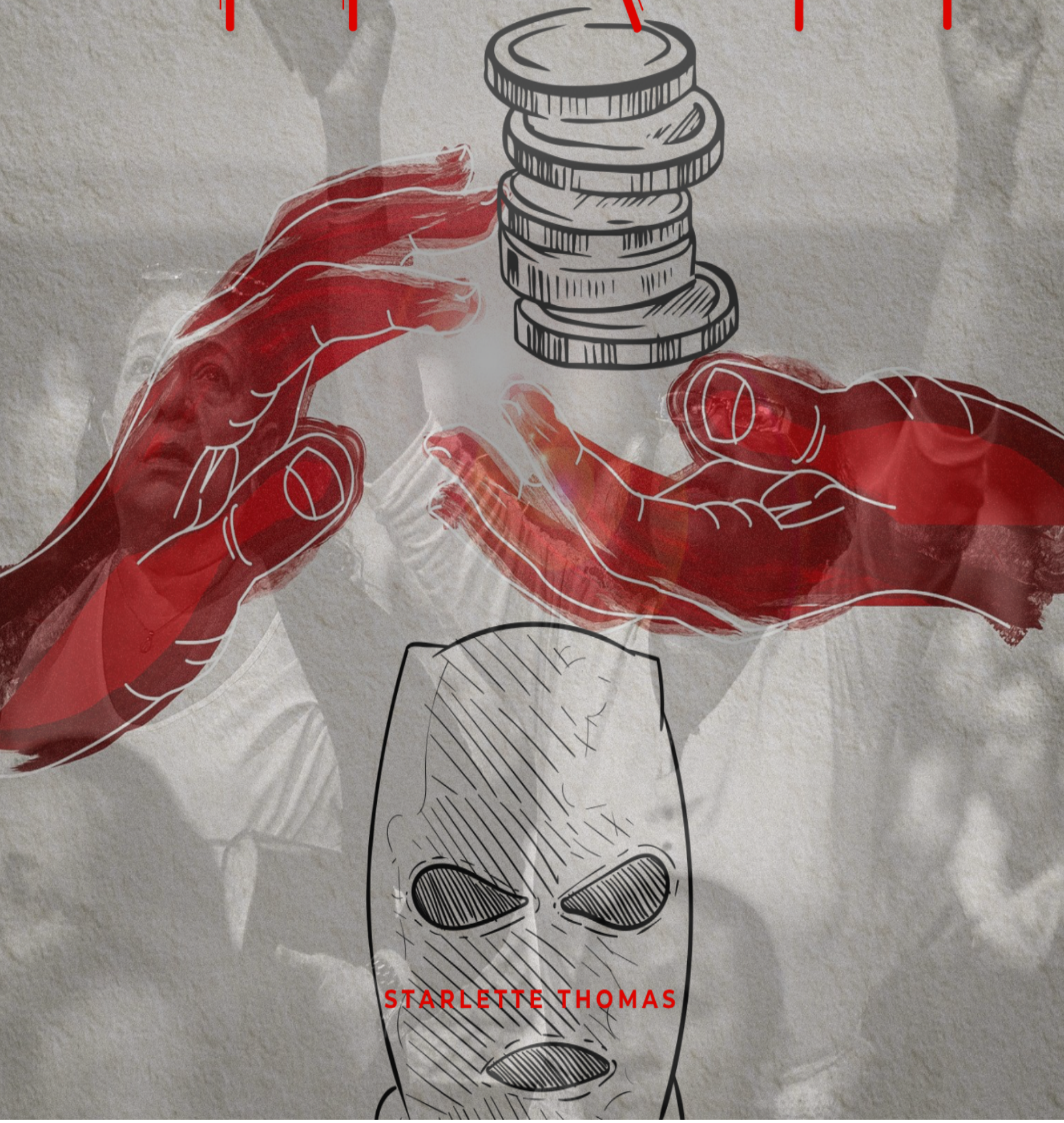


OFFERING A LOVER



STARLETTE THOMAS

WELCOME!

