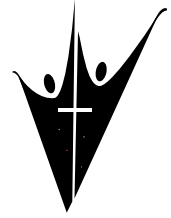

January

Let God lead us ... as we commit ourselves to the work of the church, in our congregations, our synods, our National Church and the world.



Deuteronomy 26:2 *You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.*



January often means New Year's resolutions. With a new year, it's time for the new you, a new perspective, a new commitment to change. Most often the challenge is to change our attitudes about ourselves and our world. We make promises that we want to keep.

The church goes through this process as well. At annual meetings, congregations begin the task of looking at the new year. A new perspective is formed through the

budget and evaluation process. Commitments are needed. Most often the challenge is to improve our mission, to support the programming and ministries of the church. We make promises that we want to keep.

What will it mean to keep those promises, to raise the commitment level so as to serve the church in new ways? Will you offer to serve in new areas of ministry? Will you commit to a short-term project that will bring a whole new way to share the gospel? Will you commit to a greater percentage of financial giving?

Challenge: As you participate in the life of your congregation through the annual meeting, think about ways you can serve. Make a resolution to raise your commitment level and then watch the gospel take flight in new ways.

*Rev. Elaine Sauer
Assistant to the National Bishop
Synodical Relations*

February

*Let God lead ...
to a new reason to give.*



Deuteronomy 26:2 *You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.*



This month, stop giving to the church! Do not read carefully through the church budget before you write your cheque! And above all, refrain from feeling obligated.

Too many Christians have learned to give out of a sense of responsibility. Perhaps that is why some throw in a dollar or two and feel that they have met their minimum obligation. People have learned to give in reaction to what they have heard—that the church needs a new roof, payrolls have to be met, equipment needs to be updated and maintained, bills have to be paid. The church does have

those needs but that is not why people should give.

The offering is a time of love and thanksgiving. It is one opportunity we have to joyfully return something meaningful to God. It is not a time to pay the bills.

But don't feel too relieved by this release from obligation. The decision making (How much shall I give? When shall I give it?) is now between you and God. You cannot stop giving when a congregational vote goes against your opinion or the pastor voices an idea you just can't swallow. And you can't rein in your really generous offering until a crisis occurs. Let the love of God explode in your heart. Give back to God out of that same love.

Challenge: Examine your giving patterns. Do they reflect an attitude of love and gratitude or a bill-paying sense of obligation? How should a child of our loving God feel about the offering?

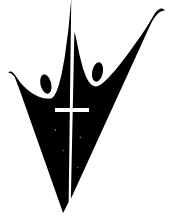
Barb Fast

ELCIC National Stewardship Coordinator

*(with thanks to "Stewardship News and Views"
from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Palm Beach*

March

*Let God lead ...
and live a simpler life.*



Deuteronomy 26:2 *You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.*



What are you giving up for Lent? My kids usually give up something like chocolate. Personally, I wish they would give it up forever! Maybe that's my problem with giving up things for Lent. I don't see much good in avoiding something for six and a half weeks, if we end up overdosing on the same thing for the remaining forty-five and a half weeks of the year.

The lesson that we can gain from Lenten self-denial is that all of us can and should lead simpler lives. There is so much that we do and have in life that we don't need.

I have a cousin who was once branded the "black sheep" of

our family—an unfortunate and extremely inaccurate description. More recently my family has come to know him as a model for simply living and living simply.

He and his wife literally built their home. I've only seen photos of this simple bungalow, but I love it. The walls are made of panels usually used in constructing industrial freezers. Their insulation value is high. Because of these walls (and living in Florida) they need neither furnace nor air conditioning. The panels are leftovers of industrial projects, so they cost very little. You should see the glow in my cousin's face when he shows off photos of his home.

We can and should lead simpler lives. Perhaps we can use Lent to remind us of that.

Challenge: Examine your own lifestyle and consider where you can live more simply. Could the time, money and energy you free up be shared with your church and community?

