

Christians shatter taboos on talking about money

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [July 12, 2011](#) issue

No sooner had 29-year-old Graham Messier joined a small group at his church earlier this year than he found himself breaking an American taboo: talking about how much he earns and where it all goes.

Others

in the group in Beverly, Massachusetts, did likewise as they kicked off an eight-week program aimed at reconciling personal finances with Christian rhetoric about economic justice. It's countercultural, they said, but it works.

By the eighth meeting, Messier's group had raised \$1,800 for three nonprofits simply by cutting back on gourmet coffees, dining out and other nonessentials.

Talking about

household budgets isn't "the most comfortable thing in the world," Messier said. "But talking as Christians about the reality of our money situations should be more of a focus than it is generally if we're going to be real about loving, giving to the poor and taking care of our fellow man."

Since its inception in 2006, the Lazarus at the Gate curriculum has guided some 400 people in more than 30 groups to give away a total of \$200,000. Using the biblical story of poor Lazarus seeking help at a rich man's gate, most participants learn that ordinary Americans rank among the world's richest 5 percent—and that a few dollars go a lot farther in the developing world than they do at their local Starbucks.

What began as a Boston-based pilot has grown into an open-source curriculum. The ecumenical Boston Faith and Justice Network (BFJN) shares Lazarus materials upon request with college student groups and churches in other regions and countries. The Boston group recently received funding from Episcopal City Mission and the Presbyterian Hunger Program to encourage the curriculum's use in their respective denominations.

For small groups in U.S. churches, intimate sharing is familiar terrain, but few go so far as to probe spending practices. This "special kind of discipleship" is rare in part because it entails true vulnerability, and people often don't want to "disclose family secrets," according to Max Stackhouse, a retired Princeton Theological Seminary theologian and coeditor of the book *On Moral Business*.

Talking about spending habits "really does cut to the depth of who you are," said Craig Gay, a Regent College sociologist and author of *Cash Values: Money and the Erosion of Meaning in Today's Society*. "It really does lay you bare, and that's threatening," Gay said. "Most of us don't want to be that transparent with each other, [but] being less private and more accountable in this area is probably a good idea."

Discomfort notwithstanding, Lazarus has proven a compelling challenge in various religious sectors, appealing to both evangelicals and mainline Protestants, according to Ryan Scott McDonnell, executive director of BFJN.

College students seem especially interested since Lazarus campus groups have drawn in non-Christians who sense that a portion of their money could be used in better ways for greater impact.

"People are looking for a framework for social justice or something, and they have a hunger for it in their heart, and they don't know how to articulate it or interpret it," said Mako Nagasawa, coauthor of the

Lazarus curriculum and an advisor to the Asian Christian Fellowship group at Boston College. "We want to say it comes from being made in the image of God and being redeemed by Jesus."

As a Lazarus group gets started, participants share household budgets with the assurance that others won't judge them or break confidentiality. Subsequent meetings place those budgets in larger contexts.

Participants explain how money was (or wasn't) discussed at home during their childhoods. Together, they unpack biblical passages that address money and responsibilities. Presenters illustrate how poverty fuels social problems such as prostitution, human trafficking and environmental degradation.

In practice, Lazarus groups function as a kind of hybrid between secular giving circles and evangelical accountability groups. When members of Messier's group convened at Christ Church of Hamilton and Wenham (Massachusetts), participants would report their spending and saving over the previous week.

Lifting the veil on finances involves risk, Gay noted, and requires vigilance to make sure no one suffers abuse. Yet when trust is warranted, he said, Lazarus groups might help people steer clear of secretive spending habits.

Simplicity for the sake of generosity is one of the Lazarus goals, but exceptions are allowed. After seven weeks of vegetarian fare at the church, the final dinner at one couple's home featured flank steak, wine and two desserts.

As the last meeting wound down, the group's 13 members voted to divide their \$1,800 equally among three organizations whose work includes microfinance, sustainable agriculture and rescuing prostitutes in Manila.

The group agreed to keep meeting monthly and making quarterly donations. And they gave thanks for an experience

that's helped them learn to live more gratefully from day to day. —RNS