WELCOME to all God's children! I was glad when they said unto me, "Let us go and talk about money, greenbacks, hard cash or whatever you call that currency on your phone, in your purse or in your pocket. Thank you for listening to *The Raceless Gospel Podcast* where we gather this season to talk about the dollars and cents of Christian ministry and to audit our understanding of giving.

Lift your hands in worship. Lift your hands! This is a stick up. Give me all you've got. I meant to say, "Give God your tithes and offerings." This is a love offering, an examination of the North American church's questionable relationship with money and an excoriation of flock- fleecing shepherds and modern- day money changers who turn a dollar into health and wealth and call it ministry.

It's season five and we are giving you "A Love Offering," an audio audit of the North American church's messages about giving.

Named for the voluntary contributions given from the heart of members, the fifth season examines the North American church's relationship with money and what happens when the divine is revealed in dollar signs. From Judas' thirty pieces of silver to the prosperity gospel, each episode names and claims the church's role in the ministry of giving.

Historically, church members are encouraged to pass the plate for a freewill donation given to a fellow member who has expressed a financial need, to a visiting minister or missionary, an employee of the church or in support of another church or ministry. Given in addition to tithes and offerings, a love offering is used to address a financial need, celebrate a ministry milestone or offer additional support to a ministry for missions, outreach, a seasonal or annual special project. But what happens when money is tied to God's blessings, healing and protection?

This special seven-episode collection:

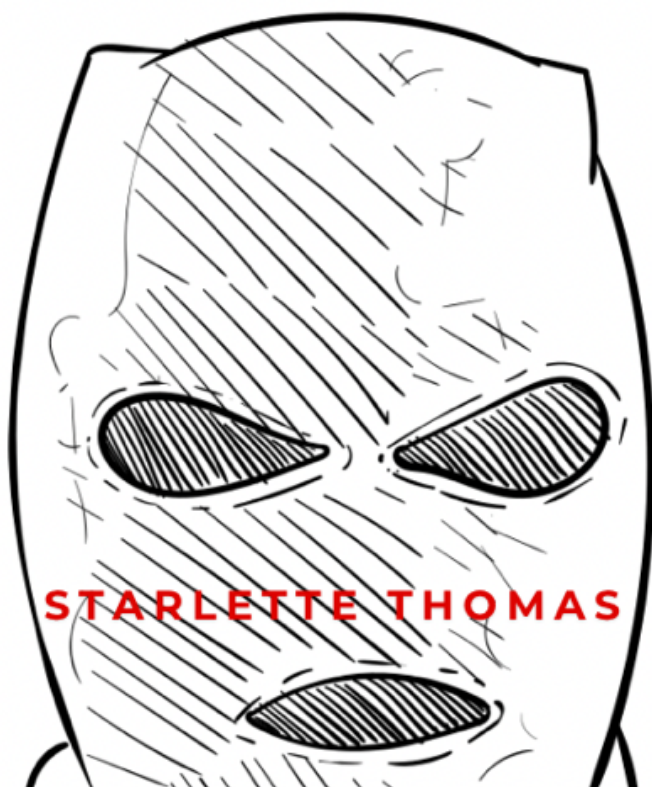
Episode 1: "Cash Cow" with Greg Jarrell
Episode 2: "Money Talks" with Yamie Barnett
Episode 3: "Quick Buck" with Xavier Johnson
Episode 4: "Highway Robbery" with Justin A. Cox
Episode 5: "Flat Broke" with Maria Francesca French
Episode 6: "Pick Up the Tab" with Leah Grundset Davis
Episode 7: "Balance the Books" with Andrew Wilkes

offers various perspectives on monetized faith coupled with the realization that communal well-being won't cost us an arm and a leg. "A Love Offering" audits our understanding of giving.

We're talking about the dollars and cents of Christian ministry. Each episode will also interrogate the so-called saving power of money and the churches that bank on this belief. All this and more is behind one of these doors, which includes ever-lasting life. Some preachers say this all while proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, who gave his life as a love offering.