*Rev. Ernie Skujins
Pastor, Faith, Toronto
Dean, Toronto Conference
Member of Support Working Group, Eastern Synod*

April



Let God lead ... in our support of caring

Deuteronomy 26:2 *You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the*



On the first of April there may be snow outside and the days are cool. By the end of April the days are warmer. The ice in rivers and lakes breaks up. Spring rain cleans the air, the streets and our yards. However, those same showers can turn into heavy rains that do not know when to stop. Rivers overflow and become rampaging torrents of deadly water. The transitions of April can be enjoyable and welcomed or they can be feared and worrisome.

Our transitions in life are much the same. Some—receiving a university degree; getting married or having a child; working in an occupation we enjoy; running a marathon; or having enough money to do what we want—are enjoyable and welcomed. Other transitions are not

as positive. Failures in education, family life, and occupations, health crises and financial concerns are also a reality. Then where do we turn?

Our faith keeps us strong but there are times when we need counsel, or advice, a word of encouragement or a hospital visit. Did you know that some of the benevolence money that your congregation sends to your synod supports caring ministries? Pastors can take special training to counsel, a campus chaplain is employed to aid students, and hospital visitors are offered workshops to help them be effective.

In good times we may not think about all the volunteers who are in caring ministry but in our transitions, when we are in need, we expect that these individuals will be there for us. They are in need of our prayers, our encouragement and our financial support all the time, so that their ministry might continue.

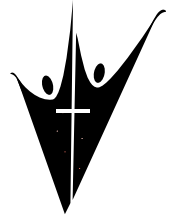
Challenge: In April, our transitional month, consider a special benevolence offering so that the synod can continue to support and train those in caring ministries.

Jim Thomas
Stewardship Consultant MNO Synod

Dolores Horn
Member, Faith Winnipeg

May

*Let God lead ...
as we remember our baptismal promises.*



Deuteronomy 26:2 *You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.*



promises. They accept the responsibility “to live among God’s faithful people, to hear his Word and share in his supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all God’s people ... and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.” Do you remember making those grand promises? Are you keeping them?

What a joy it is to celebrate the confirmation of our young people. It is a time of renewal, an occasion for relatives and friends to come together in support of the confirmands. Often our churches are bursting at the seams, aloud with song, and as Garrison Keillor puts it, “by our joining in harmony, we somehow promise that we will not forsake each other.”

More than that, confirmation is a time for young Christians to publicly affirm their baptism. They step beyond the care of the adults who love them and make their own

When the early church baptized German warriors, those fighting men would keep the hand in which they held their battle-axes out of the water for fear that Baptism would weaken their resolve and abilities in war. Do we try to hold part of our life out of the baptismal waters? Our wallet? Our time and talents?

Challenge: As we remember, through the eyes of our confirmands, the promises we’ve made and the extraordinary gift given us at Baptism, let’s offer ourselves wholly, responding as generous and faithful stewards.

*Tom Brook
Stewardship Consultant, SK Synod*

June

*Let God lead ...
as we celebrate God's gift of spring.*



Deuteronomy 26:2 *You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.*



It's June! Birds fill our yards with their singing and chirping. Buds on the trees are bursting into leaf and the first spring flowers appear. The days are the longest of the year. We look for any excuse to enjoy the outdoors, whether we are planting gardens or enjoying the annual congregational picnic. We praise the Lord for his creation and the beauty of this season.

June is also a month for dreaming and planning. Students dream of the end of the school year and make plans for summer jobs and fun with their friends. Families dream of summer holidays together and

make plans to go to a cottage at the lake or take a trip to an interesting destination. Gardeners and farmers dream and make plans for a bountiful harvest in the fall. Could life be better?

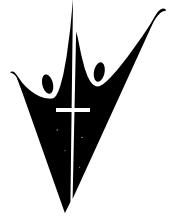
Unfortunately, for some, life could be better. There are people around the world, within Canada, within our synod and, yes, in our neighbourhood who do not look at each day, the month of June or the future with joy and excitement. Individually, we can help a few. As a body, benevolence dollars to your synod and the ELCIC support mission and ministry within the synod, our country and the wider world.

Challenge: Will you help to make June a month of joy, newness and growth for those less fortunate than yourself? Consider increasing your regular Sunday offering so that the ministry of the church can reach a little further.

