

# Stewardship Forum

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## Stewardship Tools for Leaders : Sermon Library

**Title: Who is a Christian Steward**

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### Who is a Christian Steward and What is a Stewardship Parish?

Stewardship is a way of living out our discipleship. It has to come from a mature faith - an attitude of mind and of living that is driven by the acknowledgement that all things in life, indeed life itself, do not belong to me, but that they belong to God. All my gifts, skills and talents belong to him: I am merely here for a while to care for them, to use them wisely, to nurture and develop them, and then to return them. I come with nothing, and I shall leave with nothing. But in between times I am called to do many things.

### What is the definition of the word steward?

A steward is a keeper, one who is in charge of something on behalf of someone else. A steward is one who is a manager of something entrusted to him or her, perhaps a responsibility for other people, for resources, or for someone else's possessions. S/he must be faithful and loyal to the owner, and manage according to the owner's intentions.

The steward accepts delegated authority, and is accountable to the owner for how this authority is used in fulfilment of the responsibilities delegated. The steward is also and equally responsible to other stewards, with a commitment to fellow human beings, others that are equally called to the same stewardship.

In asking the question "Who is a Christian Steward?" in their 1992 Pastoral Letter "Stewardship: A Disciple's Response" the US Bishops offer four characteristics of the Christian Steward, which are fundamental.

**The first characteristic is gratitude:** An attitude of gratitude. The Christian steward is one who receives God's gifts gratefully. This presumes, of course, that God is acknowledged as the giver of all gifts, the true owner of all that we have and are; and that is why our faith must be a mature faith. A deep sense of gratitude to God and to those around us helps us to keep things in perspective: it helps us to achieve a clear sense of purpose and identity.

**The second characteristic is accountability:** a true Christian steward is one who is always aware and conscious of the responsibilities he carries for the use of the gifts received, and that he will be required to give an account when in the fullness of time he comes before God. In the old church this was very threatening; indeed, it may still feel that way! But really it is simply a recognition that the gifts have been given for a purpose, not as in the parable, to be buried unused. The good steward is one who cherishes and tends God's gifts in a responsible manner.

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**The third characteristic of a Christian steward is openness and generosity:** if through our mature faith we agree with the basic acknowledgment that everything is God's and does not belong to us, it follows that all is to be shared equally and fairly with others. This is where we must start to take responsibility for our call to mission and outreach: to bring to others around us the love and word of God.

In the UK I think most people are still struggling with this. We still see our faith as personal to ourselves, and are afraid of taking it to others. I think that this comes from a lack of confidence: a lack of confidence which is brought about partly by an immaturity of faith, that hasn't developed or has not been nurtured; and a lack of confidence brought about by the rapid changes we are seeing in society and in the church itself. But for the Christian steward openness and generosity with our faith and our gifts is a responsibility, a duty.

**The fourth characteristic is willingness to give back with increase:** Jesus tells us many times in his parables that it's no good just sitting on our talents and doing nothing with them. We must use them wisely, work hard and enable them to develop and grow, and then return them with thanks for the blessings we have received. Waiting for things to happen around us may be a characteristic of human nature, but for the Christian steward it is simply not an option. The Christian steward has to be counter-cultural.

So as a Christian steward our first responsibility is to create our own personal mission statement for life, based upon these four characteristics: gratitude; accountability; generosity; and willingness. And from there we turn to our community responsibilities. We are responsible for those close to us, our families and friends. Then we are stewards of and responsible for our parishes and our communities. Finally we must foster a strong sense of universal stewardship, caring for those far from us, mission to the poor and oppressed, outreach.

Through our baptism we must live out our calling. Through our confirmation we must proclaim mission. Through the Eucharist we are bound together as a community. And through these sacraments, which are common to us all, we are called to exercise many and varied ministries in our communities. And within these ministries, those who are ordained have a particular call to a role of leadership in service, to call out the gifts of those entrusted to their care.

So, let's take a brief look now at The Stewardship Parish, and the part we are called to play in that.

Having reached a clear perspective of the personal life of the Christian steward, it then becomes natural to go the next step, and offer our gifts to join with other stewards, pursuing the mission of our parish or eucharistic community. It is a natural consequence: the two are mutually inclusive. What are the distinctive characteristics of a stewardship parish, and the part that each of us is required to play? What is the perfect model?

