

How can a thriving ministry still need financial support to survive?

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From an early age, we are taught to be self-supporting. If you get public benefits, it is because you are too lazy to work. If you cannot afford your rent, you just need to work harder. There is a myth in the United States that to be self-supporting-to not need assistance from the government-is the goal of every individual. Even if your education did not afford you the ability to earn a living wage, or you are disabled, or a caregiver, you must be able to pay your own bills and not accept any public benefits.

This pervasive belief even applies to our parishes. No matter how strong a parish ministry is, or how vital to a community, the most important factor that shows a ministry is thriving is financial. Is the ministry self-supporting? Does it need assistance from the Diocese?

Financial independence, or the idea that to be successful, one must “pull themselves up from the bootstraps” and not accept any financial assistance, has been used as a benchmark for ministries for centuries. But, how accurate is it? And how much does it consider the wealth of financially thriving parishes?

Certain ministries, vital ministries, are not set up to be self-supporting. Consider the lone parish in an urban neighborhood, “given” a dilapidated, older structure to minister in after other, wealthy parishioners moved away. The structure, in need of extensive repairs, coupled with the low-income of the parishioners, create a perfect storm where the parish can never be self-supporting. It may have the only food pantry for miles, have a large congregation and be a vital ministry, but it will always be judged by the fact that it cannot be self-sustaining financially.

There are many other ministries that fall into this category. College chaplaincies of community colleges or state schools, where the study body relies on the food pantry weekly and cannot afford to sustain a parish. New ministries dedicated to immigration communities, whose congregants are struggling to survive.

Now consider the opposite. Large wealthy parishes in suburban communities. Some parishes with large endowments. These parishes, no matter how little they minister to the community or how small they become, will always be considered healthy because they are self-supporting. Their wealth may come from slavery, theft of land from disenfranchised groups, or just their location. Their wealth is not challenged, as they are self-supporting.

These structural barriers and beliefs help the Church continue to be complicit in perpetuating a myth. The myth that to be successful you must be self-supporting. The myth that all our parishes earned their wealth, and should not have to share. Imagine if the wealth of the Church was redistributed to where it is needed most. Imagine if the endowments/lands of parishes were audited and the monies given back to those it was stolen from.

Though these might seem radical ideas, one idea to consider is that self-supporting does not mean vital and life-giving. Self-supporting should not be our model for ministry and our criteria for funding. The Church needs to do better. We need to find a model that considers where our wealth came from, that

looks at the strength of the ministry by the number of lives it affects and not the income it generates, a model that starts to tear down structural barriers to effective ministry, not perpetuate them.

D0047 asks the House of Deputies Committee on the State of the Church this exact question. Let's look at our models for funding and how we support ministry, and create better, more equitable processes. Processes that tear down our structural barriers to effective ministry.