert Wuthnow, The Crisis in the Churches, 122

<sup>75</sup> Reverends Manfred Holck, Complete Handbook of Church Accounting, 276

<sup>76</sup> Larry Burkett, What the Bible Says About Money, (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, Inc., 1989), Introduction

<sup>77</sup> Robert Wuthnow, The Crisis in the Churches, 23

<sup>78</sup> Robert Wuthnow, The Crisis in the Churches, 158-161

Personal finance is a subject, at least in evangelical church circles, that has been talked about a great deal in the past couple of decades. This is due in large part to organizations such as Crown Ministries, started by Howard Dayton in 1985, and Christian Financial Ministries, started by Larry Burkett, best known for his daily radio show, in 1976. These ministries came together in 2000 as Crown Financial Ministries with the mission of “equipping people worldwide to learn, apply, and teach God’s financial principles so they may know Christ more intimately, be free to serve Him, and help fund the Great Commission.”<sup>79</sup> The organization is known for its bible studies, seminars, and physical and online resources for businesses, individuals and families, and churches.

One thing emphasized by Crown is the importance of having a personal budget. The reasons given by many for this are similar to the reasons for having a church budget. One man encourages everyone to have their own personal budget, citing the biblical command to know one’s flocks and herds.<sup>80</sup> It is necessary to know what you have so that you do not waste it, he said.<sup>81</sup> This idea is even more pressing for our current time, as many members of the middle class that make up eighty percent of the church in American today are facing serious financial pressures.<sup>82</sup> It is arguable that they bring these upon themselves because the baby boomer generation lives on 122% of their income as opposed to their parents’ generation, which lives on 88% of their income, but many of these families still live from bill to bill despite the fact that they are living off of two

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<sup>79</sup> <http://www.crown.org/AboutUs/default.asp>

<sup>80</sup> The Holy Bible, Proverbs 27:23

<sup>81</sup> Author interview with Rocky Parsons

<sup>82</sup> Robert Wuthnow, The Crisis in the Churches, 23

incomes.<sup>83</sup> Interestingly enough, three out of four Americans claim to have a personal budget, but follow-up questions show that these budgets are often vague or seldom considered. However, among people who say they have though a lot about the Bible's teachings about money, the percentage with a detailed personal budget rises from 7% to 15%.<sup>84</sup>

### **Theology and Budgets**

I asked each person interviewed whether there is specific theology behind the way the budget is created in order to see whether those who are most involved with money in the church think about possible theological implications for how to spend the church's money. One pastor spoke of the theology of mission, telling me that one of the budget requirements is that at least 10% of the money goes to mission.<sup>85</sup> Another church always aims to increase outreach.<sup>86</sup> Although some support missions and outreach primarily through the national church, most individual churches do support their own local missions. One financial director said that if scripture repeats anything over and over, it is the importance of caring for the poor, both the financially poor and the poor in spirit. Her church just moved into a new building, and she said that their theology about spending makes them uncomfortable about the budget right now because of how much they have to spend on their building. The tension is good, she told me however, because they struggle to fight their American notions that certain practical issues having to do with the building have the trump card over serving others around them.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Author interview with Rocky Parsons

<sup>84</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches*, 145

<sup>85</sup> Author interview with Kenneth Letterman

<sup>86</sup> Author interview with Virginia Dunaway

<sup>87</sup> Author interview with Julia Hicks

One person honestly said that unfortunately, in her opinion, salaries and facility expenses take up most of the budget and that there is not much theology behind that.<sup>88</sup> Another simply responded that no, there is no theology behind the way the budget is set up. It is evident by looking at that specific church and the amount of time and money that they put into ministry that they are serious about where their money goes; what that means about theology is unclear. This same man, however, did have a good deal to say about money in the Bible and what it means for money in the church, which perhaps speaks to the confusing nature of the question. He pointed out that many of the sayings in the Bible dealing with money talk about planning.<sup>89</sup> One pastor, who seemed to genuinely understand the question, really got to the point of what I was asking about the budget process, and he said that it is important to be discerning and have accountability in deciding the budget priorities.<sup>90</sup> Another spoke of the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 as a call to invest money in people to make life better for them, to make them feel special and to let them know that Jesus loves them.<sup>91</sup> Despite this man's insights, it seems that this may be a difficult question for those people who are in the financial staff positions. Both pastors and financial directors made reference to the fact that the pastors are generally responsible for providing that vision and theological basis in the budget process, or at least providing some such input.

