

AMERICAN BAPTIST UNITED MISSION

“Risk Taking and United Mission”

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When we are united in God’s mission, our United Mission will grow.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”
(Matthew 13:44-45)

If we are to carry out God's mission as stewards of the gospel, it is necessary to take risks in using the resources entrusted to us. **The parables of the treasure and the pearls tell us that we are called to give everything to possess the treasure of the kingdom. “...he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”**

WILLINGNESS TO RISK

When the reality of what God has done for you and me sinks in, we are motivated to respond to God. Individually, we can “strive first for the Kingdom of God” only after we have known and experienced the reality that God loved us, sought us out, and bought us at a great price. Then it is love responding to love.

Churches also are called to take risks. Charlie W. Shedd (*The Exciting Church Where They Give Their Money Away*, Word Books) described a risk-taking church business meeting in which the members voted to be a dollar-for-dollar mission church. This would mean that for every dollar they spent on the local program, a matching dollar would be sent elsewhere. As a consequence, purchase of any item meant double payments.

But that was not the end of the story. In their denomination, such a dollar-for-dollar commitment did not include building funds. Capital improvements did not need to be matched. When the people gathered to vote on whether to build a million-dollar sanctuary, they heard a challenge from a young officer, new on the church board. No one there, including the pastor, was expecting strong leadership from him. He stood to sound

this call: “When I was elected, the church treasurer told me, 'Man, don't ever forget there's one reason this church gets money. That's because it's giving so much.' I'm on the committee to raise this million dollars. If we vote to build our sanctuary, here's my proposition: I move we go after two million, and give the extra million to build new churches where they're needed. Like on the mission field. Or places in our own country where they could use a hand from us.”

Heated discussion followed. When the ballots were counted, 93 percent had affirmed the young officer's vision. They followed through with the matching of dollars. Often they were not sure where the money would come from. At the end of one year, the officers borrowed ten thousand dollars to give away because **they had faith in the basic principle that when the outgo meets with God's approval, God will provide the income needed.**

In two of the churches I served as pastor, each congregation voted to move toward 50-50 giving, increasing the amount going to wider mission by one percentage point a year. Both churches followed through. In the latter pastorate, the giving to wider mission increased from 10 ½ percent to 22 percent of total church income over the span of my 11-year pastorate there. There was risk in adopting such a budget each year. A risky budget makes a theological statement.

VISION TO RISK

In the Old Testament, the year of Jubilee came every fiftieth year. The Jubilee ideal called for letting the land lie fallow, the remission of all debts, the liberation of slaves, and the return of family property to its original owner. Jubilee represented the kind of daring vision called for on the part of God's people. Risky? Yes.

The fourth chapter of Luke describes Jesus' inauguration of his public ministry when he returned to his home synagogue in Nazareth and rose to read from Scripture. The text he chose was a combination of Isaiah 61:1-2a and part of Isaiah 58:6:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”
(Luke 4:18-19)

This is the first extensive act of Jesus' public ministry in Luke's Gospel. Jesus' words give a description of the work that he would do, defining him as one empowered by the Spirit of the Lord. The hostile response of the crowd foreshadowed the rejection

that he would face. After reading, Jesus announced, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). That was risky. The crowd grew angry and tried to kill him. Jesus had identified himself and his ministry with the whole Old Testament tradition of God's deliverance of those forced into the margins of human existence. “To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” was to announce the Jubilee year. The placement of this statement at the beginning of Jesus' ministry strongly implies that we are to read his whole life and work in this manner.

Jesus' life and ministry made these words real. Jesus associated with and ministered to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. He befriended outcasts, tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, lunatics, and poor people. In short, he took risks and he was criticized. Three years later, he was crucified!

Yet we tend to be bound by the restrictive mold of the age in which we live. William Keucher (*An Exodus for the Church: From Yesterday to Tomorrow*, Judson Press) illustrated this concern in his words about a man who had the task of blowing the noon whistle at the factory where he worked:

[The man] made it a point to check his watch every morning with the most accurate chronometer in a certain jeweler's window. One day out of curiosity he stepped inside the jewelry store and asked the owner if his chronometer was set by Western Union, Arlington Time Signal, or Naval Observatory Time. Surprised at the question, the jeweler replied that he did not use any of those sources; he simply set his chronometer by the factory whistle that blew every day at noon!

The great need of our time is for men and women individually, and the church collectively, to envision themselves as stewards of the gospel of Jesus Christ and to take the risks necessary to break out of restrictive molds and to live out the implications of the Reign of God.

When Jesus told his disciples that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church, he did not mean that the church is safely protected behind its walls so that the gates of hell cannot destroy the church as it stands in isolation, retreating from attacking forces. The text tells us that the gates of hell represent the stationary aspects of the picture, and it is the church, which is to be the moving, mobile force. The church can only attack; the gates of hell are on the defensive.

When the church goes on the offensive, people will have a vision of the ministry of the church as part of God's mission, not simply the ministry of an institution and they will provide the funds needed. People will support God's mission, and with more than money alone.

“What I have to do,” said Paul Tournier, “is to put my signature at the foot of a blank page on which I will accept whatever God wishes to write. I cannot predict what he will put on this blank contract as my life proceeds--but I give my signature today.”

When we realize that we are the treasure for whom Jesus died, we will treasure doing God's will, at whatever risk. Are we willing to take the risk of increasing our support of American Baptist United Mission, even when as now the economy is in difficulty?

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

• Your church's United Mission giving supports your local region, which makes it possible for the region to provide more effective support for your church and others. In fact, most of the income for each of our regions comes from **gifts to United Mission**. Our giving to UM pays the major parts of the salaries of our region's staff who provide:

- staff service for search committees;
- assistance resolving church conflicts;
- area ministers to maintain contact with individual pastors and with associations and small groups of churches;
- camping ministry;
- resources to assist your church in growth and spiritual health; and
- education and training of pastors, youth, and lay leaders in congregational empowerment.

UM giving also supports:

- The Office of the General Secretary
- American Baptist Men
- American Baptist Women's Ministries (through the Love Gift)
- ABC Information Services
- National Ministries (**now American Baptist Home Mission Societies**)
- International Ministries
- Colleges, Seminaries, Homes Hospitals, etc.
- Career Centers
- Mission Resource Development
- American Baptist Historical Society
- American Baptist Personnel Services
- Orientation to ABC Life

Reminder: If you need a remittance form with your church's name, address, and PIN number, please contact your regional office.

THANK YOU for your support of American Baptist United Mission!

Ron

P.S. You are encouraged to share this letter by e-mail or in print with other leaders in your church.