

“Will It Be a Good Investment?”

2 Corinthians 9:6-8

Reformation Sunday

October 27, 2024

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

\*\*\*\*\*

Some of you are familiar with the name Ryan Burge.

Dr. Burge is an associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University, someone who studies trends in religion and politics, and writes about those trends on a national level.

He’s a go-to authority on the rise of the “nones” and the statistics behind the decline of mainline churches. He’s somebody who has predicted that the Presbyterian Church (USA) may not exist in two decades.

Now I disagree with that.

But I do appreciate the good work that Dr. Burge does.

It’s work that he used to call his “day job.”

What was his other job?

Pastoring a small American Baptist church in Mt. Vernon, Illinois. He took that job right out of college, back in 2006, and held it through this past summer.

When he wrote about the rapid decline of mainline Protestant Christianity, he would tell the press:

“I’m just trying to help other people see the big picture in American religion.”

Which was true.

But only recently, he admitted:

“What I was really trying to do was to convince myself that the rapid decline of my church wasn’t my fault.”

The church had maybe 50 people in the pews when he started there, and it wasn’t like the community, Mt. Vernon, was busting at the seams.

So finally, the inevitable day arrived, and the church that Dr. Burge was pastoring decided to close its doors.

On July 21<sup>st</sup> of this past summer, Ryan Burge writes:

“I walked out those doors into the blinding heat of a summer day in southern Illinois and stepped into a future where I don’t know where I will go to church next Sunday, or even if I want to go...I’m terrified because for the first time in my spiritual life, I don’t know what’s next.”<sup>1</sup>

Do you think Ryan Burge’s pastoring of that declining congregation was a good way to spend his time? When it came to his energy, his resources...was it a good investment?

How do we measure the investments that we make in our lives?

\*\*\*\*\*

I ask because our stewardship campaign for 2025 is well underway, and our theme this year is INVEST.

Most of us hear that word, and we think: stock market.

We think 401ks and 529s.

We think RISK.

We think REWARD.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ryan Burge, “My church is closing, and I don’t know what comes next—for me, or America,” *Deseret News*, July 25, 2024.

We think...if I make this investment, what will the return look like over the next 10 or 20 years?

None of that is wrong, but what about when it comes to church?  
How do we measure our investments when it comes to our spiritual life, our life of faith, and God's church?

One way to think about that word, invest, is through NUMBERS.  
So let me toss some numbers your way.

The first number is 2,142  
What does that represent?  
That's our current membership.  
We've got about 350 more Westminster members than we had 5 years ago.

The next number is 180!  
You know what that number is?  
The number of teenagers who are part of WPCYG that we might need to feed on any given Sunday evening!

The next number is 60.  
You know what that represents?  
The number of 3rd grade names read last Sunday when those 8-year-olds received their Bibles.

That growth is the exception to all those trends that Dr. Burge has diagramed. It's also the kind of growth costs more to support, to raise disciples in the Christian faith.

Next number:  
\$612,000.  
What does that represent?

The amount we've dedicated this year to our Witness & Service ministries.

The Session wants to continue our commitment to be generous with our neighbors, near and far.

The Session wants to support our growth.

It's why you're hearing our Minute for Stewardship speakers invite you to consider increasing your investment in Westminster in the coming year.

If everyone who is not pledging makes a pledge,  
and if those who are able raise their pledge by 8%,  
we will reach our goal.

\*\*\*\*\*

If all of you were numbers people, I would stop my sermon and say "Amen" right now.

But I realize not all of you are numbers people.  
So let me offer another way to think about that word, INVEST,  
when it comes to our life in God's church.

Instead of numbers, consider names.

The names of those who have been generous with you.  
The names of those who have given you more than you can ever name.

For example, consider the Charter members of this church who started Westminster on the wilderness of Augusta Street way back in 1947.

When they gathered Sunday after Sunday in a tent in those early years, what were they investing?

Not only their money.

It was their time.

Their faith.

Their trust in one another and in God.

They were taking a risk.

They did not know whether it would succeed or fail, but it wasn't an investment just for themselves.

It was an investment in you.

It was an investment in me.

They were investing in children of God whom they would never get to meet, trusting that God would use their gifts to spread the good news.

What would happen if we thought about our investment in Westminster in that way?

Investing in people whom we may never meet, but will be at our baptismal font and in these pews 10 years, 20 years, 50 years from now?

Speaking of names, do any of you remember the name, Oseola McCarty?

She wasn't a Charter Member of this church.

But she was a member of Friendship Baptist Church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

She died 25 years ago, at the age of 91.

Born into poverty in rural Mississippi, she grew up with her mother and grandmother and aunt, and family responsibilities forced her to leave school in sixth grade.

She became a washerwoman, cleaning others' clothes.  
She did this her entire life.

In the 1960s, she bought a washing machine, but got rid of it, preferring to boil her wash water over an open fire and scrub the cloth by hand.

She never married.  
She had no children.