One way to think of the theology behind the money is to take the mission statement of the church and see how money is used to carry out that mission statement. One financial person told me the mission statement of her church: to know Christ, and to make Christ

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<sup>88</sup> Author interview with Linda Stein

<sup>89</sup> Author interview with Anthony Brown

<sup>90</sup> Author interview with Waring Porter

<sup>91</sup> Author interview with Anthony Brown

known. She then said that it would be wonderful if they looked at every budget item in terms of that mission statement, but they do not. Another person said that the greatest commandment is basically to go out, so they need to put money into missions and outreach. In light of that, however, this same man said that it is also important to teach people to fish and not just to give, making a reference to a New Testament passage where Jesus called the fishermen and told them that he would make them fishers of men.<sup>92</sup>

### **Desires for the Future**

Money is necessary, as has been said many times, but it is impossible to underestimate the additional importance of the giving of time and talent to the church. One pastor spoke of an electrician at her church who put in 640 hours worth of work in addition to \$800 worth of materials to fix up the computer room which is used for training people in the community to provide them with marketable job skills. This particular church is tight on money at the moment, and the pastor told me that there really would be no mission or outreach without donations of that kind.<sup>93</sup> Another pastor talked about a mechanic in his congregation who decided that he wanted to donate some of his time and resources to the church by mowing and edging the lawn once a week—this saves the church \$13,000 per year.<sup>94</sup> Those who gave examples such as this have a real desire to see more people devote not only their money but also their time and talent to the church.

One interesting thing to note is that in talking to pastors they want people to donate more time and money. Talking to the financial directors, across the board they simply

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<sup>92</sup> Author interview with Anthony Brown

<sup>93</sup> Author interview with TroyAnn Pouloupoulos

<sup>94</sup> Author interview with Kenneth Letterman

expressed the desire to have more money; they are, of course, the people who really deal with the numbers at the church. A problem that one financial director noted with depending on time is that a congregation full of people with their own jobs and families really do not have very much time to give to the church, which is why it is necessary to have church staff.<sup>95</sup> Regardless of the reasons, more than one financial person stated that they wished their church had so much money that they did not know what to do with it all, especially so they could address deferred maintenance.<sup>96</sup> Another pastor wanted more money to engage in more planned ministry.<sup>97</sup> Even one person who said that they would like to see less money go toward their building said that that meant they either need a more stable building or more money.<sup>98</sup>

### **Practical Matters, Spiritual World**

I began this paper by introducing my belief in the importance of a budget as a measure of a church's priorities, as a tool for allocating the money of the church to its various ministries, and as a challenge to deal with spiritual matters in a practical world. My method and introduction to my sample of churches followed. I then presented my budget data, describing the average church budget: over half of the total budget amount is allocated to personnel, a significant portion is devoted to maintenance, and approximately five percent goes to each of the other budget categories. At this point in the paper, some of the Midtown-specific challenges were addressed, after which I outlined the budget process in detail. This section includes a description of the role of a separate financial

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<sup>95</sup> Author interview with Virginia Dunaway

