

Apportionments



Just About Right?

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Put two or three United Methodists in a room together, even for a brief time, and it usually does not take very long for one of two subjects to emerge. The conversation will soon move to either appointments or apportionments. Significantly, for most United Methodists, these are the places where the rubber of the connection touches the road of congregational life. If the conversation should be about apportionments, it is not surprising to find that the issue frequently becomes “how high?” or, put differently, “How much is enough?”

Unfortunately, it seems to me, we all too often center our conversations about the apportionment on issues that may be of vital importance to us but do not address the real question of “how much is enough?” Criticisms are raised of a bureaucracy that many in pulpits and pews believe to be top heavy and cumbersome. Uncertainty emerges as to accountability. Concerns are raised about monies being employed for causes that some believe unworthy of us while others believe they are central to our witness. Worry is expressed about how “they” spend “our” money. The apportionment becomes little more than a franchise fee. All of this leads to a sense of dis-connection: **Doesn't the Conference (either General or Annual) understand how hard it is out here in the trenches?**

I believe these issues, while important for us to debate in other contexts, are unfortunate when discussing the apportionment because they hide this last, deeper issue. The apportionment, one of the two most visible symbols of our underlying ecclesiology, has become something that divides us. We begin to resent structures and institutions that seem to

demand more and more for less and less. We feel ourselves distanced from those in places of decision-making. We devolve into an “us” and “them” mentality, forgetting the basic truth that “we” are “they” in our system.

It is difficult to argue that the apportionment is about right in all cases. Many, if not most, local churches struggle to make ends meet. The rising costs of pastoral support, health insurance, and pensions alone make budgeting and finance difficult for even the largest of our congregations, much less those with the fewest members. On the other hand, the truth is that some churches could share more and better. Generalizations simply are not helpful, especially when one is sitting in a Finance Committee meeting preparing next year's budget.

Let a word be said for the apportionment, however. For many of our small membership congregations, World Service is their primary missional support year in and year out. Through the apportionment, every church in Methodism supports a network of missions and missionaries worldwide, shares in a university in Africa, sustains hospitals and medical missions around the world, continues a long-standing tradition to higher education through church-related colleges and universities, and offers financial assistance to women and men preparing for the ministry of the church. Through the apportionment, Annual Conferences provide continuing support and care for those women and men who have served our churches in the past and are now retired. Through the apportionment, every United Methodist congregation invests in its own future as the Annual Conferences help sustain camps and retreat centers, offer youth events, provide leadership

training, and resource the ministries of the local church. Through the apportionment, we witness to the truth that together we do more than any of us can do alone. **Through the apportionment, we incarnate the theological belief that we are a connected people—connected in faith and connected in mission.**

According to the General Council on Finance and Administration's web site, the average United Methodist Church spends 83.2 cents of every dollar raised on local budget items and ministries. Less than four cents on every dollar is raised for the ministry of the General Church and roughly 12.8 cents supports the programs and ministries of the Annual Conferences and Jurisdictions. In other words, about seventeen cents out of every dollar put in the offering plate on Sunday connects us as a global and regional church.

We may (and do) disagree about how every dime is spent. Accountability is a continuing concern that we should address. Every local church I have served and known could use more financial resources at home for its own work in the community. Yet, it seems to me that for the question of “how much is enough?” the answer truly is “about seventeen cents of the dollar.” That's a bargain for a people who truly wish to be global in reach and connected in mission. □



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