

Investing In God's Business
2 Corinthians 9.6-15

FUPC
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I don't like shopping very much. The idea of walking through a store looking at various products and merchandise doesn't do much for me. But if I really need something, maybe a garden tool or an essential piece of furniture or an item for my office... then I'm on it. I know what I want. I have an idea of what I want to pay for it. And so I become a consumer... I go shopping. I compare prices. I evaluate the quality of the particular item I'm looking for. If customer service is important then that may factor into my decision. I may even decide that if I have to stand in line or the store is too crowded, then I might want to buy it at different store. Or even better, maybe I can buy it online and not have to find a parking space and deal with crowds of people. Bless Amazon Prime with its free shipping for most items... even to Hawaii!

I am a consumer, so are you. "Consumer" comes from a Latin word that has to do with addition. If you take "con" off the front and "er" of the end, you end up with the middle, "sum". And sum is what we put at the bottom of a column of numbers. Add them up and that's the sum. A consumer is someone who adds numbers. The answer is "the bottom line." The final verdict.

The Romans did their arithmetic from bottom to top. We add from top to bottom and put the result underneath. They added from the bottom to the top and put the result at the top. So the sum became the summit, the highest point. So we say, "It just doesn't add up."

A consumer is a person who adds up numbers. But more than that, a consumer is a person with power, the power of choice. They choose to buy or not buy based on whether the product they're shopping for fits their criteria. They're in the drivers' seat because they can choose to spend their money in your store or they can choose to walk out the door.

It's an analogy that fits the church. We're all religious consumers. We have certain needs that we want to have met when we attend church. If you've ever done any church shopping, you know how this goes. In one church, the people seem friendly but the sermons put you to sleep. In another church, the music is upbeat and happy, but they aren't too friendly. In another church, you look around and don't see any kids. That's a red flag if you have children. In another church, they seem pretty rigid and judging so that God seems like a cosmic policeman just waiting for somebody to make a mistake.

When we're looking for a church, most of us look for a friendly atmosphere. If we feel welcome, then we are more likely to go back. Some look for a church with deep roots in the community where they get involved with mission outreach and people who are marginalized out on the edge of society. Some look for a place to heal, where they can be enlightened, comforted, supported, and find forgiveness. Some people just look for plenty of convenient parking.

There's nothing wrong with being a consumer when it comes to looking for a church. It's natural, legitimate and valid. If we find a church that meets most of our criteria of what we think a church should be, we'll be a consumer there. We'll attend, give our offerings, sing the songs and pray the prayers along with everyone else. As long as that church meets our needs in the way we want, we'll keep on attending. As soon as it stops meeting our needs, we may be out the door fairly quickly. That's the power of the consumer. We can always walk away.

But some people, in addition to being consumers, go on to become investors. These two people look at life differently. While a consumer looks at what he can get out of a church, the investor looks at what he can put back in. When you invest in a company, you own part of the business. You have a stake in the success or failure of that company. You have a sense of responsibility for the success of the enterprise. If there's trash on the lawn you pick it up. If a door is left unlocked, you make sure it's locked before you leave. If the lights are left on, you turn them off. If there's yard work and maintenance required, you show up to do what you can.

Investments always come with risk. When I decide to invest in something, I'm deciding that the potential reward is worth the risk. I am willing to get involved, take responsibility, make sure that my investment is a good one and do everything within my power to make sure I don't take a loss on it.

Usually, that's what happens when people decide to become members of a church. We're always consumers, but at some point, we decide that we also want to take that extra risk and responsibility of ownership for what's going on in the church and we become investors. As members, we can serve on boards and committees. We have the right to express an opinion and to shape the direction and impact of the church's mission.

