# Generous Life Project: Session 7

**Session 7:** Celebrating Generosity: Your Offering Plate

**Theme:** Knowing that you don’t HAVE to do anything, what do you WANT to do?

**Hook:** You don’t have to do anything.

**Text**: Review of past Biblical Foundations work. Plus Deuteronomy 6:4-6, Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22: 34-40, Matthew 28:16-20 and 2 Corinthians 5: 16-20

**PowerPoint Slides**: See synod website to download narrative budget slides and spreadsheet.

**Learning Goal**: to discover how God is using the resources you share with your congregation, our synod and our churchwide organization.

**Learning Activity**; create a narrative budget for your congregation that shows how resources are used to fund our common mission: to Love God, Love neighbor, for the sake of the world.

**Preparation/Need**:

1) “Images of the Kingdom of God” newsprint,

2) Congregation and neighborhood analysis newsprint.

3) Several sheets of blank newsprint

3) Markers

4) Power point slides loaded and ready on computer, projector

5) Copies of your congregation’s budget from this year.

6) Read “**Preparation for Session 7”** which precedes this session.

 **This is IMPORTANT!!**

7) Copies of Personal Letter of Intent for each congregation member

8) Copies of Letter of Intent for synod for the groups to consider.

9) Blank pieces of paper for participants.

## Welcome:

**Hook:** You don’t have to do anything.

Of course we don’t HAVE to do anything. We don’t save the world, God, through Christ, already has. But we have caught a bit of the divine imagination and are beginning to see what this world could be like. So…

**Theme:** Knowing that you don’t HAVE to do anything, what do you WANT to do?

**Prayer:** God of Grace and Mercy, we come into this world with nothing, and we leave the same way. But between birth and death we acquire many belongings and participate in time consuming activities. Some of these things require a great investment of our time and skill. Help us discern which things bring you glory and which are wasting our precious resources. In your name we pray, **Amen**.

## Biblical Foundation:

Review: If most of those gathered have participated in the previous 6 sessions, spend some time revisiting the Biblical stories with which we have already worked.

**Small Group**

With the newsprint of your collected images of the Kingdom of God, ask participants to talk about some of the images with the following conversation starters:

Which Bible stories sparked which image? What do you remember about the full Biblical context of this image?

Which images mean the most to you? What do they spark in you?

How are you already living out those images? For example if Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000 is a meaningful image of the Kingdom of God for you, how are you participating in providing spiritual and/or physical food for God’s children?

## Learning Activity: Moving toward filling out your personal Letter of Intent

**Consider, pray and commit:**

Knowing what you do about God’s kingdom; how would you like this awareness to impact your life?

You are already generously sharing your resources with others. Do the opportunities to share in which you currently participate continue to bring you joy? Do you want to take this opportunity to commit to another year of participating in these opportunities or would you like to explore something new? If new, then what do you feel God is leading you toward?

Please jot your ideas down and save them with your Personal Letter of Intent form.

## Biblical Foundation

If you are using this session by itself and haven’t done any of the previous sessions, begin your Bible study here.

If you use have done the 6 sessions, you may choose to continue with the following Bible study.

Have someone read Deuteronomy 6: 4-5.

**4Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. 5You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.**

Have someone read Leviticus 19:18

**18You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.**

Have someone read Matthew 22:34-40

**34When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together,35and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38This is the greatest and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”**

## Commentary

Patrick Miller calls the Shema the “pivot point around which everything else in Deuteronomy revolves (Miller 1990, 97).” Yet as I read further into his commentary it seems as though the Shema is the pivot point around which all of scripture, indeed all of life turns. It’s as if the Shema was a dehydrated camp sponge that is simply waiting for someone to pour water on it so that it can expand to 100x its original size.

The first word calls us to listen: Hear! And if we listen we can hear the wisdom of the universe. The second word makes an incredible theological claim: God is one, God alone. God cannot be divided into parts. God is unified and single.

The first command is to love God. Not to worship. Not to serve. Not to obey. The core, motivational response to God is love.

## Conversation Starter

**Small Group**

What does it mean to you that our motivational response to God is love?

Can Love be commanded?