*Jim Thomas
Stewardship Consultant, MNO Synod*

July

*Let God lead ...
into celebration*



Deuteronomy 26:2 *You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.*



Farmers don't take summer vacations. From the first blush of spring to the first snows of winter we are on the clock. The days are long. The work is hard, but there is joy that comes from the fruits of our labour. We celebrate the new lambs and calves in the fields. We give thanks for the first produce from the garden. We look with pride and hope over fields ripening under the summer sun and we know God is good.

Prairie farmers celebrate as Christians, at worship and as communities, at something called the county fair. These summer fairs share some of the spirit of the "feast of weeks." (Numbers 29:12) They provide a time

for feasting and celebrating before the Lord and for sharing our joy over the fruit of our labour and the bounty of God's creation.

What is it like for those who work at other jobs? Is work seen as a blessing? Are there rewards other than the paycheque? What are the "first fruits" and how is the bounty of God's creation celebrated?

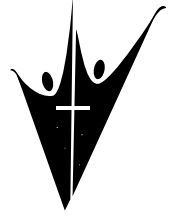
If farmers can make time for celebration during this, their most busy season of the year, certainly others can do the same. Let God lead you into celebration. Give thanks to the Lord!

Challenge: Think about everyone who is involved in bringing the food to your table, farmers, truckers, packers, manufacturers, grocers, financiers, cooks and even the child who sets the table. Give thanks for the work God has given to each of them and give thanks for the food which gives us life. Consider a special donation this month to your church or a local food bank.

*Rev Steven Olson
Pastor, Westside, Barrie, ON
Member of Support Working Group, Eastern Synod*

August

Let God lead ... as we support the educational institutions of our church.



Deuteronomy 26:2 *You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.*



There is much talk about fewer young people discerning a call to ministry in the church. What can we in the church do to encourage a change in this pattern?

Congregations successful in creating environments where young people learn to love ministry recommend these practices:¹

- Tell “call stories” in the congregation.
- Speak to individual young people about their particular gifts for ministry.
- Lift up the ministry as a worthy, relevant and joyful vocation.

- Open up opportunities for young people to engage in real ministry, leadership and service in the congregation.
- Maintain relationships with young people as they go off to educational institutions and other destinations.

One of the first fruits in this particular basket comes from us—our ability to recognize others’ gifts, our mentoring and sharing of our own gifts. This is the case not just in our interactions with young people, but with the unchurched, the inactives and the actives within our congregations. In the next month find at least three people you can encourage to share their gifts. Help them find opportunities to engage in leadership and service.

Challenge: This month, consider a special offering so that your synod can support seminary education, diaconal training and ELCIC church schools. Perhaps your congregation would like to sponsor a bursary or scholarship.

*Rev. Elaine Sauer
Assistant to National Bishop
Synodical Relations*

¹ *Horizons*, the newsletter of The Fund for Theological Education

September

*Let God lead ...
to a healthy, joyful lifestyle.*



Deuteronomy 26:2 *You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.*



Team sports, music lessons, a membership at the gym, cooking class, choir, a book club ... the calendar fills up and the bank account empties.

A philosopher once wrote that a person's priorities are clear in their appointment book ... or wall calendar ... or fridge door notes. If I read yours, I might see that you are concerned with your health, a talented or aspiring musician, and a creative artist but would I know that you belonged to a faith community?

Should we not donate our money and our time to our church at least as willingly as we do to the local community club, gym or music teacher? Surely equipping ourselves and our children with a faith is

worth as much as hockey sticks, running shoes or a trumpet.

This month, add up all the time and money that you spend on leisure activities, lessons and physical exercise and compare it to what you spend on your faith life. Then rejoice as you support your church and its ministry, knowing that with your donation, the church can add to your health, develop your talents and fill you with joy.

Challenge: Consider all your options before you fill your calendar. How will you spend your time and money?

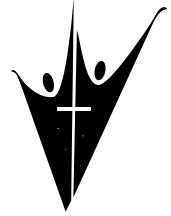
- *Sign up and support one child for one season of hockey.*
- *Sign up and support one child for one season of Sunday School.*
- *Tickets to the ballet, symphony or theatre centre.*
- *A weekly seat at the church of your choice, front row.*
- *Join a health club, improving your physical health.*
- *Join a group for Bible study, improving your spiritual health.*

Barb Fast

ELCIC National Stewardship Coordinator

October

*Let God lead ...
as we help those in need.*



Deuteronomy 26:2 *You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.*



Thanks be to God for your generous gifts in support of the mission and ministry of this church. Your offering makes a significant difference as we continue Christ's work in and through the church.

