



GLOBAL | INTERACTION

TRUSTEES of all we are and all we have

The following articles, by Rev Keith Jobberns (pictured), Rev Dr John Olley and Grace Munro, the Editor, appeared in the *Vision* magazine, August 2006



I read once where a reporter asked the American multi-millionaire businessman J.D. Rockefeller how much you need to be happy. Rockefeller's pithy response was, "Just a little bit more." This edition of *Vision* magazine raises the issue of finance, resourcing, stewardship or, more broadly, the issue of managing, or being trustees of, God's resources.

One of the greatest challenges facing the western church, yes, Baptists in Australia, is how we use the resources of life God has put at our disposal. Our prevailing culture of self-centered materialism suggests that all we have is quite properly used to fulfil our desire for happiness. Bombarded by a myriad of spending demands, we daily face the challenge of deciding when enough is enough. We ask what proportion of the resources we have control over ought to intentionally reflect our understanding of the Lordship of Jesus in our lives.

Consider the resource of time – we often think a "little bit more" of that would be handy, too.

There is a vast range of resources: access to information, knowledge, abilities, gifts, education, leisure and work. Speaking recently with Helen Bensley, I was reminded that being a pharmacist in Melbourne benefits others to some extent; being a pharmacist in Papua is, quite literally, life-saving to hundreds, even thousands, of people.

Even more important than the material and temporal resources are the spiritual resources God has made available to us. These will have an impact long after our money, property, knowledge, abilities and the like reach their "use by date". In Australia, we have the opportunity to hear gospel teaching and to read God's Word daily and ten times on Sunday if we wish. Meantime millions of other people go from life to death and never hear a meaningful explanation of Jesus' relevance to them. How would God want us to use these spiritual resources?





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Global Interaction's Missiological Advisory Committee members have identified relevant Biblical considerations for managing God's resources. A copy of the document is available on request.

PRINCIPLES FOR MANAGING GOD'S RESOURCES

The Committee identified principles to guide Global Interaction staff working with emerging faith communities.

1. All resources are God-given and to be used for the benefit of others: money, possessions and skills. But stewardship is broader – all we are and all we have belong to God. We are called to share the gospel and ourselves with others, especially those who lack easy access to God's resources, physical and spiritual.
2. Who we are and how we live is a priority. Christian management of God's resources recognises creation, redemption, providence and calling as motive for mission. The life and ministry of Jesus are the pattern for mission. We should live humbly and sacrificially as servants of Jesus and of the people whom he has called us to serve.
3. Structures and practices need to be developed carefully, so as to be sustainable and empowering, and not lead to dependency, especially with new groups of believers. We must help them discover what is necessary, culturally appropriate and sustainable for them, rather than giving elaborate, expensive Western structures they will be unable to sustain and which will hinder their mission.
4. The use of funds needs care. Too often we try to impose Western processes that are culturally inappropriate. Responsibility to relatives and lack of accountancy skills, and the like must be considered. Accountability principles need to be applied in culturally relevant ways, and, if foreign funds are provided, in ways that are acceptable to donor agencies.
5. Self-determination under the Holy Spirit is a key to the development of a successful faith community. We must help leaders work out the biblical principles and culturally appropriate ways of managing God's resources in their own unique situation. Two major elements are:
 - a. being biblically sound – our teaching and our example for the trusteeship of God's resources need to be based on careful exegesis of the Biblical text.
 - b. being culturally appropriate – each culture is unique. Aware of our own cultural biases, we aim to build an understanding of elements in the cultures of others which either reinforce or block a correct understanding. This is not something **we** do, but something **we help them to do**.





BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS for managing God's resources

A paper written by Dr John Olley (former Global Interaction Board Chairman and Principal of the Baptist Theological College of WA, and more recently interim team leader with his wife Elaine) covers many Biblical concepts. Here are a few:

- As God's image in the world, we represent his ruling care of it as trustees (the old word, stewards, referred to servants responsible for care and use of the owners' possessions).
- All belongs to God.
- Giving is proportional to God's blessing.
- Our obedience in giving is an expression of our total allegiance to God.
- We are entrusted with God's land and resources, and must cater for weaker members of society and future generations.
- The "Jubilee" concept highlights the use of power and resources to bring greater justice, equity, freedom and restoration of the poor.
- Gospel writers reflect Old Testament values of proclaiming liberty to captives, forgiving debts and caring for the poor.
- Spirit-empowered believers shared resources (Acts 2:44-45 and other passages).
- Care for each other and fruitful gospel proclamation are linked, as is providing for spiritual and socio-economic needs.
- Christian groups are challenged to share the total resources of the community for the total purposes of the kingdom of God.

In considering economic development, John highlights the biblical images of Babylon and Jerusalem. In Babylon, first seen in the story of the tower of Babel, people focused on self-preservation and acted for their own benefit to the exclusion of others. The final description conveys a sense of wonder at the wealth that comes from being a world power, but the end gives the chilling cost: "human bodies and souls" (Revelation 18:11–13). The contrast is Jerusalem, also wealthy, with its walls and buildings being of rich jewels and gold. But its gates are open, and a river flows from it, surrounded by trees that bring healing to all nations (Revelation 21:1–22:5). Elsewhere the vision of the new Jerusalem is of leaders and citizens alike being concerned to do what is right and just for all (Isaiah 2:1-4, 65:17–25; compare Matthew 5:14–16). The new Jerusalem is the "bride of Christ"; a living relationship with God is at the centre of its life.

Two cities, two visions: one bringing wealth to a few and death to the rest; the other which sees justice and doing what is right as a priority and which has a relationship with Christ at the heart.





By Grace Munro, *Vision* Editor



GOD'S GENEROSITY and our giving

What does the biblical story of the widow giving two small coins, maybe twenty cents mean? In two areas where Global Interaction worked in the past, an interpretation of this story led to decreased rather than increased giving. Did the missionaries twist the story? Did hearers change the interpretation? Probably neither. But the context led to unintended outcomes. Missionaries also taught tithing, but this concept too was adapted.

Community situations, values and expectations affected giving in both areas.

- In both places, in Africa and in the Pacific, people had little cash. Most received no wages. Some earned a little by selling items at local markets. The employed received tiny wages. Families collected food from the bush or grew their own, keeping seed for planting, and breeding animals and chickens. They built their own houses. Most transactions involved an exchange of labour, grain, pigs, food, etc. The small amount of cash received went to the purchase of other essentials and the care of relatives. When these people applied the widow's story and the tithing concept to their cash income, twenty cents was about right. But, as a result, the growing churches struggled for want of funding. In real terms, cash was only a small part of people's "income". But, where produce was included in tithing, people had a practical issue to face – how could they transport the goods, and what would the church do with them anyway?
- In both settings, the first cultural responsibility was to family members, including great-aunts, cousins-twice-removed and broader clan members. Hospitality was crucial. Extended family members could rightfully claim cash or goods held by a family member. This not only diverted funds that might have been given for God's work, but church funds often went to the church treasurer's extended family.
- Adopted or imposed practices affected the churches' ability to cope financially. With the example and guidance of mission staff, churches tried to have paid pastors and evangelists, and residential colleges and hospitals were set up. These were extremely difficult for church groups to sustain.
- Prayer and sacrifice were used traditionally to manipulate the spiritual world. This led to a rather mechanistic view of giving to God.
- As in many other places, funds from Australia or elsewhere led to attitudes of dependency.





- Even when people gave generously, some church leaders were ill-equipped to deal with funds, and so squandered them. As a result, people reduced their giving.
- In the African setting, poverty increased with devastating results. Families struggling to feed their children spent their twenty cents on food rather than giving it to the church.

As we consider these two places, we see some of the issues that are relevant in looking at what has been called “stewardship”, or, even better (given that stewardship is often restricted to giving), “the management of God’s resources in their totality” – physical, social, environmental, spiritual, etc.

How then do Global Interaction staff members working with emerging faith communities today approach the management of God’s resources? How do they model and teach appropriate giving patterns? What are the principles of stewardship and how do they apply? How do these issues impact our giving to mission?