## Commentary

When Jesus quotes the Shema he uses *agape* to translate the Hebrew. *Agape* is not an emotional or romantic love. It is love in action. The actions of love are inclusive, they require the commitment of your whole heart, your whole soul and your whole mind. S. Dean McBride in his exegesis of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 notes that to love with the heart means “undivided loyalty,” to love with the soul is to commit your life “even to the point of death” and to love with your mind is to put your “substance, wealth and property into the service of God (McBride, 303 quoted in Miller 1990, 102).” In his commentary on Matthew, Robert Smith notes that Jesus answers the scribe with the Shema and then lives it out by going to the cross (Smith 1989, 266).[[1]](#endnote-1)

## Conversation Starter

**Elbow buddies**

Have you ever committed to someone you love with your whole life? What has this meant as you’ve gone through the years?

## Commentary

Patrick Miller’s commentary beautifully captures the meaning of the Shema. Here are a few of his more powerful lines. (*poetic form, mine)*

“…the power that undergirds all reality

 is one

and not multiple,

faithful

and not capricious,

a whole and not divided,

and therefore

 capable of purpose and power

because this

 one

is not controlled and limited

by other forces

(Miller 1990, 103).”

“For the oneness of the reality that grounds existence,

God,

is what keeps life from being chaotic

and divided beyond the limits of human management.

…human existence is held together

and in order

by that one and absolute

object of our allegiance and loyalty.

The demand of the Shema is,

therefore,

finally,

not just a demand.

It is also what makes human life

possible.

All claims on human life are relativized

 and subsumed

within the one total claim of God

so that

 the demand is ultimately

the gift of grace

(Miller 1990, 104)

## Conversation Starters

**Small Group**

What impact does it have on your ideas of the divine to consider God the “power that undergirds all reality,” or “the reality that grounds our existence?”

What impact does this have for how you live your life?

## Commentary

Jesus combines the Shema with the command to love neighbor in Leviticus forever linking our love of God to our love of neighbor. Robert Smith pulls this back to Genesis 2’s bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. We are one, so we must treat our neighbor as if we understand our unity. Paul uses the Body of Christ imagery to make the same point. The Shema lays out our response to God, this commandment sets the standard for how we are to be in community with each other. The Ten Commandments have the same lay out. 1-4 speak to our life with God, 5-10 organize our life together. This is why Jesus can later say that all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.

# Conversation Starters

**Large Group**

Biblically thinking, what is our purpose? What is at the core of who we are and why we are here?

 Record responses on blank newsprint.

Reflecting on the analysis you have been putting together over the past 6 weeks, and knowing what you do about how your congregation uses its resources, respond to the following questions:

How does our congregation encourage and demonstrate love for God?

Write “Love God” across the top of a clean piece of newsprint and record responses below the title.

What are the ways we would like to deepen our love for God?

 Record responses on same newsprint

How does our congregation encourage and demonstrate love for neighbor? (in this reflection ‘neighbor’ means those within the congregation.)

 Write “love each other” across the top of another clean piece of newsprint and record responses below the title.

What are the ways we would like to deepen our love for each other?

 Record responses on same newsprint

## Biblical Foundation

Have someone read Matthew 28:16-20

## Conversation Starter

**Large Group**

This is the most often used statement of the mission of each believer, as well as the Church as a whole. What does this mean to you as a congregation?

Write “For the sake of the world” on the top of a clean piece of newsprint and record responses below title.

Have someone read 2 Corinthians 5:16-20

**16From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.17So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.**

## Conversation Starter

**Elbow Buddies:**

What does this add to your understanding of your role in the world?

What is the “ministry of reconciliation?”

How do you already participate in this ministry?

Where is God leading you into deeper participation?

**Large Group**

How does our congregation participate in the ministry of reconciliation?

 Record responses on your “for the sake of the world” newsprint.

**Large Group**

With your congregation and neighborhood analysis newsprint posted, is there anything this conversation brings up that could be added to this work?

## Learning Activity

**Large Group**

It has often been said that a budget is a value statement. We put our money toward the things that we value. Yet when we look at the budget of our congregation through that lens it often looks like we value the building and the pastor’s salary the most. This is not really a true reflection of our life together. What if we could create a budget based on our purpose as believers? The following exercise will help you create a narrative budget based on the following categories: Love of God, Love for each other, and Acting for the sake of the world. There is also a category for “governance.”

