

Personal Property in a Mission Society

A Reference Document of the USCWM Community

Ralph D. Winter (first draft)

Friday, September 21, 1990

E506

From the time the USCWM was founded we have always said we did not ask prospective members about "what they earned or owned," but only whether we could confirm to donors supporting our members that our members are living and working productively, in keeping with our official, corporate objectives so as to merit that support.

What this means is that a person of great wealth could freely consider membership with us without running into an inquisition about things over which he was already a steward under God. It is our intent not to display profligate use of money; an independently wealthy person as a member of our fellowship would be expected not to use his wealth lavishly or uneconomically. We would not want to preach a wartime lifestyle and have our members practice something else. By and large we would expect an independently wealthy person to live within the means defined by our normal membership allotments.

Would we allow such a person to raise support if he did not need it or did not entirely need it? What if the person would rather put some of his own wealth into his ministry account instead of asking other believers to pay for his work? We would allow any donor, including the person himself to give funds to the organization for his ministry account. This, in fact, happens all the time where people who are, in effect, undersupported draw on savings or simply cut down on their living standard. They themselves become the missing donors.

But, the key point is that we would not pressure a wealthy person to become a donor in that sense. That would be completely up to him. We would actually prefer even the most wealthy person to conduct "a personal ministry" the way everyone else does. We feel such a ministry is not primarily directed at support but at service, and we wish all of our staff to be so involved. If they receive money in return for their service, money that exceeds their need, it can be used to help others. The laborer is worthy of his hire. He does not have to pay himself.

Suppose a couple becoming members already owned a house back in Massachusetts, and sold it on coming out to Pasadena, renting one of our houses. Would we allow churches to pay a housing allowance to this couple? The housing allowance is an integral part of the living allowance in our

system. Whether a member now owns or once owned a house, or owns the equivalent of a house, is not our business. We pay all members according to a scale which is defined as what they would need to live on. We expect them to live within those means, not flamboyantly. It does not matter where that money comes from, whether the donors include friends, churches, or the member himself.

It is crucial to us how people live but not what they happen to own, or what they happen to be stewards over.

All of us have been entrusted with many privileges and blessings by God. Some can be given away, some cannot. But no matter what our blessings consist of, we are to be stewards thereof. "Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required," the Bible says. More blessings, more responsibility. God does not bless us to lighten our load but to burden us with opportunities we would not otherwise have.

Our community has never chosen to "expect" that anyone would give away to us, or to others, whatever they can, but simply to be a good steward thereof. Some people ought to give away what they can give away, knowing that someone else may be better able to use such gifts. Others ought not to because they can better use those gifts than can others. In any case, this is up to the individual and the family involved. We have not made it our community's business to regulate such things.

One staff member may continue to own a house in another state. We do not pressure that staff member to sell or to rent or to give away that house, certainly not to us nor to anyone we would indicate. Whether the staff member sells or rents, obviously income will flow from that house, or from its invested equity. This income may be in addition to what is provided by donors—monies we consider justified on the basis of the work a staff member does, if it is done productively under our supervision and in conformity to our corporate objectives.

If a staff member does not receive adequate support for his full allotment, then he is not legally obligated to do any particular thing with that proportion of his 40 hour week, although he is urged to use that time to generate support.

If a staff member is able to raise full support, but cannot for any reason put in full time in an assign-

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ment defined by our corporate objectives, then we cannot legally pay full support. I could imagine a person becoming a member of our community and having to spend a substantial amount of time in assisting a family member outside of our community, or taking care of personal assets. In such a case we cannot support such activities with tax-deductible gifts which are donated to fulfill our corporate purposes. We routinely give "home assignment" to mothers of young children precisely because that allows them both to fulfill their parental duties, which we uphold, and also to do many useful and good things in part-time assignments as they are able.

We allow people a basic allotment which covers basic needs according to the extent of those needs. But we do not feel it is up to us to modify that allotment because of other kinds of income a given staff member or his family receives. That additional stewardship is the burden of the staff member, who should not use "company time" to nurture those other assets.

It is a fact that some onlookers are perturbed by our policy of "simple lifestyle" as they describe it—actually a "war-time lifestyle"—which is not necessarily simple. Others might think that we should require all members to surrender their personal property, and all personal assets. We do not sit in judgment on those mission societies which do either of these two things. But we do not go in either direction via any mandatory structure whatsoever.

Similarly, we do not want people to seek to join us because of the potential financial security membership may afford. Nor do we want people to stay for that reason. Therefore, it has long been our intent to provide some way in which a person staying with us over a long period can build some kind of personal equity that can be taken with him if he or she feels led to leave our fellowship.

In that vein we have opted to participate in Social Security, even though we intend eventually to offer members more than what they will be able to receive from SS. This is one way we can assist our members to provide for old-age security. There are an amazing number of ways this can be done, running from work-credit systems becoming popular in certain parts of the country, to senior-care, child-care combinations, to outright financial equity

plans. We intend to think clearly about these dimensions