

Netteburg ?

REPORT ON INTERVIEWS WITH PASTORS IN THREE CONFERENCES
REGARDING TITHING PRACTICES IN THE LOCAL CHURCH
Columbia Union Conference

Setting:

At the request of the Columbia Union Conference President a total of fifteen pastors and two conference staff personnel were interviewed by the Columbia Union Ministerial Secretary in three separate focus groups at the Ohio, Potomac and New Jersey Campmeetings, during the latter part of June, 1988.

Prior to each of these interviews the conference ministerial secretaries were asked to select five to six pastors to meet with the union ministerial secretary to discuss the issues of tithe return in their churches.

During each of the interviews, three basic questions were asked. Although the interviews proceeded along the lines of these three questions, there was significant input that resulted when the groups moved away from strict adherence to the three questions, which were:

1. What are the prevailing attitudes, feelings and perceptions, positive or negative in your churches regarding tithe return?
2. What are your thoughts and feelings, positive or negative (as a pastor) when it comes to tithe return and distribution?
3. What do you think the corporate church could do to improve overall response when it comes to the question of tithing?

Although it is recognized that such questions could have the natural effect of encouraging the negative responses of the pastors, this did not turn out to be the case. All of the pastors were thoroughly candid, while their candor was conditioned by a basically positive outlook.

These interviews were originally designed to address only the issue of tithing in the local church as an ongoing part of the Columbia Unions Vision 2000 support system to the local Conferences. At two of the interviews, however, the ministers were asked just before the interviews for unrelated reasons, to fill out a survey on employee remuneration. This accounts for the emphasis on worker remuneration from the pastors.

The responses of the pastors will be summarized below. This

summary is based on careful listening and extensive note-taking by the Columbia Union Ministerial Secretary.

SUMMARIES

I. OHIO CONFERENCE

Note: In the Ohio Conference there were four pastors present and one conference office staff person, who was suggested for the interview because he had been involved in Ohio's own tithe study. Pastors were from both large city parishes and average rural or small town settings.

1. What are the prevailing attitudes, feelings and perceptions, positive or negative in your churches regarding tithe return?

Responses:

Tithe is not seen as sacred as it used to be.

Tithe is seen more as an arm of church organization than as a divinely ordained principle.

Thus, if a layman does not agree with the way the tithe is being used, or how he/she perceives it is being used, it is withheld or paid somewhere outside of the church, or to some ministry within the church (eg. V.O.P.), or to some independent ministry (The pastors did not feel that much was going to the independent ministries).

Some feel free to use the tithe for their children's Christian education expense.

There is an increasing dissatisfaction over the perception that so much of the tithe and other offerings are sent on to higher levels of the organization while the local level does not benefit to the extent it needs to from these funds.

Laity perceives inconsistencies in leadership in the church; this affects credibility, and thus tithe income is impacted negatively.

There are some questions regarding what the "storehouse" is when it comes to tithe - ie. where exactly one should pay his/her tithe. This question is especially challenging when people wish to pay tithe to some cause or ministry within the church.

2. What are your thoughts and feelings, positive or negative (as a pastor) when it comes to tithe return and distribution?

Responses:

I have a hard time seeing millions going out of the local congregations, when so much more is needed at the local level if the work of ministry is to be done as it should be.

I often feel like a professional fund raiser.

When the troops (local churches) are commanded to "storm the hill", even when they are under fire, there often does not seem to be much meaningful "air and naval support" (conference/union).

It is difficult to unequivocally call for faithful stewardship when I know of those in my church who have questions about the use of the tithe and the overall management of church monies, but I still do.

Note: It was clear that much of what the pastors said about the feelings and perceptions of their church members, was also felt by them. Surprisingly little was said regarding remuneration in the Ohio interview, when compared to the responses in Potomac and New Jersey.

3. What do you think the corporate church could do to improve overall response when it comes to the question of tithing?

Responses:

The conferences need to use the mail more, as other ministries in the church do.

The corporate church must communicate more with the local church member. It must talk more about its mission.

If people see successful evangelism in the churches, then they will get into it more financially.

We need to do more practical indoctrination of new members when it comes to the practical issues, the actual how-to's of giving.

The people must be given the big picture, the whole picture, more clearly than they have been given it so far.

We need to write more convincing materials (stewardship etc.) aimed at young couples especially.

The young professional particularly needs to be told up front exactly how the tithe is disseminated. Plenty of clear, honest material needs to be widely distributed by way of information with the young couple especially in mind.

People need to know exactly how the tithe benefits the local church.

People need to know the rationale for the division of tithe.

Church leadership must project its willingness to actually listen to the church member.

We must at the same time share the spiritual aspects of tithing more than we do the organizational aspects.

We must minimize the amount of money being taken out of the local church and distributed to all kinds of corporate projects.

We must realize that the most important corporate project is what is done in the local community by the local church.

We must leave more money in the conferences and churches.

The pastor and the people are tired of talk...."We've talked enough....there is the perception that much of the talk by administration is propaganda....What is said must be carried out."

