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New tithers report freedom from past financial failures

By Ken Walker

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WOODSTOCK, Ga. (BP)-They have suffered such financial setbacks as bankruptcy, car repossession, staggering credit card bills and scratching for cash to buy their next meal.

However, since they started tithing, half a dozen Christians interviewed for this story said they have more than enough money to provide for their needs. And they feel they are making positive contributions to God's work in the world.

"It's not what the prosperity teachers teach," said Raquel Perez of Elizabeth, N.J. "Give because it's an indicator of your heart toward the Lord. What you love, you put your money into, whether it's your house, car or whatever. Give because (God) is worthy. We're not to serve God for what we can get out of him."

Kevin Maude of Woodstock, Ga., who started tithing immediately after his conversion in 1999 despite a \$15,000 debt, agreed.

"The blessings aren't all monetary," Maude said. "I'm talking about friends, family and the way your kids are growing up. Just to know that if you leave

it in God's hands and let it work his way, it will—that's what we've learned. That's the key.”

Andrew Stull, a 25-year-old environmental health specialist from Lawrence, Kan., started tithing two years ago when he heard the late financial counselor Larry Burkett mention Luke 16:10: “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.”

Often broke in college, Stull wondered why he still didn't have more money left at the end of the month after finding full-time employment. Then he started tithing and saw a huge difference.

“It's strange,” he admitted. “After a month or two, I didn't notice it because I always had plenty of money to go around.”

Two members of First Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla., say they saw God provide for their needs in often-miraculous ways.

Diane Graves had watched her family's debts mount to \$25,000. So, after the woman who led her to faith in Christ in 1980 told her she needed to tithe, Graves protested that she simply didn't have the money.

“You have God's money; you just don't have bill money,” the woman replied. “You're supposed to give God 10 percent of your earnings.”

After promising she would start tithing when things improved, Graves sensed God speaking to her, “If you can't trust me when things are hard, you'll steal from me when times are good.”

Initially, her giving was sporadic. When she failed to tithe, mishaps occurred—the car broke down, her children got sick or the family ran short on food. Finally, Graves said, “OK, God, I'll give you your money.”

After that, the Orlando hairdresser secured a new client who gave her \$100

a week regardless of how simple a service she performed.

However, still struggling to make ends meet, the family later faced foreclosure on their home. Two weeks before that was to happen, a woman in Graves' Bible study group offered her \$5,000, money the friend had made on some investments. Her only condition was anonymity.

“That was the beginning of the miracles I saw with tithing,” Graves said.

Although he became a Christian in 1983, Jim Alafat didn't “walk the walk” until after he moved to Orlando in 1997. Still, it took another 18 months before he started tithing.

Initially, he donated money to a Christian radio station, until an announcer mentioned gifts should only be made after donors tithed to their churches.

Still, Alafat struggled with the concept until reading Malachi 3:10, which states: “‘Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.’”

Since then, Alafat has paid off more than \$10,000 in debt, found a job that pays far more than any previous position, and gotten married.

Last year, he and his wife were able to buy a home and have set a goal of paying it off in seven years.

“Once you start giving, it's like saving,” said Alafat, a mortgage broker. “You realize you can live without it and that it's going to help people. It brings joy to your heart.”

Back in New Jersey, Perez found financial relief when she changed her outlook on money as well.

Before, she was stressed out by the flock of creditors who hounded her. After she started giving to her church, the largest creditor called and offered to write off half the debt.

After settling that bill, another creditor called with the same offer. Eventually, she paid everyone and began planning for her wedding, which occurred in May. She and her new husband paid for the wedding in cash.

But more than those blessings, tithing is a matter of obedience, she said.

“I didn't want to” tithe, said Perez, who owed more on her car than it was worth when she lost it to creditors three years ago. “I had so many bills I couldn't make ends meet. But when I began to be obedient, the creditors stopped calling.”

In Orlando, Diane Graves thinks many Christians don't understand that tithing is a form of worship.

The tithe belongs to God—not because God needs it, but because the believer needs to be obedient and allow God to teach her how to live on God's economy, Graves said.

“It's not only freedom financially, it's freedom inside,” she said. “When you're not being obedient to the Lord in giving, there's a tendency to be in bondage to everything. When you're obedient, you can relax and allow him to take care of you.”

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