<sup>96</sup> Author interview with Linda Stein

<sup>97</sup> Author interview with TroyAnn Pouloupoulos

<sup>98</sup> Author interview with Julia Hicks

staff member, the budget committee, and the rest of the church throughout the creation, presentation, and confirmation of the budget. It concludes with some responses about the satisfaction level of those in charge of the church budget process: most are somewhat satisfied, but would, among other things, like to see more involvement on the part of the congregation in formulating the budget. The next part of the paper deals briefly with the teaching of the Christian church in America on the subject of money, covering stewardship, personal finance, and theology in the budget process. It also includes two rather critical views of the mainline church as it deals with money today from representatives of two churches who believe that those in the church spend too much of the church's money on themselves, and that the church needs to return to the foundational teachings of the Bible. The paper concludes by relaying the desires of those who were interviewed, the men and women whose knowledge, experience, and opinions make up so much of this paper. Most of them expressed the desire for more money in their church's budget, either to maintain or repair their buildings or to enlarge their outreach programs. Those who were pastors also expressed a strong desire to see more people give not only their money but their time to the church, citing examples in their own congregation of how effective this contribution can be.

The interview experiences were very enlightening, and gave me a fairly strong knowledge base about the budget process and the concerns involved with it. The people I talked to were, for the most part, very open and were excited that I was interested in what they did; when I asked for a copy of the church budget, qualifying my statement as I went, they were already a step ahead of me, handing me past and current budgets and stewardship campaign printings. I ended up with much information that I was unable to

fit into this paper. The one question, however, that was the most interesting and important to me was the question of what theology lay beneath a particular church's budget process. This question seemed to confuse most people of whom I asked it, however, and while it sometimes sparked interesting conversation, it was often left unanswered. I conclude this paper by observing how interesting it is, given the relationship between Protestant churches and the Bible, that few churches in my sample consider theology, at least in those words, when formulating their budgets. Asking about the theology underlying a particular church's budget seemed like an obvious question to me, but it was enlightening for me as a college student who spends a great deal of her time in books to see that in the real world it often seemed to matter little at all. I mentioned earlier that one of the challenges and benefits of the budget process is that it forces the church to bring spiritual matters into the context of the practical world. The practical tools are invaluable to maintain a planned, accountable process that can safeguard against carelessness with and abuse of the church's money. However, I think it is necessary that the church not overlook the other side of that challenge: to look at practical matters in the context of the spiritual world that it teaches about. This is one of the many balances that churches can seek as they allocate their financial resources, with a goal not as much of discovering the perfect balance but of maintaining the tension of the struggle to keep the church strong for those practical and spiritual tasks ahead of it.

## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What is your position at this church?
2. How long have you been:
  - a) At this church?
  - b) In your current position?
3. How many others are here on staff?
4. About how many members does this church have?
5. How many people would you say attend Sunday Services in an average week?
6. What denomination does your church belong to?
7. When did this church come into existence?
8. Is membership currently growing, declining, or staying about the same?
9. How would you describe the congregation in terms of family style and age?
10. How would you describe the congregation theologically? Politically?
11. How would you describe the congregation economically?
12. What is your role in the budget process?
13. What does the budget process at your church look like?
  - a) How involved is the congregation?
  - b) How involved is the staff?
  - c) How long does the process take?
  - d) How often do you create a new budget?
14. Do you feel that the budget process generally strengthens or weakens your church (is it divisive or does it bring people together)? Why?
15. Do you feel that your church handles the issue of money well in its teachings? (very well, fairly well, poorly) Do you feel that the Christian church in general handles the issue of money well in its teachings? Does this affect the budget process at your church? If so, in what way?
16. How much does the budget change from year to year?
17. Is there theology behind the way the budget is set up or how the money is divided?
18. How do you think what the Bible says about money can be applied to the process of forming church budgets?
19. What pressures do you feel in your role as a decision-maker, from congregation or staff or your own personal beliefs?
20. Are there any pressures you feel that you think are specific to the Midtown/Memphis area?
21. Are you satisfied with the budget process at your church? (completely, somewhat, very little) To the best of your knowledge, are most people in the congregation satisfied? (all, most, some, few, none)
22. What changes would you have liked to see in the church budget in the past that have not been made? Why haven't they been made?
23. What changes would you have liked to see in the church budget that have been made? Why were they made?
24. Do you have any plans or idea for changing the budget in the future?

