

Dear Friend in Christ:

This is a time in which we as committed Christians are seeking to deal faithfully with the challenging realities facing the church in the 21st century. It is a time, as well, in which we are called to enable the church to identify and embrace new possibilities for ministry and mission.

CLAIM THE VISION is a Commitment Sunday program that fits this transitional period in the church's life, a time in which we have the opportunity to "claim the vision" of a New Church and New World — united and made whole through Jesus Christ. It is God's vision, as proclaimed by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5: "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself ... and entrusting the **ministry** of reconciliation to us."

Pastors and lay officials know that NOW is the time for new strategies and structures to be developed to give a forward thrust to the church's ministry of **reconciliation** — its primary ministry. Indeed, many such leaders have already begun implementing new approaches to this ministry. In a society and world where change is accelerating, it is imperative that this process be ongoing.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP

CLAIM THE VISION uses imaginative symbols and language from the fascinating world of hot air ballooning to illustrate the program's emphasis upon new perspectives on Christian stewardship. As you examine the Step Envelopes in the Preview Kit, you will discover stunningly beautiful, full color photographs — taken at balloon festivals — that make the posters, bulletin inserts and covers, letters and letterheads, stewardship response envelopes, and related items eye-catching and even inspiring. These materials make this program the most visually stimulating one offered by Stewardship Resources.

Given the challenges and possibilities before us in the church today, we need "new perspectives" on Christian stewardship, don't we? I reflected on this reality one August day after listening to Charles Kuralt, on the tape from his book ***My Life on the Road***, describe a "Sunday Morning" CBS television segment done years earlier by him and his very imaginative photographer.

A western state farmer was being interviewed in his field helping young children fly kites, a favorite pastime for him. It struck the photographer that it might be rather interesting to shoot a part of the segment from the kites' perspective. A cherry picker was rented and he ascended into the sky and rolled his film. Focusing on the scene from the kites' perspective made for a much more interesting segment, one that brought an unusually high level of positive feedback from the viewing audience.

Later that same August day, I listened to a tape of a lecture by David McCullough given at the Chautauqua Institution in western New York. McCullough spoke of the importance of the use of our imaginations in various areas of our lives. It was a riveting lecture.

That night, I fell asleep praying that God would enable me to use my imagination to find a powerful symbol for the new perspectives from which we as Christians and as stewards of the Gospel are called to view this world. At 4:30 a.m., I awoke suddenly and fully with the image in my mind's eye of a beautiful hot air balloon high in the sky and filled with smiling people looking down on the earth. Clearly, my prayer had been answered!

Immediately, I began learning about hot air ballooning: its history, its pioneers, its heroes, and its present state as a fast-growing and increasingly popular outdoor sport. I attended the magnificent World Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque, New Mexico. There, I watched some 600 balloons — each unique and spectacular — ascend into the bright blue desert sky. I even had the exhilarating experience of riding in one of those balloons and, from high above the Rio Grande, looking out and down on God's beautiful creation. Indeed, it was a new perspective!

Back home, my staff and I went to work conceptualizing and developing the CLAIM THE VISION program. Shortly, I was on the phone to Ron Behrmann, the official photographer for the Albuquerque festival, explaining what we were about and inviting him to send samples of his ballooning photography. Among those sent were photographs of the awe-inspiring World Balloon, with its circle of flags from many nations. Interestingly, it is the “flagship” balloon of Albuquerque's annual event. This balloon, shot from two angles, is the first one your people will see. The others, too, are the product of Mr. Behrmann, one of America's most talented photographers of hot air ballooning.

A FORMAT FOR SUCCESS

Responding to the frequent requests of pastors and stewardship committee chairs for a new Commitment Sunday program, my staff and I quickly acknowledged that traditional Commitment Day programs have an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage is that a Commitment “Day” gets the appeal over with quickly and usually involves relatively little time and expense. The disadvantage is that this one day solicitation, by itself, frequently disappoints church leaders in terms of financial response and renewed “commitment” to ministry.

While CLAIM THE VISION is a Commitment Day program, it is non-traditional in two ways. And these are a significant part of the program's strength.

First, ahead of Commitment Day, comfortable small group settings are provided in which every active member is given the opportunity to affirm present approaches to ministry AND suggest new possibilities. These rank and file members are invited to express gratitude for what is and share their visions of what might be.

The reality acknowledged by this feature of the program is that God often communicates insight and wisdom to ordinary Christians in the midst of their unique life situations and their lives in the church. So, it is important that they be encouraged to speak, in an atmosphere of respect and trust, and that their words be valued and honored.

As Commitment Day approaches, these rank and file members will have participated in a process that will have caused them to feel affirmed and to perceive themselves as “visionary” stewards. And when that “Day” arrives and they turn in their response envelopes, their gifts to God will represent Visionary Stewardship!

Secondly, following Commitment Day, the leaders of those earlier small groups contact the members assigned to their groups who did not turn in their response envelopes, for one reason or another, to encourage them to do so without delay.

The reality acknowledged by this feature of the program is that not every member is able to respond on Commitment Day. Some cannot be present for worship for one reason or another. Some need more time to “process” the appropriate level of their stewardship response. Others feel a need for personal attention — one on one — before they make their response. Quite often, intentional follow-up contacts are the difference between a stewardship program that enables the church’s stewardship response to be energizing and one that is demoralizing.

Here, then, is a format for success with the Commitment Day program in your church. Yes, it is going to require more investment of time and money to implement CLAIM THE VISION. And yes, in making this investment you are going to experience a return that will please you. Most importantly, you want the program you are going to use to please God, who has entrusted you and your people with the ministry of reconciliation — within your church body, your community, our nation and throughout all nations, as symbolized by those flags on the World Balloon.