What happened, then, to giving patterns in the groups described above? In Africa, churches benefited from the purchase of grinding mills to crush corn for the people’s staple diet. Initially, this was not very effective because funds received were often diverted to needs of the mill managers. Increasingly, though not exclusively, there are now reliable leaders managing these mini-businesses. Their spiritual maturity means that funds provided for the church are held for that purpose, and they use personal funds to help relatives and to meet their own needs. Because of widespread poverty and hunger, even the most generous and dedicated church members are able to give little to the church, whether in cash or in produce. They do what they can in practical ways, but the churches still struggle financially.

In the Pacific, church leaders tried to remedy the giving problem by teaching stewardship and setting an example of simple living and tithing. These efforts proved largely ineffective. But, when spiritual revival swept the area, Christians began to give huge offerings of food and money. They saw this as a necessary response to God’s great gifts of salvation and the Holy Spirit. Sadly, other difficulties ensued and giving soon declined.

It is clear from both places that spiritual vitality is foundational to generous giving and to the appropriate use of money, resources, skills and gifts. When we give ourselves totally to God, giving of possessions and abilities is a grateful response to his loving provision. Churches and individuals firmly grounded in God will use for his purposes what is entrusted to them.





CONTRASTS by Grace Munro

In caring for God's resources, including the environment, what huge contrasts there are between average Australians and some of the people groups Global Interaction staff serve.

- Ivan Jordan, who worked in the Northern Territory, tells of sleeping overnight on the ground when travelling with Indigenous leaders. When they got up in the morning, Ivan saw an indigenous man carefully replacing the soil into the small hollow he had dug to make his "bed" more cosy. The irony for Ivan was that behind this activity loomed a huge mine, with massive mullock heaps and huge disruption to the environment. Here we see a significant attitudinal difference. In our modern, technologically developed world we tend to adapt and use (and frequently misuse and abuse) the environment for our benefit. The skyline of a modern city, with smoke and pollution billowing from multiple sources, highlights the impact of our chosen lifestyle. In contrast, some so-called "less developed" peoples, especially in rural areas, tend to adapt their lives to suit the environment.
- Rightly, we Australians are concerned at the massive destruction of forests, the whaling industry, the salination of huge tracts of land, and the death of native animals worldwide. Many former staff members who worked in Zambia would be saddened by the deforestation that has occurred recently. But, would our concerns be the same if we were in the shoes of the Zambian people? Families struggling to survive will cut down trees for firewood; they have no other fuel. If some unfortunate animal comes into view they will kill it; it is a rare source of protein. In an effort to get money for the children's schooling, parents will cut down trees to make charcoal to sell to city dwellers. There is some unnecessary destruction of the environment in places like Zambia, but much of it occurs as people try to exist in a context of extreme poverty and disadvantage.
- The third contrast is obvious – poverty and wealth. Often in our prayers we give thanks to God for the rich blessings we enjoy – safety, security, housing, food, spiritual nurture and much more. We remember sometimes to pray for those who don't enjoy what we have. Perhaps we need to be much more proactive in being the answer to our own prayers by using our resources to grow the Kingdom of God.

How does our attitude to management, or trusteeship, of God's resources impact the way we live? How can we best help those who experience poverty? Will we continue to enjoy our spiritual riches without making an intentional effort to make sure others also learn about Jesus?





Sometimes we excuse our lack of generosity and involvement by focusing on how hard it is to help people without creating dependency; on the high percentage of donated funds which never reach the intended recipients when we give through some organisations; or on the difficulty and cost of transporting goods to the other side of the world. Undoubtedly, these are real issues to be faced. But we can choose to treat them either as impenetrable barriers or as hurdles that can be overcome with some effort on our part.

Global Interaction staff members experience extreme generosity. Many of the people groups whom we serve have very, very little. Yet, they often have a culture of great generosity. With joy, and no regrets, they will give visitors the only food they have in the house, even to wealthy visitors such as ourselves who are there serving God. Here, in action, is the spirit of generosity we see in the woman who gave twenty cents, her all.