Thank you for listening but also consider yourself a guest and let me know what you think.

Your podcast pastor,



SYNOPSIS

Episode 1. "Cash Cow"

There is a long history of religious leaders milking members for money. Though they have been warned, the prosperity gospel keeps pumping out promises of health and wealth in exchange for greenbacks. In this episode, we discuss the North American church as big business and American empire- adjacent.

Episode 2. "Money Talks"

Born with a silver spoon or as poor as a church mouse, how we were introduced to money determines our view and use for it. In this episode, we discuss our introduction to money and what the North American church says about the Benjamins.

Episode 3. "Quick Buck"

Just tell them that you must pay to stay on God's good side. In this episode, we discuss the going rate for right-standing with God and the money laundered to give filthy rag- righteousness a good scrubbing.

Episode 4. "Highway Robbery"

Help! The love of God is trapped behind a paywall. In this episode, we flip over tables trying to get to it while discussing "cheap salvation" and the currency of faith.

Episode 5. "Flat Broke"

The future of the church and the future of the community are not synonymous. A flattened view of the coming "kin-dom," the focus remains

on squeezing the world into a building. In this episode, we discuss the broken institution seemingly on its last leg, the increase in church closures and what it means to gather as Christian believers.

Episode 6. "Pick Up the Tab"

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep"—not fleece my sheep. In pop culture and in many communities, preachers are mostly associated with mammon and greed. In this episode, we discuss the early church model of "sharing all things in common" and why everyone can't have a seat at the table.

Episode 7. "Balance the Books"

What happened to the year of Jubilee and the year of the Lord's favor? Something's not adding up. In this episode, we discuss the need for an audit, which is to say a reckoning.



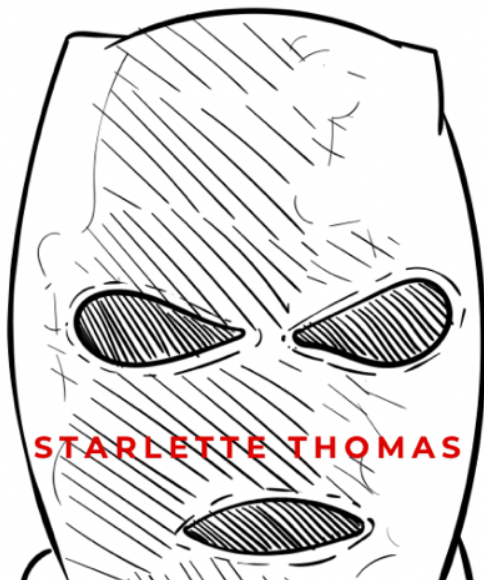
P R A Y
W I T H M E .

ALMIGHTY DOLLAR GOD, whose blessings are billable, who sets a fee for living the good life and whose curse is poverty, deliver me out of the hands of the cheap and the weak and into a life that is stress and struggle free. Give me the good seats.

I need only pay Thee what You are owed though You own everything. At least, that's what the psalmist sings, something about cattle on a thousand hills. Still, You need my dollar bills to work these capitalist miracles. Paid puppet pronouncements, those greenbacks really pull your strings.

M-O-N-E-Y, of thee of sing. Because piles of this capital are the pinnacle of divine offerings, the height to which You wish we all would climb as we play on hills fit for a king, who believes that cash is king all while praying to the "king of kings" or the king of the jungle, the lion of the tribe of Judah or whatever sounds better using the King's English. Oh, deliver me from this gibberish, please.

Amen.



TESTIMONY

FIRST GIVING HONOR TO GOD, who makes heads and tails of my life, to the pastor, visitors, saints and friends, I need to testify:

Oldest of three and a possible, baby miscarried, I knew early on that life was a gamble. My parents played cards for money. Playing Spades, Tunk and Rummy on Bicycle cards slammed on the table hard because it was a high stakes game. They needed the money to add to the government's assistance: rental assistance, food stamps and a stipend for each child.

Don't tell them that my father was living with us though off and on because their relationship was off and on. We would have lost it all. His absence was part of the agreement.

