

COMMENT

The Greatest Act of Christian Stewardship

It's done," I said as I pushed back from the desk after signing my will, a living will, a durable power of attorney and other related documents. An estate plan that I had been thinking about for months was finally in place. Insurance beneficiaries were coordinated with my will as were beneficiaries for my retirement. All the parts fit together in one master plan.

It was not as if I had no will before. I did. After my late wife Eleanor died in 1998 I revised my will and revised it again when Pat Hart and I married four years later. I thought it was a good will. I took care of family and left part of my estate to the Lord's work.

Unfortunately I knew little about how to transfer assets with the least amount of tax consequences. And my insurance protection was not always coordinated with plans for retirement or other assets. When Pat and I blended our families that further complicated how to faithfully exercise Christian stewardship and fulfill family responsibilities.

Catalyst to act

That it took 12 years to work through an agreed-upon plan that accomplishes what both Pat and I want to accomplish — cares for family, minimizes tax consequences and includes charitable causes — illustrates how good intentions can lie dormant because there is no urgency to act on them.

For me the catalyst to act was an offer by The Baptist Foundation of Alabama (TBFA) to consult with PhilanthroCorp, a stewardship planning organization based in Colorado Springs, Colo., that focuses primarily on helping parachurch organizations through estate planning.

TBFA had partnered with this organization to work with Baptist churches in Alabama. In fact TBFA President Barry Bledsoe introduced PhilanthroCorp to the idea of working with churches needing stewardship assistance through estate planning.

In one of PhilanthroCorp's earliest church partnerships, it helped an Alabama Baptist church receive more than \$21 million in estate designations. Since then the ministry has worked with other churches in the state, including non-Baptist churches, and the results have always exceeded expectations.

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not have a will and 71 percent of people under 35 do not have a will.

Furthermore PhilanthroCorp executives report that only 1 in 40 of the persons with whom they talk have charitable causes in their wills before that conversation.

Evidently Christians, like others, give little thought to the Christian values reflected in how resources are used at one's death. Most seem to think whatever the law allows should be done instead of asking what God might want one to do in their greatest opportunities for Christian stewardship.

PhilanthroCorp reviewed our wills and Pat and I had a number of telephone conversations with them. They asked clarifying questions. At no time did they suggest how assets should be distributed. As they said at the beginning of the process, they are not a fundraising organization. They raise questions that helps one think biblically about Christian stewardship. Then they help find the best ways to accomplish whatever goals are set.

Personally I was surprised at the various ways our goals could be accomplished, and I was chagrined to learn the way I originally planned to accomplish those goals would have tax liabilities reducing the gifts by almost half.

As issues surfaced in the process they were examined and resolved. Clarity came through conversation and methods for accomplishing our goals were revised. Once it was clear what we wanted to do and how we wanted to do it, it was time to draft the documents. PhilanthroCorp does not draft legal documents but they

do have a network of attorneys with whom they have worked a number of times. However, one is free to take the estate planning information to any attorney one chooses.

After documents were drafted, PhilanthroCorp reviewed the documents to make sure they outline the agreed-upon goals and methods.

Before finalizing the estate plan in wills and trusts and other documents, I asked a friend who specializes in taxation and an attorney friend who specializes in estate planning to review them. Both complemented the work and endorsed the plans. PhilanthroCorp work was good work.

At the outset I had been skeptical this could be done via telephone. I was wrong. The hard part was thinking through the issues raised by the realization that estate planning is the greatest act of Christian stewardship most of us will ever make. Telephone conversations, emails and faxes made the other part simple. Working with a skilled, thoughtful and caring consultant also helped.

I am not the only one who needs a push to finalize their estate plans. One church in Texas used a weekend to emphasize stewardship of estates followed by a free workshop for anyone who wanted

more information. This megachurch hoped for 100 workshop participants. They had more than 1,000.

PhilanthroCorp is working with Alabama Baptist churches now. Frequently the organization partners with a church for a series of services during a two-year period but there is no set program. In addition TBFA staff uses the same program and is available to work with churches.

Helping Alabama Baptist families

TBFA goes one step further. If an active family in an Alabama Baptist church is interested in doing estate planning and open to including Baptist work in its estate plan, TBFA will work directly with that family even if its church is not emphasizing estate planning at the time. And all of this is done at no cost to the family.

PhilanthroCorp also works at no charge to families with their costs being covered by contracts with sponsoring churches.

For a Christian, estate planning begins on one's knees asking what God would have one do as stewards of what He has entrusted to them. It requires creative biblical thinking. Then it deserves wise plans for implementation. For me, TBFA and its partner organization PhilanthroCorp were valuable resources in the process. I commend them to you. 🙏

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**For more
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TBFA at www.tbfa.org
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