Within our congregations there are children to teach and youth to mentor. Adults need to hear words of hope. We all need to be fed the nourishment of the communion table and hear the words of salvation at the font. The sick and shut-in need to be visited and to be told that there is a whole church

community ready to support them in their need. Those who grieve should not walk alone.

Within our communities, there are people who need to be fed, clothed and guaranteed a warm place to sleep. They should not have to fear poverty, violence and oppression.

In the wider world are those who wait to hear the good news of Jesus Christ and to see his gospel in action. They have a right to fresh water, adequate food, opportunities for education, freedom from disease, war and disaster.

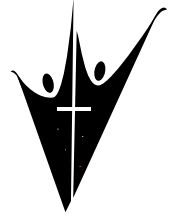
Jesus cares about us. He also cares about what we do in his name.

Challenge: Reach out and touch the lives of God's people. Give prayerful consideration to how you can increase your giving and expand the work of our church.

*Tom Brook
Stewardship Consultant, SK Synod*

November

*Let God lead ... as we joyfully
build a strong church for our children
and grandchildren.*



Deuteronomy 26:2 *You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.*



A hush falls over the congregation. Empty vases stand on plant stands at the front of the church. A lone bell ringer stands poised and ready, a bell in each gloved hand.

At Faith Lutheran Church, Winnipeg, it is time to celebrate the birth and baptism of babies within the church family and to give thanks for members who have died during the year. As the pastor reads the names of those who have died, a bell with a deep tone is rung and family members move to the front of the church to place a red carnation in one of the vases. At the names of each “new saint,” parents and siblings of that child make their way to the front of the sanctuary with a white carnation. A tiny bell with a high pitch

is rung to indicate that we have been blessed with a new member.

All Saints Sunday is a time to give thanks for the people in our past; those who brought us to the baptismal font, and guided our Christian journey, whose faith and vision continues to inspire us. It is a humbling experience to reflect on the sacrifices made by our ancestors. Our rich inheritance comes with responsibility.

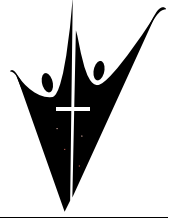
The tiny bell signals that the baton has been passed and those of us present will now assume the responsibility for these newest members. We will be mentors in their journey and provide a church that is strong and able to reach out in service and love. This is an awesome challenge that will take a huge commitment of time, talent and treasure.

Challenge: Recognize that All Saints Sunday is a perfect time to make a special gift to the church, one that honours the past and builds a strong future.

Dolores Horn

Member, Faith, Winnipeg

December



*Let God lead ...
as we open our presents.*

Deuteronomy 26:2 *You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.*



Christmas is a season eagerly awaited both within the church and in our secular world. Our senses are bombarded with sounds, sights, tastes and smells that draw us directly to December 25. Sometimes, however, Christian families struggle to teach that the climax of the Advent season is the birth of Christ – not the opening of the presents.

December is a month of generosity. Somehow pine trees and penny pinching cannot coexist. Churches and other non-profit organizations recognize this and anticipate the financial gifts that will come their way this month. The shopping malls do the same.

Generosity is a good characteristic, but the frantic tearing open of a plethora of presents on Christmas morning can be disconcerting. Can we blend the two?

This year, why not pause before the gifts are opened to thank God for your home, your family and the blessings of wealth that have allowed for all those presents. Say the prayer that is in your heart, or use one already-written such as: *Let us just for a moment, Lord, hold this time in our hearts. It is a time of mysteries and gratitude, smiles and wrong sizes, snippets of ribbon and screams of delight. Help us to remember the immense love you have for each of us. With each gift that is opened, no matter how perfect or not, let us feel again the many ways you gift us each day, especially with your presence in our hearts and the presence of each other in our lives. Amen*

Challenge: Enjoy being generous—thank God for teaching you how. Before you attend church to hear the Christmas story once again, consider deciding, as a family, to give a special gift there, too.

*Barb Fast
ELCIC National Stewardship Coordinator*