II. POTOMAC CONFERENCE:

Note: In the Potomac Conference, six pastors were interviewed. Two were from churches in the Washington D.C. area, two others from larger metropolitan areas in Virginia, and two from small Virginia towns near the center of the state.

1. What are the prevailing attitudes, feelings and perceptions, positive or negative in your churches regarding tithe return?

Responses:

The right wing says that unless you teach or believe as I believe, you won't get my tithe. The left wing may say similarly, that unless you administer the church after my preferred style of leadership, you won't get my tithe.

At this point only some of those who feel this way have acted out their thinking.

Some of this tithe may go to ministries such as It Is Written, or to independent ministries.

We are hearing a lot of "negative stuff" such as:

- Because the denomination is laundering tithe monies, we are going to pay our tithe to the local budget.
- We feel that we are being lied to.
- We are going to keep more of the money in the local church so that we can have more control over how it will be used.

People see embellished staff at other levels of the church organization and ask, "How can it be?"

They are concerned about the rising educational costs in the church.

There seem to be a number of young couples coming back to church or coming into the church who are returning tithe, but they do not have a voice in the running of the church. Many of them see the church, especially the General Conference as quite autocratic. The receiving of their tithe dollar will be tenuous until they feel that they are being listened to.

2. What are your thoughts and feelings, positive or negative (as a pastor) when it comes to tithe return and distribution?

Responses:

We say that the local church is the driving force of the denomination, but is it? Are we really putting our money where our mouth is?

Pastors have a conflict of interest; they are supposed to say that the tithe should go to the conference, but increasingly people in the churches are saying that it is needed at the local level.

This is only going to intensify.

If we want or expect the church to grow, we must invest more money and other resources on the local level where the ultimate action of the church is.

Increasingly over the last few years there has been a rising sense of the local church being drained of its financial resources in favor of corporate church projects, needs or desires. This creates a very uncomfortable frustration in the local church and especially in the local pastor. While he is expected to fulfill the mission of the church and the desires and

plans of those on higher levels of the church, he finds himself increasingly short of the resources needed to do the task he is assigned to do.

He also has little significant say in the decisions that affect his sphere of influence in this way. He feels that very few are really listening to this obviously real dilemma that he finds himself in. The very levels of the organization that expect him to be the force that really causes the church to grow are the levels that find it possible because of their position and authority to take inordinate amounts of money from the local level so that he cannot fulfill effectively the mission of the church and the desires of his own heart, and that of his congregation.

Note: The particular line of thinking in the preceding two paragraphs was initiated by one pastor, but was built upon by the whole group. Judging by the level of emotional involvement at this point, this was an issue that was keenly felt by the group.

The tithe has always been seen as sacred, and theologically this is understandable, but local funds have not been promoted as the tithe has been. Thus the local scene seems to have a degree of financial difficulty that other levels of the organization do not feel as the local level does.

Heavy staffing at the higher levels of the church, cause especially deep concern in pastors. This is especially so on the union level.

The denomination seems first to finance and care for the "fat" of the organization before it cares for the real needs at the local level. This occurs because there is no natural way for those on the local level to actually communicate their needs where it really counts. Those making major financial decisions for the church operate almost exclusively on upper corporate levels of the church, and therefore have little emotional investment in or consciousness of local needs. Thus when corporate budgets are discussed the needs of the local church are not carefully considered. The potentially negative impact of corporate financial decisions on the mission and function of the local church is not taken into account.

The recognized in-church ministries, such as V.O.P. get money through the World Budget, and then on top of this they send out appeals to the local church member for further financial assistance, thus draining off more from the local level.

Why do we need ADRA and Ingathering? Although they do complement one another, ADRA is another corporate program that ultimately receives income from the local church.

When it comes to remuneration, ministers are beginning to get more vocal.

In some conferences ministers have been on half salaries and at times the cost of living has not been passed on.

There are reasons for the fact that young men are not going into the ministry as they used to. Some of these are financial.

There are ministers who are seriously thinking of leaving the ministry. A significant reason for this is that they are not able, despite their best efforts to live with the degree of financial stability that they need to have while keeping their families reasonably stable and content.

There are nine pastors who have specific plans to leave the ministry in this conference. (This statement received some discussion, one pastor questioning the authenticity of the statement made by another.)

3. What do you think the corporate church could do to improve overall response when it comes to the question of tithing?

Responses:

Cut away top heavy fat in the unions and at the G.C.

Sit down and look seriously at how and when this may be done.

Decentralize. There must be more say on all levels of the church structure.

The local pastorate must actually be seen as the essential place for ministry. As with the United Methodists, those in places of corporate leadership should regularly be revolved back to the local level.

The church must find a way of having more money stay at the local church level, even if some of the tithe remains there. Though even this is a partial solution.

A widely ranging solution, dealing with all of the facts of the problem, should be sought. There can be no tokenism or stop-gap approach.

III. NEW JERSEY CONFERENCE

Note: At the interview in New Jersey there were five pastors and one member of the Conference staff. The five pastors were from larger churches in the Conference, which include some metropolitan or urban churches and some small community churches which would be classified as institutional. All of the pastors in the interview group had been in New Jersey for some time. The ministerial director of the Conference was the Conference staff participant.

