



Understanding per capita

The money contributed helps build up the Body of Christ

One evening 20 years ago, I was in a meeting with two local church sessions. They were discussing the congregations' differing views on a matter before the General Assembly — the ordination of LGBTQ Presbyterians. The exchange was polite but candid, with passionately expressed opposing views. At a pause, one session moderator, the pastor who was pro-ordination of LGBTQ Presbyterians, said in an offhand way, "Well, at least we agree on one thing: Our churches don't really need the denomination's help all that much."

A hand quickly shot up. The clerk of session from that church stood and said firmly, "I respectfully disagree." Everyone was now paying close attention as the clerk told of a crisis the church once faced in which presbytery and synod leaders immediately contacted the congregation. "They advised us on legal matters. They arranged for substitute preachers. And they helped us find an interim pastor to lead through the next two years," said the clerk.

I confess: I was the pastor who had said we didn't really need the denomination's help. I knew our clerk was right as he urged us not to dismiss denominational leaders as "church bureaucracy," describing them, instead, as skilled leaders who help our denomination function. As the pastor, it was my turn to speak — and apologize. It wasn't my best moment, but whenever I speak about the value of per capita, I tell that story. It's embarrassing every time, but it makes the point: Without per capita payments that provide the funding for presbytery, synod and General Assembly, the support needed in a crisis by the congregation I now serve would not have been there.

Friends from other nonconnectional denominations whose own churches have gone through similar rough patches understand. They have nowhere to turn when they need help.

There are good theological and biblical arguments in support of per capita. It is the connective tissue in the body imagery of the Apostle Paul — "But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Corinthians 12:18, NIV).

Per capita provides the wherewithal for the ecclesiastical democracy of the priesthood of all believers to run smoothly. It fuels the machinery of doing church the Presbyterian way, which is quite different from independent congregational and bishop-based systems. It can

also be embraced as one way in which we work toward building a beloved community.

A recent experience reminded me again of the importance of per capita. This past summer, we had our backyard regraded. The melting snows of Minnesota winters had begun finding their way down a slope and into the basement. We had to redo everything in the yard. As I watched workers build rain channels and install rock, I thought of my assignment to write about why I support per capita and how having a Sunday in January dedicated to per capita awareness is a wonderful educational moment for our congregations. Gardens, like churches, need infrastructure.

For many years, we had simply planted bulbs, tended vegetables and weeded flower beds. It was only when we had to start the garden from scratch that we became aware of how a healthy garden depends on infrastructure. We had never been particularly concerned with soil composition and drainage. We assumed and took for granted that the garden would be there year after year.

Congregations can be like that. We worship, teach church school and sing in the choir. We marry and bury. We advocate for justice. But without the support that undergirds the way we do church, the plants in our congregational gardens would find it difficult to thrive. We are not often aware of the value of per capita, but it is there all the time — especially when we need it. Our clerk of session reminded me of that one evening long ago.

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Hart-Andersen is the senior pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis.

OBSERVE PER CAPITA SUNDAY

Jan. 23, 2022 has been set aside as Per Capita Sunday, a day to celebrate being a connectional church. The Epistle lesson for that Sunday is 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, a reminder that all parts of the church are parts of one body. Being a connectional church takes both the contribution of gifts to per capita and the work of pastors and elders who together advise, guide and govern our General Assembly, synods and presbyteries.