**Small Group**

Handout copies of your congregations budget for the current year. Ask groups to re-catagorize each line item according to the following options, with the abbreviations listed:

 Love God God

 Love each other EO

 For the sake of the world W

 Governance G

For example: “Love God” could include worship, discipleship, and prayer ministries. So ask yourselves: Which of your congregation’s line items pay for the expenses involved in worship? How much of the sanctuary’s usage is worship? If that is its only use then 100% of repair and maintenance of the sanctuary should go in this category. How much of your pastor’s time goes into preparing the different aspects of worship? That percentage of your pastor’s total compensation package should go into this category.

In this case, “Love each other” means those within the congregation. Budget line items for Fellowship could go in this category as well as repair and maintenance of the kitchen and fellowship hall. Ask your pastor how much time they spend per week in caring for the members of the congregation, both in chaplaincy type calls and everyday visiting. The expenses for any events whose main purpose is to build up the congregation, go here. Educational events would go under “Love God.”

“For the sake of the world” would include all expenses associated with outreach to your neighborhood, as well as the mission support you send to the synod or other organizations. You may consider the repair and maintenance of the outside of your building and grounds in this category as well, since it does represent your congregation in your neighborhood.

**Large Group**

Use the slide you put together in your preparations to show the spreadsheet of your budget in these new categories. Encourage the small groups to share their choices as you lead the large group through the choices you prepared for this session. Offer to change categories for a line item if the group thinks it fits better elsewhere.

When you have agreed on the various categories, show the pie chart and discuss the visual image of where your financial resources go.

Often our “for the sake of the world” section is the lowest percentage (though “Governance” should be lower still). This category reflects your congregation’s commitment to the world outside its doors.

Celebrate the generosity that your congregation demonstrates in its highest percentage categories.

**Small Group**

How do you feel when you see your budget in these categories? What can you celebrate? What changes would you like to see made in how your financial resources are allocated?

**Large Group**

Share the Celebrations and Changes you discussed in your small groups.

 Record **Celebrations** on one piece of newsprint and **Changes** on another.

These pieces of newsprint should go to the team that puts the first draft of your congregation’s budget together.

## Power Point Presentation

Move through the slides and the script showing the flow of financial resources from the congregations offering plate to our synod work, from our synod through to our church wide work, and then BACK AGAIN from our churchwide work to our synod – supporting congregations like Pueblo de Dios and Iglesia Luterana Santa Cruz (remember the videos) as well as many others! We ARE the body of Christ. We ARE Light for the world. We Are Church Together!

See copy of slides on the following page.

**Small Group**

Hand out one copy of “Our Congregations Letter of Intent” to each small group and ask them to discuss the % of their financial resources they’d like the budget team to consider sending outward to support the work of our synod and churchwide organization

Collect these forms.

**Think, Pray, Note:**

Hand out one copy of “My Personal Letter of Intent” to each participant, as well as a piece of blank paper. Create a time of silence and encourage each person to find a quiet place to think, pray about their personal pledge for the work of the kingdom of God in your city. Ask them to jot down their thoughts on the blank paper.

## Sending:

Have each small group pile their copies of their “Personal Letter of Intent” along with the notes they have taken during this session. On the top of the pile have them place their copy of the “Congregational Letter of Intent.” Invite everyone to lay one hand on the pile and the other hand on the shoulder of one of the person next to them.

**Prayer**: God of Abundance, we often long for what we don’t have, instead of celebrating all that you have provided for us. Grant us your wisdom that we may see the wealth of time, skills and financial resources with which you have endowed us. Bless our discernment as we consider how to use all that you have given, to further the work of your kingdom in this place which we call home. **Amen.**

Remind everyone that they should fill out their Personal Letter of Intent and bring it to worship on your Celebration Sunday where they will put it in the offering plate. The Council should prepare the Congregation’s Letter of Intent for the same Celebration event.

Dismissal:

Leader: Go in peace, serve the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God!

1. Patrick Miller. 1990. “Deuteronomy” Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: John Knox Press.

Robert Smith. 1989. “Matthew” Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)