1. What are the prevailing attitudes, feelings and perceptions, positive or negative in your churches regarding tithe return?

Responses:

Members see tithe used questionably in the church organization and then they see cuts in the local field, such as the reduction in local pastors in the churches. This causes them to have questions.

Members are sending some of their tithe dollars to independent ministries because of their questions about the use of tithe in the church.

On the other hand the use of the tithe is not a great issue in New Jersey.

Some do have questions about the large outlay of money in such corporate projects as the building of the G.C. structure, while at the same time ministers are being dropped in the local fields.

Some would like to see more of the tithe stay in the local church.

2. What are your feelings, positive or negative (as a pastor) when it comes to tithe return and distribution?

Responses:

We will call for faithfulness in tithe return regardless of what the corporate church does as it manages the tithe income.

We see the tithe as sacred - no question here.

There are serious questions about the use of church of monies when cuts are occurring on the local level (such as pastors being taken from the field).

The reformulation of the package plan etc. has hurt the church and the pastor.

A significant number of our pastors are paying more than 50% of their salary for housing alone. There is nothing outstanding about these houses.

Some feel great pressure to get out of Social Security - they feel they must find some way to make ends meet.

"My wife must make up at least \$900.00 per month if we are going to make it."

"My wife has not had a new wardrobe in 5 years."

"I am facing the question right now, 'Where do I go from here?'" (Financially speaking)

"My wife does everything but preach. She should be paid something."

"Since we recently moved from a parsonage into a non parsonage (precipitated by an in-conference call) our monthly, out-of-pocket expense has increased by \$200.00 and our taxable income has increased significantly."

"A Pastor in Michigan is paying a housing rent of \$325.00, while in New Jersey I am paying \$1,300.00 per month. The extra expense to me is not reflected in the small amount more that I receive for residing in a high cost of living area."

We need to have some parity in income with other comparable professions, especially with other main-line denomination ministers. Pastors of other mainline denominations are paid from \$30,000.00 to \$70,000.00 per year.

The local churches could help the pastors more.

Pastors who have small children, have no serious problems, but just wait until their children go to school.

Many of us who have been in the ministry for some years, have not felt the "crunch" until just the last few years.

Pastors need help, early in their training when it comes to how to handle personal finances.

Men are coming into the field with large college and seminary debts.

The amount of money that the pastor is paid versus what professionals are paid in Health Systems seems to reflect the

degree of worth that is seen in the pastor.

Fewer and fewer 2nd, 3rd, and 4th generation S.D.A. young people are going into ministry.....Why?

Whenever the minister gets his raise, his rent goes up also. The rent raise often seems to go up more, proportionately, than does the salary.

New Jersey is a great place to work, though....!

When we think of moving, the big issue is not the call or what size church I could be in. The big issue is, just to be sure that my wife keeps her job.

Because of considerations like this, the whole philosophy of ministry is changing and the effectiveness of ministry is suffering. The role of the minister's wife also becomes far more important than it has been.

3. What do you think the corporate church could do to improve overall response when it comes to the question of tithing?

Responses:

Make Christian education free to ministers, at least handle it so that it is not seen as salary.

Moving expenses should be increased, and should not be seen as income.

Restudy the expense of living in different geographical areas, and revamp remuneration scales accordingly.

Travel and auto reimbursement do not cover actual expenses. There is an urgent need to restudy and reformulate this area.

In some conferences ministers receive allowances that amount to more than ministers in other conferences, this should not be.

Conclusion:

Although each of the three groups seemed to emphasize different aspects, certain themes tended to come through clearly in each of the interviews. Four closely related themes seemed to especially emerge:

1. There was a heightened perception among these pastors of dwindling financial resources both in the local church and in the pastor's personal finances - a perception which was not as acute a few years ago, and one which contributes to serious frustration and handicap in doing the work of ministry/ evangelism in the local church.

2. There was a heightened perception among the pastors that the corporate church is taking increasing amounts of financial resource from the local church with little evident sensitivity for what such action is doing on the local level either to the mission/role of the local church or to the personal financial resources of the pastor.

3. There was the perception among the pastors interviewed that at present there are significant questions in the minds of some laity (The young professionals especially) regarding the use of the tithe dollar, that these questions are negatively affecting tithe income and that a voice in the church's future would help this condition.

4. There was strong feeling among the pastors that more money must be left on the local level if the work of ministry and evangelism is to go on in the Columbia Union as desired by all, and that this could be done if corporate church budgets/staffs could be cut and less money taken from the local level for an array of corporate needs and ministries, and/or more money left on the local level for the essential ministries of the church.

Note: The pastors in the interviews evidenced a clear understanding of their counselor role in enhancing the attitudes, perceptions and habit patterns of laity when it comes to tithing.

This summary shows little of this because it was felt that to press this issue with the pastors during these interviews could have negatively affected the responsiveness of the pastors to the very issues that were purposely being raised in the interviews.