Churches exist because of consumers. But churches grow and thrive because of the investors. We are all consumers. We need consumers. But we also need investors to make the church work. I see some hard working people here. Recently I looked back through the archives of the church this week, I saw many of you. You were teaching classes, sewing quilts, taking care of the property, participating in worship, serving on committees, doing outreach in the community. You looked a little younger then... but you still look good! And you're still active. You have been the investors that kept this congregation moving and growing. We owe you a great deal of gratitude for all your dedication and hard work. But we need more investors.

At some point, one generation merges into the next and leadership is passed on. At some point, the people who are always willing to serve get tired and need a rest. A church's health is related to how widely leadership is shared within the membership. It's not a clear line or a neat formula. Developing new leadership happens slowly, gradually. Almost imperceptibly. It begins with our children and giving them a sense of belonging. In a few weeks, we'll include some of our young people as lay leaders for worship. We have a number of young adults who are part of our church family. They sometimes provide Sunday morning refreshments, some serve on the church council, some are active in a community outreach like feeding the hungry.

During these months after summer, we usually spend time focusing on two important priorities: Our leadership for the coming year and our budget for the coming year. If someone approaches you and asks you to consider helping out with an area of our church's life and mission, I hope you'll hear that as an opportunity to Invest in God's Business with time and talent. As we send out letters inviting you to pray about your financial giving for the coming year, I hope you'll read that letter as an invitation to Invest in God's Business with you financial resources.

What is God's Business? One word: People. God's business is people. Families, Children. Young people. Hungry people. Homeless people. People living with violence. Disabled people. Sick people and terminally ill people. Financially strapped people and people with problems like self-doubt, depression, alzheimers and people who feel forgotten and alone. To the degree that our church is involved with people, we are doing God's business.

It may involve maintaining a piece of property with some buildings on it. Paying insurance and utilities and repair bills. But the buildings are merely a tool to help us do our real business which is all about people. God's business is not about the buildings. Its about the people served because we are here... and have been here for almost 150 years.

Its easy to lose our focus and think that our church is the buildings we pour so much money into. No... these buildings are merely the facilities in which First United Protestant Church meets. The church is people not buildings. If these buildings were to disappear, we'd still be called First United Protestant Church.

Most of you probably don't remember but I remember when MacDonald's first opened more than 60 years ago, there was a sign hanging on their golden arches with a number on it. That number was a tally of how many hamburgers they had served to date. And it was fun to watch the number change from 3 million to 30 million then to 400 million. Don't be surprised if some Sunday you come to church and in the bulletin you see a special box containing a number something like this: 134 people served this week. Tally up the preschool and their families, all the AA and NA groups that meet here, the Kindermusik group, the Harmony on Tap group preparing for their concert, all the students who come for music lessons in the afternoons, and occasional concerts and community meetings... you'd be surprised how big that number might be. The success of our church is directly related to that number... how many people are we serving?

We are the church when we are gathered together. We're also the church when we leave here on Sunday morning and scatter to our jobs, our classrooms, our offices on Monday morning. And if you add up all the people whose lives we touch by serving them outside the church – giving rides, providing meals, lending a hand to a friend in need, loaning someone in need some money, or the use of their car.... That number grows even larger.

So lets agree that we're consumers when it comes to making choices about where to attend church. But the next question is, are you also an investor? Do you have any sense of ownership and responsibility for this small outpost of God's Business called First United Protestant Church?

To all of you who invest so tirelessly, so graciously, so consistently and so lovingly, I offer deep gratitude and regard. For those who have carried the church in their hearts over many years, and contributed time, energy and resources, I say "Mahalo, Mahalo". To those who are thinking they'd like to contribute more, get more involved, I say "thank you so much." We're so glad you're here and look forward to how you will share your gifts with us. And to all who are consumers and who would like to just enjoy the blessings of attending here for now, bless you for being here. Bless you for finding meaning in our worship services. Bless you for adding your voice to our hymns, your presence to our services, your prayers for your brothers and sisters, and your financial support so that we can continue to be here.

Consumers. Its why we are here. Investors. Its how we thrive and stay healthy.
Amen.