

## The Alabama Plan of Stewardship Education

September, 2009

The year was 1969 and The Right Reverend George Murray was Bishop of the Diocese of Alabama, just before his departure to head the newly formed Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast. A task force headed by two young priests, Bill Stough and Bill Yon, challenged the leadership of the diocese to envision a less secular, more faithful stewardship method - their first and embryonic version of a new stewardship education plan. Biblically based and theologically sound, the new approach combined prayer, Bible study, psychological insights and good business methods to help parishes and individuals examine their current stewardship beliefs and practices, and gave them tools and resources to move toward a more spiritual and satisfying stewardship portion of their life in Christ.

As the program developed, a cadre of lay and ordained individuals was trained to assist parishes as consultants. Within a few years the parishioners of the Diocese of Alabama had the highest average pledge in the American church. (Alabama, for the year 2007, had the second highest average annual pledge, based on average Sunday attendance. CGC ranked 15<sup>th</sup>, and was just under the national church average.) Soon other dioceses and denominations took notice, and, what by then was known as the "Alabama Plan," spread throughout the nation and beyond, proving that its concepts and methods are universally applicable and effective, and as timeless as the Gospel which they follow and proclaim.

Believing that "the stewardship commitment of a parish will not rise above the level of commitment of their leaders," the Plan begins with that leadership, clergy and lay. A consultant shepherds the leadership through an "Exploratory" session to determine whether or not the parish is prepared to commit to the program. If so, the consultant and parish enter into a covenant based on a set of criteria, which include acceptance of the tithe as the Christian standard and goal, a long-range plan of increased outreach for the parish, and a commitment to private and corporate prayer for the parish and the program. A Stewardship Committee, which also subscribes to the criteria, is responsible for the recruitment of the needed Workers to make the Plan function. This "Godly Pyramid Scheme" is crucial, as it is these Workers who are "educated" in the concepts and theology of the Plan, and from whom increased commitment of time, talent and treasure is generally experienced. Their number is mathematically determined by the size of the parish, as the covenant commits the parish to provide one trained Worker for each four remaining parishioners. The original process envisions a Stewardship Sunday home visit by the Workers to those whom they have chosen. The Workers then report to the Team Captain who recruited them. There is also a follow-up group in place. A celebration of the parish's response is the prelude for a year-round stewardship education program for all ages.

There are a number of positive departures from the usual stewardship “campaign,” the most significant being:

1. Accepting the biblical tithe as the norm and goal of every Christian’s giving.
2. Calculating current giving as a percentage of income, and proportionate giving as a tool to move toward the tithe.
3. Waiting to prepare the annual parish budget until the pledges are known, rather than announcing a budget goal to be funded.
4. Replacing the “should” and “ought” vocabulary with “pray” and “consider”; substituting grace for guilt.
5. Defining clearly the distinction between secular “fund raising” and “Christian Stewardship,” with increased giving as a secondary result of Stewardship Education and practice.
6. Focusing on the spiritual centrality of stewardship as a gift from God for the welfare and joy of the giver, and as a powerful tool for Discipleship development.

My involvement with the Plan began in 1974 when I was new to the Church and to St. John’s, Montgomery. A friend visited us on Stewardship Sunday and, without apology or pressure, outlined the program, shared her own stewardship experience and left a pledge card with an invitation to consider the concepts. Carolyn and I prayed and talked, and, trusting God’s promises, adopted the goal of a tithe of all that God had given us. Because of the powerful positive impact this soon had on our lives, I wanted to learn more and to share with others, and was trained as an Alabama Plan Consultant. As my stewardship expanded my spirituality deepened, and within four years we were in seminary. In the parishes I have served since and as an outside consultant, I have used the Plan, and variations and insights of it, with unfailing effectiveness, both spiritually and financially, when faithfully applied and followed.

I remain convinced that the Alabama Plan of Stewardship Education was inspired at its inception, and that it continues to be a gift of grace to all who are led to adopt its discipline. I pray that we can truthfully echo Chapter 29 of 1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles, David’s magnificent hymn of praise, the ideal King now also the ideal Steward, in his quintessential statement of faithful stewardship - “All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.”

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