

STAINED GLASS WINDOWS OR FOOD?

Scripture Reading: 1 Chronicles 16:23-29, RSV

In our September board meeting, the Fundraising Committee wanted to get reactions to spending \$50,000 for stained glass windows in our sanctuary, perhaps as a goal device for our building campaign. They got reactions all right!

The subsequent discussion was amicable, yet intense. We got into the same kind of debate the Holy Trinity Catholic Church of Georgetown was in over spending that money for the windows or for the poor or some other need.

It was interesting to see that this dispute did not divide along conservative-liberal lines, or over social class. Different people have different priorities.

You will recall that I started this series on stewardship and the poor with the question of how we should spend our money. We looked at our responsibility to the poor for several weeks. Now I hope to spend a little time on the other side.

Let's begin by looking at the Biblical example on spending our money for beauty, especially in the house of God—in the tabernacle. God commanded that voluntary gifts be the support for it. In Exodus 25:3 and following, the materials are specified: gold, silver and bronze. There was also to be fine linen, spices for the anointing oil and fragrant incense, and various precious stones for the ephod and breast piece on the High Priest.

The ark was wooden, overlaid with gold. It rested on the mercy seat, made in the form of a solid golden slab. On top were small angels of refined gold. All of these appointments were designed to be beautiful!

When we come to the building of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, enormous expense was involved. Moreover, the Israelites spared very little when it came to creating beautiful music—even supporting the musicians with tithe. They also developed an ear for poetry and wrote great literature—most of it in the Bible. Generally speaking, however, they did little with art or architecture.

The point is that the Hebrews were lovers of beauty. They saw it as crucial to worship. They felt the need to make worship something extraordinary, an event that would take people absorbed in paying grocery bills and the routine of daily living out of the average, ordinary and practical, and move them into the unusual, the beautiful, the aesthetic.

Man, made in the image of God, must find outlets for his creativity. He is like the Creator who made a universe with infinite possibilities and infinite freedom. Worship was to involve experiences and expressions that lifted us out of the utilitarian and ordinary. That is why we need the aesthetic, the beautiful, the original. The crust of the ordinary needs to be broken up, if we would truly experience the Sabbath.

As Dr. Otilie Stafford puts it in an article in *Spectrum* (Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 9):

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church has spent much effort to understand and put into action each person's need for a body that can testify to God's presence in our physical experience. The church has spent much effort to understand and interpret doctrine, has spent much effort to educate the minds of its youth because it sees the importance of a thoughtful and trained membership. The church has stressed moral purity and ethical responsibility for its members. Truth and goodness are not argued about. But the aesthetic development of its members has been shockingly neglected. There seems to be a feeling that this is a luxury that cannot be afforded, a triviality that cannot be included in the serious life, a secular realm for which dedicated Christians have no time.

But art is essential to the church.

It draws us together in the experience of worship—creates unity and oneness. It helps us rise above the materialistic, cheap and violent. It civilizes us and refines us—it matures our emotional responses and makes us sensitive and understanding where before we were rigid, "judgmental, given over to practical matters, evaluating by economic and material standards" (*Ibid.*, p. 10, 11).

In other words, it helps us develop a genuine appreciation for excellence.

As Stafford goes on to say:

Churches these days debate whether or not to spend money on stained glass windows when there are illiteracy, unemployment, hunger, violence and disease two blocks away. One church recently dismantled its lovely old historical pipe organ and installed a cheap electronic organ because the money saved could be used for youth work within the church. Judged by monetary standards, such actions seem justified. We Adventists have consistently refused to invest vast sums of money in church buildings that are rich in stained glass, murals, sculpture, expensive organs or other "luxuries." But who is to evaluate the soul-stirrings, the fleeting perceptions of divine majesty in a moment of time, the sense of being lifted out of oneself, the sense of peace and calm of Sabbath time...the encouragement of freedom and human response—and for how many people—that are being sacrificed for the apparent saving of money, even of money that might be invested in a practical and worthwhile cause?

If we choose to save money on the construction of buildings, we might at least give more careful attention to those things that don't cost anything but thought and effort: the quality of worship in our services, the environment that we give our children and young people that might encourage their imaginative and emotional maturing, the richness of the symbols and imagery and unifying parables. These shape our lives, whether we wish or not. And if we do not ensure the richness and meaning of the imagery that affects our lives, they will be supplied by Kojak, Anacin and Archie Bunker.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has almost entirely ignored this fact. Perhaps some of the observable drift to the secular, the materialistic, or the mystical is a result of

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this. Perhaps our overwhelming concern with right act and wrong act, our intense absorption in intricacies of doctrine, have left us with a thinness of spirit—with much knowledge but little power (ibid., pp. 10, 11).

