On the autumnal equinox just a week ago, as the earth was tipping on its axis, congregations all across the Episcopal Church were hoping to tip themselves into the black by preparing for their annual stewardship campaigns.

In the Episcopal Church, the fall stewardship campaign, or “pledge drive,” is as predictable as the rising and setting of the sun. Even though the stewardship-campaign ritual continues as usual in congregations across the church, this year the situation is different. All across the globe, people face new and significant economic challenges. Unemployment rates are at all-time highs, funding for public education is inadequate, and public services are on the chopping block. Too many people are unable to earn even a subsistence income, and too many children and seniors suffer too much.

The significant societal economic and environmental change happening all around us calls us to look at old practices in new ways. Our response to all that God has given us through stewardship – the biblical tithe and giving of our time, talent and treasure – has a new sense of urgency.
Like a pebble thrown in a pond, the pledge that an individual or family makes to a congregation sustains the ministry of the congregation and, in turn, contributes to the ministry of the diocese through the congregation’s contribution. The ripple effect carries from our homes to our congregations, to our dioceses and on to the wider Episcopal Church to support and enable God’s work in the world.

Until the last several years, giving increased in the Episcopal Church faster than the rate of inflation. While membership in the Episcopal Church and attendance at Sunday worship has been decreasing since 2002, stewardship trends primarily have been positive.

According to Kirk Hadaway, director of research for the Episcopal Church, plate and pledge giving increased steadily from 1991 to 2008, when it dropped for the first time since good records were available. The average pledge among domestic parishes increased from $1,791 in 2003 to $2,302 in 2008, and plate and pledge giving per attendee increased from $1,496 to $1,883 during the same period, Hadaway has found.

Perhaps now we are being called by God to return to our pre-2008 generosity, even in the face of economic crisis. Perhaps we are being called to revisit our concepts of success and wealth, and invent a lifestyle that reflects the Christian values we profess to hold. Our stewardship practice can exemplify our moral theology and demonstrate the ways we are stewards of relationships, time and money while maintaining a balance between responsibility and action. God’s work seeks a rare equilibrium.

Let’s put a lid on our own personal spending and envision ourselves living within a personal budget that is lower than what we really have available. Let’s call the difference between our real income and our budget a “cost of giving” increase. We can target our personal tithe on the real income, then add the cost of giving. Then give the total amount away.

Like the harvest moon, which unusually coincided with the autumnal equinox this year, the yearly stewardship campaign may look like just another business-as-usual event to the unpracticed eye. But God’s work is never business as usual. Each individual’s, family’s, congregation’s and diocese’s giving takes on immeasurable significance in these tough times, calling us anew to unimagined opportunities to live as the holy people of God.

—Canon Bonnie Anderson is president of the House of Deputies of the Episcopal Church’s General Convention.

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