

Insights on Stewardship Based
on the Writings of Henri Nouwen

LIVING in the HOUSE of LOVE

Patricia Farris

Pastors, stewardship chairpersons and other congregational leaders are in constant search of new techniques and approaches to enliven the annual stewardship campaign. There is much available to us that is creative and helpful, and many congregations have experienced improvements in levels of giving. But a much deeper spiritual journey is needed as well, one that will reshape the foundations of our attitudes and behaviors about giving and living. Truly generous givers are formed not in increments or admonitions, but through transformation at the most profound depths of the soul. Such transformation frees us from fear and frees us to holy peace, gratitude and generosity.

Generosity of time, gifts and financial resources requires that we move from the house of fear to the house of love.

*I would rather be a doorkeeper
in the house of my God
than to dwell in the tents
of wickedness.*

Psalm 84:10

Several years ago, theologian and teacher Robert McAfee Brown wrote of “disturbing discoveries” important to the faith journey. These include: “who we listen to determines what we hear; where we stand determines what we see; and what

we do determines who we are.” To these musings on location, perspective and right action might be added an insight—based on Henri Nouwen’s writings—that where we live determines how we live and how we give. Nouwen’s recurring theme of moving from the house of fear into the house of love offers valuable insight as we ponder the wellsprings of transformative discipleship and radical stewardship. Faithful stewards must know where they live, their true address, that they might know when they are home, safe and free.

Nouwen observed that many people live at the wrong address, that is, in the house of fear. He observed that we are fearful people, even those of us who live

in the relative affluence of the United States. Nouwen describes the house of fear as the place in which the powers of hatred and violence rule. It is a place in which despair and depression prevail, in which fear and power shape all our decisions and choices. Fear has invaded every part of our lives and has only increased since September 11, 2001. We are anxious, nervous, over-medicated, and overweight. We are afraid of change and afraid of standing still. We are afraid of economic decline and worry about the costs of our children's education, our health care, and our retirement. We are afraid of the world, of foreigners, of potential terrorists. We are afraid of people of other faith, especially Muslims, and we question their motives and their trustworthiness. We are afraid of disease—AIDS, the West Nile virus, and most recently SARS. We are afraid of what we know and of what we do not know.

In the house of fear, fear taints our outlook and limits our choices. Consequently, our needs for acceptance, affection, influence, and power determine how we invest and spend our time, our money, and our love.

Home Is Where You Are

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Without spiritual transformation and renewal, we live in the house of fear. We are continually misled by the alluring deceptions of product promotion and anxiety-producing innuendos implying the inadequacy of our financial planning. The voracious appetite of the consumer society and economy have seduced and consumed us, leaving us off-balance, anxious, and perpetually needy. Stephen L. Carter has described Americans as “materially prosperous but spiritually impoverished,” in a modern reprise of the old hymn text which names us “rich in things but poor in soul.” We buy what we do not need and cannot afford in a desperate, never-ending quest for satisfaction and status.

Pope John Paul II has called this the “culture of death,” the poisonous fruit of materialism. He has said that “the values of being are replaced by those of having. The only goal that counts is the pursuit of one's own material well-being...” Those who suffer are the poor, the women and the children, the sick, the elderly and the

weak. Those consumed by consumerism suffer as well. Obsession with the “good life” can lead to self-hate and despair.

This consumerist mentality has also dangerously invaded the thinking of Christians. Studies document that “never have so many Christians believed that our monies and possessions are ours to do with as we please.” Robert Wuthnow's research shows that Christians find little connection between faith and possessions and that religious teachings on money have little to do with people's decisions about how to live their lives. No wonder our levels of giving are low and we find it excruciating to increase even a little. We are trapped in the same fearful scarcity mentality as is the world at large, denying the incredible abundance with which we are blessed day to day.

We are living in the house of fear. We buy and hoard to assuage that fear. Nouwen felt that Americans were so despairing, so overwhelmed by consumerist culture, that we are at risk of losing our ability to believe that God loves us. At home in the house of fear, we are lost, vulnerable, and sick unto death. Carter, in *God's Name in Vain*, suggests that “one of the toughest sacrifices we could make [would be] not buying things we want and can afford.” Curbing our appetite for things is as challenging as curbing other addictions that diminish life and keep us less than whole. But beyond changing our behaviors, we must change our fundamental approach to life, meaning and self-worth. This will require of us time, discipline, support and spiritual work.

*I rejoiced when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house
of the Lord!”*

Psalm 122:1

Nouwen's work focuses on moving from the house of fear as key to finding and working for peace in our world. The same movement is also essential for coming to peace with our material goods as well and for moving into a life of grateful stewardship and generosity. A steward has responsibility for the household. A steward in the house of fear cannot grow beyond the confines of that place. Persuasive efforts to achieve greater levels of giving cannot finally succeed on their own, for they will be ever constrained by fear, self-doubt and anxiety. The true

steward must move into what Nouwen called the house of love.

The house of love is the house of Christ, in Nouwen's words, “the place where we can think, speak, and act in the way of God, not in the way of the fear-filled world.” In the Gospel of John, the house of the Lord—spoken of with such reverence, longing and joy by the psalmist—becomes Christ Jesus himself. The Word of God pitches its tent among us and dwells with us. Jesus reveals himself as our new home in John 15:4: “Make your home in me, as I make my home in you.” Jesus offers us this house even now, in the midst of our anxious and fear-filled world.

