



The Big Surprise

It was a surprise party when the church that built its own addition with all congregational labor – eighteen months of Saturdays – had so much fun they wanted to keep doing things together. It was a surprise party when the church that decided to space-share with an Indonesian congregation learned “Silent Night” sounds like angels when it’s sung half in English, half in Bahasa. There were two surprise parties for the discouraged teenagers from New England when a regional youth event was cancelled. Two different outdoor ministry sites opened up to them and, in the midst of nature, God did the speaking.

It was a surprise party for the Philippians who believed Paul’s promise that contentment with available resources and an intentional focus on the true, honorable, just, pure and excellent would spread peace past human understanding.

It's never a party when we worry about the needy-side and hungry-side of our own situations — the not-enough of our personal finances or our church finances. When we realize the plenty-side is more about attitude than quantity, we walk in the door. It's still dark in the room under budget gloom, and we all fumble for a magic switch. When we really discover that we can live with what we have and give with what we have — the lights go on and we see the balloons, the friends, the piñata, and Christ who has been strengthening us all along. The secret is out! The surprise party is us!

God is still speaking,
**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**



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Church with a Secret

The city of Philippi in Macedonia was a prosperous stop on the main East-West road through the Roman Empire. It boasted theaters, elegant baths, public squares, noted concerts. It was a favorite retirement spot for military families. In case of trouble, it also had a very secure jail.

Philippi was the site of Paul the Apostle's first European outreach. The Philippi church was founded by Lydia, the biblical woman who brought together the often incompatible personality traits of "Martha and Mary." Lydia both frequented a place by the river for prayer and meditation, and she was an active merchant of purple cloth and the host and administrator of a faith community in her home. Her life had balance.

The Philippi church is remembered as the “generous” church. They repeatedly sent gifts to Paul as he continued on his travels. It was not “one-time mission” but ongoing support, even when he was out of active ministry and needed compassionate care in prison. Paul wrote that they were the only church who shared with him in giving and receiving. Christians through the ages are grateful to the Philippians because what they received was the most encouraging and affirmative of all the New Testament letters.

Like their founder Lydia, the Philippi church was the church of balance – they understood poverty and plenty and they understood the secret of giving in both circumstances. What secret? They could do anything through Christ who strengthened them.

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Secret Santa... Not a Yankee Swap

There are two popular Christmas games in work places, clubs, schools and sometimes families. One is a Yankee Swap, where participants bring in unidentified wrapped presents and then – by number – choose, keep or exchange the gifts. Often it’s funny; sometimes it’s a little mean. The underlying assumption is that there is little effort to the purchase and little attachment to the gift, which probably will be snatched away.

The other game is Secret Santa. Each person receives someone else’s name for whom to plan and purchase a gift. The “Santa” might spend weeks or months hunting for clues to the recipient’s interests – learning favorite colors, foods, authors, musicians. The result is a secret, surprising, appropriate gift of attention and caring.

The two-way relationship between Paul and the church in Philippi was based on deep caring that was expressed in remembering one another clearly and vibrantly, praying for particular joys and sorrows, and sending gifts that aided in ministry and responded to times of plenty or hunger, prison or well-being.

We are “Secret Santas” for our own churches – considering needs for time, talent, treasure and prayer. We pay attention to the budgets of committees, the hopes for the future, and the personal needs of staff. Our pledging for the ministry of the church is no Yankee Swap – tossed in thoughtlessly for a random return – but a carefully prepared offering. A wonderful secret! A wonderful surprise!

Weekly Giving if the Percentage Is
(Rounded to the nearest dollar)

Annual Income	Monthly Income	Weekly Income	2%	4%	6%	8%	10%	15%
\$8,000	\$667	\$154	\$3.00	\$6.00	\$9.00	\$12.00	\$15.00	\$23.00
12,000	1,000	231	5.00	9.00	14.00	18.00	23.00	35.00
16,000	1,333	308	6.00	12.00	18.00	25.00	31.00	46.00
20,000	1,667	385	8.00	15.00	23.00	31.00	39.00	58.00
25,000	2,083	481	10.00	19.00	29.00	38.00	48.00	72.00
30,000	2,500	577	12.00	23.00	35.00	46.00	58.00	87.00
35,000	2,917	673	13.00	27.00	40.00	54.00	67.00	101.00
40,000	3,333	769	15.00	31.00	46.00	62.00	77.00	115.00
45,000	3,750	865	17.00	35.00	52.00	69.00	87.00	130.00
50,000	4,167	962	19.00	38.00	58.00	77.00	96.00	144.00
60,000	5,000	1,154	23.00	46.00	69.00	92.00	115.00	173.00
75,000	6,250	1,442	29.00	58.00	87.00	115.00	144.00	216.00
100,000	8,333	1,923	38.00	77.00	115.00	154.00	192.00	288.00
125,000	10,417	2,404	48.00	96.00	144.00	192.00	240.00	361.00

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Can You Keep a Secret?

The teenager didn't see me coming back to the choir loft for my music folder. The sanctuary was empty, though the offering plates were still on the communion table. I was also in perfect position to know what she was doing, because I was the one who had just given her the two fifty dollar bills for pet-sitting. It was cheaper than a kennel, and I knew she was short of her goal of community college tuition. It had meant having her arm pulled out of its socket by an over-exuberant chocolate lab twice a day for five days of freezing rain and snow... and the "scooping." She took an envelope out of the pew, folded a fifty and slipped it secretly into the morning offering. I was sorry I hadn't given her smaller bills — till she turned around and I saw her radiant face.

The best-kept secret in the church is how wonderful it feels to give. Whether it's an annuity that provides self-support while undergirding local ministry; a toy donated to a family at

Christmas; the weekly pledge that transforms into salaries and health insurance, fuel bills and curriculum, a new kitchen counter and a youth group mission trip; or an anonymous can of chili, a poinsettia, or used eyeglasses — it feels wonderful to give. Whether we have little or whether we have plenty, it's a joy to give it away. Can you keep a secret?

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