**First and foremost our parishes should be centres of Warmth and Hospitality:** to generate a clear and strong sense of personal and community belonging. The parish is not

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buildings and structures, it is a community of people, the sum of its constituent parts. It needs to be warm in its welcome. Everyone has something to contribute. Everyone is needed. There should be a recognition that all are gifted and called by the Holy Spirit to participate as fully as possible in the mission of the Church to work for the Kingdom of God in parish, in diocese and in the wider world. Everyone is asked to contribute to planning and discussion, and there should be a willingness to recognize and respect each other's right to have and express an opinion.

**Scripture and Prayer:** The life of the parish and the individual steward must be deeply rooted in the celebration of scripture, prayer and in the sacraments. The Christian steward needs to be sustained by constant contact with the Christian community, the parish, and with the opportunities that it offers for the nourishment of the faith. Regular reading and sharing of the scriptures can be profoundly inspirational in decision-making and planning. I would go so far as to say that no parish meeting should take place unless and until a quarter to a third of the time allocated for the meeting has been first devoted to reading, sharing, and interpreting the scriptures.

**Commitment and Recommitment:** Stewardship is expressed not in a single programme, but in a constant reminder to commit one's very self to the Lord. There should be annual commitment and recommitment. But, and many of you will relate to this: One of the frequent cries from committed people is that once they start something, they can never find a way out. You become stuck in and the ministry eventually becomes a burden. So in a stewardship parish your commitment is time-limited, so that you can devote yourself to ministry and mission when you know you have time and energy available; and when you don't have the time and energy you withdraw for a while. The whole community needs to understand this: at times you can, and at times you can't, for perfectly genuine reasons.

**Stewardship Committee:** the parish needs a systematic way of infusing the theology and practice of stewardship into its life, identifying opportunities for members of the parish to share their time, talent and treasure, and establishing an ongoing process to recruit, recognize and thank volunteers in all parish ministries. The stewardship committee is charged with the responsibility of discovering and identifying the skills and gifts available within the parish. It is they who call for annual commitment and renewal. And within the process, individual parishioners are regularly encouraged to share from the pulpit their experiences of ministry and giftedness. The Christian steward should be encouraged to share his or her experiences of ministry, to lead by example and urge others to come forward. This in itself is stewardship of the gift of leadership.

**Outreach and Mission:** mission is not what the church does, its what the church is: or what the church should be. Each of us has a primary responsibility for mission, to bring the good news of the gospel to the world around us. Stewardship is to enable mission. Parishes in the old church of the UK have become inward-looking and maintenance-driven, not mission-driven. We all have it within our power to bring people to the knowledge of Jesus, but we became frightened to do so. For example the parish as a whole can set aside a portion of its resources to reach out to and serve those in need: first in the parish in our own community, then in the wider community and the universal Church.

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**Accountability:** Constant personal and community accountability is fundamental to good stewardship. There should be a visible commitment to accountability for the full range of parish activities, from the way decisions are made and carried out, to the way resources are collected, managed, used, and reported. There should be regular reports, written and verbal, and more than just annually. The people need to be kept in touch with how things are going, and what decisions have been made on their behalf.

**True Collaboration:** In a stewardship parish there is true collaboration, which is not the parish priest delegating tasks that he hasn't time for or isn't interested in, but genuine shared responsibility for planning, resourcing and facilitating mission. At first this is hard on everyone, involving personal sacrifice, as tasks seem to take four times as long, and there are inevitable creative tensions. But a genuine investment of time, patience and understanding, with an honest desire to acknowledge each person's right to hold opinions, will develop into an exciting process. All are called to explore their gifts and offer them for the community in pursuing its mission, to serve the Kingdom of God. This is not collaborative ministry brought about through a shortage of priests, a shortage of money or problems with buildings; it comes from recognising each other's roles and ministries from baptism.

### Conclusion

So that's a very quick tour of stewardship: four characteristics of the Christian steward, seven characteristics of the stewardship parish. If stewardship is to seriously take root in our parishes it will involve for most a wholesale shift in culture, a complete change of mindset, from the maintenance-driven parish to the mission-driven parish. From the old parish where nothing happens unless either the priest says so, or even unless the priest does it, to the new parish where everyone takes a share of responsibility for decision-making, for doing, and for being mission. And it could be a difficult journey of transition. But we believe that over the next twenty years it's a journey that we will all have to travel.

**About the author** - Simon Thorrington is the Stewardship Adviser for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Lancaster. This article is an extract from a larger presentation delivered at a workshop of the annual International Catholic Stewardship Conference in Toronto in October 2002.