They also played the numbers, the lottery: combination and straight risks, hoping to hit it big. Money will deliver us from these government projects, these cold, concrete buildings that meant society took hard positions against us, those society wouldn't bet on. But I made it as do so many others.

It wasn't a coin toss because it wasn't a fifty- fifty chance that I'd escape it, more like 80-20. The statistics were stacked against me. So, it was all up in the air like the God I prayed to, who also required money.

Is faith a gamble or a lottery? Was God looking at my pockets or my heart? If the former, then the church was really preaching the saving power of money though they told me that I couldn't serve both.



"CASH COW"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Church as cash cow, some would say it has high earning potential, but its members exhibit low spiritual growth. Milked for money, how has a steady diet of capitalism impacted the health of the mystical body of Christ?
2. First a ticket to salvation from Johann Tetzel to a promise of health and wealth from televangelists, what do you make of this capitalization on salvation and signs of the miraculous made evident through land possession, power- grabbing identities and the accumulation of wealth?
3. Greg Jarrell wrote in *Our Trespasses: White Churches and the Taking of American Neighborhoods*:

It was no surprise that powerful people in official positions were also Christians. In the American South, some version of Christianity has been placed on every cause, just or unjust, from the time the first European settlers arrived here. And yet the fact that every official bio included church membership, from across a range of denominational groups, was a significant clue. Urban Renewal had a political theology and a theological politics that informed both the public and private processes and results. Even the program's names had theological echoes: renewal, revival, regeneration, resurrection, restoration, rebirth. All are common terms in Sunday school rooms and sanctuaries.

What do we say then about the church that has become good for business and is so close in its resemblance to the American empire in its beliefs and behaviors that we cannot tell the difference?

4. Talking about money is often taboo. There is a silence that surrounds it. In Jarrell's book *Our Trespasses*, he talks about the silence that surrounds the story of Urban Renewal and the displacement that followed.

Why do Christians continue to follow the money, rename God's mission after the goals of capitalism and then demand or expect that we keep quiet about it?



"MONEY TALKS"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your first memory of money? When was the first time that you saw it? What was the context?

2. How were you introduced to money? What was said about it (e.g. its use, misuse, power)? What was your initial reaction and/ or attitude towards it?

3. Now an adult, what is your relationship with money? How have those greenbacks influenced and/ or informed your understanding and practice of Christian discipleship/ faith?

4. Based on your experience, how does money talk in church? What does it sound like?

5. Matthew said that Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (6:24, NRSV). Since we "cannot worship two gods at once" (MSG), where should the church's hands be when it comes to money?

"QUICK BUCK" DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did the church teach you about staying on God's good side and how has it informed your understanding and practice of the Christian faith?
2. What is your definition of righteousness today and what do you make of right- standing with God being closely related to a dollar amount?
3. In your estimation, what is the relationship between righteousness and money in the North American church?
4. Considering the prosperity gospel's money- laundering schemes, how should the church handle money theologically?
5. What do you say to those who use Jesus' gospel to make a quick buck?



"HIGHWAY ROBBERY"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Kate Bowler wrote in *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*:

"What would it mean for Christians to give up that little piece of the American Dream that says, 'You are limitless'? Everything is not possible. The mighty kingdom of God is not yet here. What if 'rich' did not have to mean 'wealthy', and 'whole' did not have to mean 'healed'? What if being the people of 'the gospel' meant that we are simply people with good news? God is here. We are loved. It is enough."

What would it mean?

2. From promises of "Jesus is coming soon" to "money cometh to me now," why has the North American church changed its offer to would-be converts to Christianity? What are we to make of this "cheap salvation," which is, in fact, highway robbery?
3. From woes to blessings, how has capitalism compromised the church's prophetic witness?
4. How did money become the currency of the Christian faith and how do we help our theology escape this paywall?
5. In your estimation, how should the North American church be stewarding the gospel and where are we being called to upset seating arrangements?

