

Stewardship meets the P.O.

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 10, 1999](#) issue

Every Month I look forward to reading "St. Paul Journey," the newsletter of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa. I turn first to Peter W. Marty's "Pastor's Column," of course. Last month the columnist alerted readers to something I had not known about before and believe will help my readers. I'll let Peter tell it (he owes me after all those days I shivered at the finish line of cross-country meets or winced at squeaking junior high school band competitions).

He learned that the U.S. Postal Service has huge manuals and busy computers that regulate who can use which postage rates, and when. One section of rules, "Computer-Prepared Contribution Notices, DMM E612.2.3," tells congregations what they must say in mailed contribution reports. For one thing, the reports must say that we givers have received nothing in exchange for our donations. Peter's church stumbled over another strict regulation when it changed one word in its thank-you message.

Three times a year, St. Paul's reports say, "Thank you for your continued support of St. Paul's ministry this year. Please call the business office with any questions." Sounds innocuous, doesn't it?

At the end of 1998, the parishioners proved such faithful stewards and cheerful givers that the church altered its thank-you message--by one word: "Thank you for your generous support of St. Paul's ministry throughout 1998. Please call the business office with any questions." They replaced "continued" with "generous."

Here is where St. Paul and M.E.M.O offer you a money-saving tip. The Postal Service interprets DMM E612.2.3 as classifying the first three reports as "a solicitation for more contributions . . . thus qualifying them to be mailed at the nonprofit standard mail rate of postage." St. Paul's slightly altered phrase changes the purpose of the mailings, the manual claims. Now the line "contains personalized information . . . and lacks a solicitation for more contributions . . . thus subjecting it to first-class rates of postage." Peter explains, "In other words, you pay a lot more in postage if you don't solicit more money from donors."

The congregation pleaded with the Post Office. "The absence of the word continued doesn't mean we're closing shop," they said. They produced a copy of their 1999 budget, saying that it relies entirely on the generosity of the members--the same people receiving the statements. The giving reports even include a column that lists the individual's pledge commitment for 1999. "We are CONTINUING!" No luck. The congregation had to cough up \$370 in first-class postage, "recognizing that a bureaucracy cannot possibly comprehend the Christian spirit. But it can't dampen it either."

"The whole notion of soliciting donations runs against the grain of everything we believe in as Christian stewardship," Peter says. "Operating St. Paul Lutheran Church and its ministries is not an exercise in fund raising. It's Christian giving, pure and simple. You give freely where you know blessing and trust God and find joy; you hold back when those things are in short supply. A statement of contribution record is a printout of your generosity--not a tool for solicitation!"

Thanks, Peter, for helping me meet a deadline for this column. Readers will thank you for the postage advice, with the theology of stewardship tucked in.