About now some of you must be wondering if I have reversed myself on the importance of the poor. Not at all. What I am trying to show you is that there are good reasons for doing both—spending money on beauty, architecture and worship, and spending money on the poor. Even the poor need beauty. They, too, need their spirits fed as well as their bodies. But these two needs create a tension within the church. When money is limited, which it almost always is, we must make hard choices.

It is wrong to think we can be clearly right or wrong in this matter. Tension is in the Bible—and is still with us. We must always live with the tension until Christ's kingdom is restored—when all beauty and all needs can be met.

The needs of the poor are, of course, the most pressing and immediate. But they are not always the only needs to be met. What about our responsibilities? Can we do something about world hunger? What about our own community and our community services program? What about our own building program?

Let me describe some of our needs for you on the basis of information given to me from Susan Harrington, our Community Services Director.

In the last month or two, we have been getting about two requests a day for help. If that pace continues, it will mean we will receive several hundred requests in a year. Many of the individuals who ask for help have ongoing problems that cannot be solved in one quick response. I would like to give you a few examples:

1. Client needs food stamps, but when he went to apply at the county department of social services, they declared him ineligible. Elder Zork acted as an advocate and helped him meet the eligibility requirement. The church also gave him \$12.
2. Client requested contribution toward a \$1,000 wheelchair needed for a 5-year-old quadriplegic. The parents were unable to get help from any government agency. We were able to give \$100.
3. Client (alcoholic, abused wife) requested help toward first month's rent. We were unable to help because we had no money left in our Emergency Aid fund. Referred her to emergency rent at county office.
4. Client a refugee from overseas. Needed help for rent and food while immigration status was being considered. Client was about to be deported because of confusion over status. Was given money for rent, food and utilities. Also, church acted as advocate for client to the State Department so they would regularize his status and allow him to go to work or attend school.
5. Request came from WAH for money (gave \$50) toward a bill for one of the clinic patients

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who was supposed to have a tubal ligation.

6. Client in Quebec Terrace Apartments needed food (four children, absolutely no food). Sligo gave \$40 and a volunteer took client shopping the next day.

Approximately 80% of the cases, after being screened by trained social workers, are helped in a financial way. However, there is a growing increase in requests. We urgently need volunteers who are willing to stay close to these families. Some of the people who ask for help are proud and don't come to us until they are desperate. We also need more money for our Emergency Aid fund.

Ron Graybill of the White Estate has outlined a number of concrete things Seventh-day Adventists can do for the poor.

1. Read Ellen White's *Welfare Ministry*.
2. Find out what agencies exist in your community to help the poor. Get them to speak to your neighborhood groups so your community can be informed. (This is one of the reasons we hired a trained social worker so we would know the best way to meet the variety of requests.)
3. See if we can help our own church's community services program and provide emotional, caring support (as well as financial support).
4. Consider paying tuition for a child who would not otherwise be able to attend church school. (Sligo is sending about \$1,000 a month to Sligo Elementary School to help many of our parents, but we know there are still more who have their children in public schools because they cannot pay the tuition.) The best way to ensure a child is not as poor as his parents have been is to educate him.
5. Don't stereotype the poor. Most poor people in this country are white, not black or Hispanic. Many are employed, but are underemployed. They are proud, just like yourself, and need to be treated as self-respecting individuals.

In my own boyhood, I learned the meaning of poverty. With my parents separated, my mother went on welfare. There were times we ate corn soup and peanut butter sandwiches for weeks. I remember that at the holidays the neighborhood police would bring us groceries they had collected from the merchants. Other times I would steal bread from the bakery so we could eat. A lot of the poor are elderly people who cannot make ends meet on meager Social Security benefits; they may just need help shopping.

6. Don't get discouraged. A Christian social worker does not have to see immediate and total alleviation of the problem he attacks. He knows Jesus is coming. Non-Christians are easily discouraged. They see the problem as greater than the solutions they try to work out.

But Christians believe God makes a difference. At least in our own fellowship, we can eliminate many of the problems for our poor people.

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We can show the community we live in that we are willing to help them—not only the poor but the affluent—with their habits, their problems and their emotional needs. The church is here to strengthen and build relationships and to help people find new meanings in life.

Who knows, when we have analyzed and studied everything thoroughly, we may even decide we need stained glass windows. I don't know, but we must decide and it is *we* who must sacrifice and it is *we* who will be blessed.