Because she owned no car, she pushed a grocery cart a mile to the grocery store.

She lived very modestly, made a modest living.  
And she did one other thing.  
She saved.

Somehow, on her meager living, she saved tens of thousands of dollars, until they became hundreds of thousands of dollars.

When she was in her 80s, bank officers contacted her, because they were both impressed and concerned about her mounting wealth. What were her plans for it?

She scattered her dimes across her kitchen table, to help outline the parameters of what would become her irrevocable trust.

Three dimes represented the percent designated for living relatives.  
One dime was the tithe—10%—that would go to her church.

And six dimes symbolized the coming bequest that would make national news, because Oseola McCarty, a washerwoman from Mississippi, would leave \$150,000 that she had saved over the course of her life for the University of Southern Mississippi. It was to be used to underwrite tuition for students who could not otherwise afford the education that she herself had been denied.

When Ms. McCarty decided to set that gift loose before she died, 600 neighbors found her generosity so remarkable, they added their gifts on top of hers.

When a journalist asked her why she didn't spend the money she had saved on herself, she answered with a smile, "I am spending it on myself."<sup>2</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

Now what did Ms. McCarty mean by that?

Because she clearly wasn't spending money on herself.

If I may put it like this, here's what I hear in the answer she gave to that journalist.

When she lived simply,  
and then gave extravagantly,  
she was being the generous person  
whom God had created her to be.

Which is, I believe, the third way, and perhaps the most faithful way, that you and I understand what it means to INVEST in Westminster.

---

<sup>2</sup> Karl Travis, *God's Gift of Generosity: Gratitude Beyond Stewardship*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

Invest—doesn't just mean numbers.

And it's not only names.

**It's about what we know.**

What we know, deep down, to be true.

To be true about God.

And to be true about ourselves.

How many of you know that you are God's child?

Good.

To be a child of God is, by definition, to be a generous person.

To be giving person.

That is our truest self, our deepest identity.

Why?

Because we are created in the image of God.

And being generous, giving joyfully is what God has done since the very beginning.

How many of you remember the way the Bible begins?

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...”

And what does God do next?

God gives.

God gives generously and joyfully.

God gives light to the darkness.

God gives form to the chaos.

God gives day and night to the Earth.

Now, at the end of each day, does the Bible say that God was a reluctant giver? A grumbling giver?

Do you think God said:



“Uhhhh...another day, do I really have to be generous tomorrow? I have to create the lions and the tigers and the giraffe and the hippopotamus...when I am going to have time to watch my Netflix??!!”

Is that what God said?

Or do you think God took delight, pure and unadulterated joy in giving and giving and giving....it's why Paul write, in our text for today, “God loves a cheerful giver.”

Because that joy is reflective of the God in whose image you and I are made.

That's what investment in God's church is all about.  
Reflecting the image of God.  
Being and becoming the generous people whom God created us to be.

\*\*\*\*\*

When the author Isabel Allende's daughter, Paula, died of a rare blood disease at the age of 29, Allende's entire life came to a halt.

Then, after three years of “emotional paralysis,” Allende took a trip to India with her husband and another friend. One day their guide was driving them down a dusty, country road when they saw a group of four women and some children standing under a solitary tree, out in the country, in the middle of nowhere.

Allende asked the driver to stop.  
She approached the women.

They did not share a common language, but they still communicated with one another—first through smiles, then with the women reaching out and touching Allende’s clothing, her face.

She and her friend gave the women their bracelets, which those women gratefully put on and wore.

As Allende was leaving, one of the women gave her something. It appeared to be a tiny package.

But when Allende looked inside, it was no package!

It was the woman’s baby daughter!

She wanted Allende to take her daughter back with her, to give her a better life.

The driver saw what was happening and, very swiftly, ran from the car to Isabel Allende, taking the child and giving the child back to her mother.

Allende writes:

“What happened that day beneath the...tree loosened the knot that had been choking me...

“In that moment I remembered that when [Paula] was alive I would often call her for advice...and her answer would always come in the form of a question:

‘Mother, what is the most generous thing [you can] do?’

“I had an account with untouched savings that I was planning to invest in something that would make Paula proud...”

On the way back home, Allende announced to her husband and her friend that she would start a foundation to help women and children.<sup>3</sup>

It was a turning point, a defining moment in Allende's life.

A moment grounded not in answers to life's problems, but in a question:

“What's the most generous thing you can do?”

\*\*\*\*\*

I wonder what would happen if you and I woke up each day, and let that question guide ALL our investments...

When it comes to the people who are most important to you...

When it comes to the person who has wounded you...

When it comes to the neighbors who live all around you...

When it comes to Commitment Sunday, two weeks from today...

When it comes to being the person whom God has created you to be...

***What is the most generous thing you can do?***

(Amen.)

---

<sup>3</sup> From “Who Wants a Girl?”, by Isabel Allende, found in *Better Than Fiction: True Travel Tales From Great Fiction Writers*, edited by Don George, Melbourne: Lonely Planet, 2012.