"FLATBROKE"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As a post- Christian thinker obviously writing beyond the monetary value given to a relationship with God in some Christian circles churches, and traditions, what continues to make faith meaningful to you?
2. Your faith experiences have included the Catholic church, the charismatic evangelical church, the Pentecostal faith tradition, progressive and post- evangelicalism. Now post- Christianity, what did these faith experiences teach you about church and community? Do you think these groups can reconcile their differences for the sake of the coming "kin-dom" that they pray for? If so, what kind of theological imagination is required?
3. In her book *Safer than the Known Way: A Post- Christian Journey*, Maria Francesca French leads the reader beyond the binaries of theism and atheism. She wrote "While we are post- god, we are not post- faith." What transformation do you propose for an institution on its last leg and marked by an increase in church closures yet offers, in your words, "various forms of Christianity (that) attempt to bankroll us"?
4. A flattened view of the coming "kin-dom," the focus of the church remains on squeezing the world into a building. How do you envision a gathering of all God's children, rather than this separatist thinking of believer and nonbeliever?



"PICK UP THE TAB" DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. From "feed my sheep" to fleece my sheep, how has capitalism created an imbalance in our understanding and practice of pastoral ministry? What can be done to address this unevenness, this lopsided association of Christian leaders with money and greed?

2. Speaking of greed, Stanley Hauerwas wrote in *Working With Words: On Learning to Speak Christian*:

Scripture is clear. If you are a Christian who is wealthy or desires to have wealth, you have a problem. Yet, in our day, greed is seldom identified as a major problem for Christians. Lust, which is usually associated with sexual misconduct, seems to have become the sin that Christians worry about. ... Yet I suspect that greed grips our lives more than lust. But we fail to focus on greed because we are not sure we know how to identify what greed looks like.

In today's economy and in your estimation, what does greed look like?

3. I grew up watching televangelists with an African child in their arms say, "For just fifty cents a day, you can feed a child." Robbed of its resources and its citizenry, yet Africa remains the face of need for many. How has American colonialism influenced our understanding of shared needs as well as the practice of hospitality?

4. From the so- called face of need in Africa to America's avoidance of facing its history and present reality, I want to turn our attention to

restorative justice. Regarding reparations for African Americans, Ta-Nehisi Coates said,

What I'm talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I'm talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.

Reparations would mean the end of scarfing hot dogs on the Fourth of July while denying the facts of our heritage. Reparations would mean the end of yelling “patriotism” while waving a Confederate flag. Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.

Coates says there's something more valuable than money. Is this kind of spiritual renewal feasible, likely, possible for America? Why haven't more Christians sought to pick up this tab? What will it cost?

5. Early Christians “shared all things in common” and in God's economy, there is “plenty to go around” and “plenty good room.” Today, Christians in the United States, though sharing the same sacred text, can't seem to get on the same page. How can we get them to sit down at the table and ensure that everyone has a seat—no matter what they bring to it?



"BALANCE THE BOOKS" DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. From "Jesus is coming soon" to "money cometh to me now," what do you make of this change of messaging for some churches?
2. Jesus didn't leave his disciples a business plan. Still, some Christian leaders try to balance ministry and the market? Is this a worthy endeavor?
3. First Timothy 6:10 warns, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." How do we pull up this root, which flourishes in the soil of American capitalism while ensuring that we can all thrive?
4. With many Christian leaders priding themselves on the number of *butts* in seats, *bucks* in the offering plate and *bricks* as it relates to the size or square footage of the church building," what can this focus on numbers teach us about the current state of the North American church?
5. In Andrew Wilkes' book *Plenty Good Room: Co- Creating an Economy of Enough For All*, he wrote, "Building a democracy where working people have a governing say at the workplace, at the ballot box, in society, and within mass media will require, at minimum, having a totally different conversation about money, public finance and wealth than the one we're having now."

What might the beginning of that conversation sound like?

6. In your estimation, how should the church handle money theologically to balance the books?

7. Who would you like to give a love offering to for their work and witness? What word of encouragement and/or affirmation would you give them?