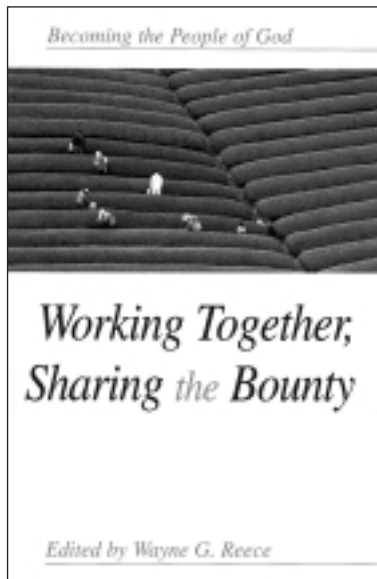
Within the house of love, relationships are characterized by mutual vulnerability, gratitude, peace and celebration. The new community is the *ecclesia*, a people called out from the land of oppression to the land of freedom, from the house of fear to the house of love. Free from worry, fear, anxiety, violence, competitive and self-destructive behaviors, the church dwells in, abides in Christ. It becomes the New Creation. Stewards in the house of love are freed to give generously and cheerfully.

*Like living stones,
let yourselves be built
into a spiritual house,
to be a holy priesthood,
to offer spiritual sacrifices
acceptable to God
through Jesus Christ.*

1 Peter 2:5

How do we become stewards in God's house? The pathway into the house of love is prayer. In prayer, we perceive new answers to our questions: “To whom do I belong? Where do I reside? Why do I fear?” Through prayer, our hearts hear Jesus' promise that we need no longer be afraid. We find our home and our peace in his abiding love. This prayer must be constant, honest, and persistent. Expressing all our fear to God, we open to let God gently lead us from the house of fear to the house of love. In prayer we gradually learn how to live in the presence of God.

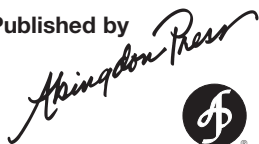
Nouwen names three additional marks of living in the house of love: resistance, community and working amidst the poor. These, along with prayer, should be familiar to followers of Wesley!



This study, from the *Becoming the People of God* series, examines the Economic Community section of the “Social Principles” from the Book of Discipline, plus relevant material from the Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church.

Wayne Reece does more than just look at the issues. Participants experience how current events intersect with Scripture and Christian belief, and they learn how both individuals and congregations use United Methodist teachings to shape relevant ministries in their communities. These stand-alone, short-term studies include session plans, activities, discussion questions, and post-session strategies for Christian living. UI4-513545. \$8.00

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Resistance to the ways of the world frees us to live in joy and generosity, freely giving of the gifts we receive. The support of community is necessary to hold us accountable and keep us on the path. Work amidst the poor brings perspective and keeps our hearts focused on the true needs and gifts of God’s people, increasing our humility and compassion.

For the congregation serious about the spiritual journey into radical stewardship, a comprehensive ministry plan must be developed far beyond the normal outlines of the annual stewardship “campaign.”

Worship services and sermons throughout the year teach and reinforce the movement into the house of love.

Issues of money, materialism, and consumerism must be regularly and directly addressed.

New members classes provide an occasion to examine the serious covenantal commitments of congregational life.

Reception of new members and baptisms provide occasions for review of membership vows.

Pastoral care includes attention to the true fears people are confronting, inviting them into the Christian community of love and support.

Financial planning workshops assist individuals, couples planning marriage, families and seniors to develop specific plans for financial well-being.

Sunday School classes and study groups explore the riches of the Psalms, the Gospel of John and the Epistles, growing in understanding of what it means to abide in Christ and dwell in his love.

Children and youth programs introduce covenantal Christian living and mission involvement.

Spiritual growth groups and covenant groups delve into the difficult areas of holding one another accountable for our growth in trust and stewardship, daring to create safe places in which the faithful can speak with one another about the taboo topic of money and begin to practice “simple living.”

Short-term mission projects involve many members of the congregation in direct work with the poor, in the local community, and around the world.

The Administrative Council/ Church Council regularly prays and studies, so that the budget of the church itself reflects its priorities of generosity and mission.

*O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come.
Be thou our guide while life
shall last and our eternal home.*

Isaac Watts

The work of true Christian stewardship is much broader and deeper than limited campaigns and programs. Limited approaches will always produce limited results. The church and its mission will continue to be needlessly impoverished. But worst of all, God’s people will languish in the house of fear—broken, vulnerable and afraid, like sheep without a shepherd. Available to them, from the rich resources of our faith, is the promise of God’s abiding love and the true security found in the house of love. In the words of Psalm 23, we are invited now to begin to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Becoming generous givers of time and gifts and financial resources is not the goal of this transformation, but will be its natural fruit. This is the work of fashioning the people of God, guiding them to learn their true address, where they are truly at home and can be continually addressed by the God of love.

May we learn to journey together, rejoicing as we go, to take up residence in the house of love and abide there forever. □

For further reading:

Stephen L. Carter. *God’s Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics*. (Basic Books, 2000.)

John Dear, ed. *Henri Nouwen: The Road to Peace*. (Maryknoll, 1998.)

Henri Nouwen. *Lifesigns*. (Doubleday, 1986.) *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. (Doubleday, 1992.)

Wesley K. Willmer. *God & Your Stuff: The Vital Link Between Your Possessions and Your Soul*. (NavPress, 2002.)



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