

Why Do We Take Offerings?

One day when I was sitting in my office at my last church, the phone rang. It was someone who wanted me to donate money to some cause. He tried to pressure me to make a donation by saying, “I know your church has lots of money from all those people’s tithes.” At which point, I knew he didn’t know anything about church finances. But he’s not alone in thinking that churches are flush with cash. If you took all the junk mail aimed specifically at churches that I’ve received since I became a pastor and piled it up in the parking lot, you could make a mountain that people could see for miles around. For some reason, many people believe that churches are rolling in money. Of course, it just isn’t true. In fact, over the years people have suggested different approaches I might take in dealing with our chronic financial difficulties. One guy likes to say, “We’ve got all the money we need. There’s just one problem: it’s still in your wallets.”

His approach underlines the way we WELS Lutherans fund our ministries: we depend on offerings from members. The synod works the same way. The main component of the synod’s budget is the Congregational Mission Offering – the money we send in every year. Where does that money come from? The gifts you members give. And mostly, those gifts come in through the offering we take in our church services. Why do we do it that way? **Why do we take offerings?**

Would it surprise you to know that it hasn’t always been done that way? For much of the church’s history, wealthy donors financed the church. “Passing the collection plate” started in America in the late 1800’s. In Europe the church is supported by taxes. In many places, the church still relies on large donations from wealthy people and on various kinds of fundraising efforts – carnivals and selling stuff and targeted appeals. But these approaches have problems. They all focus our efforts on people with money. The people who control the purse decide what that church is going to do and even who they’re going to call. Those people like people who schmooze with them and make them feel important. They like to have their names on things. Our Lutheran forefathers were very uncomfortable depending on the wealthy. Since they couldn’t get government support, they studied the Scripture to learn what God says about how the church should be funded. They came up with a system that’s probably closer to what was done in the early church – individual members give as God has blessed them. That led to us “passing the plate.”

In the Old Testament, God commanded his people to support the ministry by giving ten percent of all they made. In the New Testament, St Paul talks about his right as a minister of the gospel to be supported by the church. God said that the worker is worth his hire, that is, his wages, so pastors and teachers should be paid by the church. There are lots of ways that can be done and there are lots of tough decisions we have to make about it. But God does make the church responsible for supporting our ministry. Salaries are the biggest part of what it costs to do ministry.

But would we have to collect offerings to fulfill that responsibility? It’s no secret that “passing the plate” doesn’t always work. Here at Peace, during the summer church attendance and offerings go down. So some people send in their offerings. The truth is, we don’t rely only on offerings. A large part of our income comes from tuition and fees for our school. But since operating the school is the most expensive part of our ministry, and that income is still less than half what it costs to operate our school, we’ve accepted that. So, could we engage in fundraising? Maybe, but we’d have to be very careful that it didn’t teach the wrong lesson. Could we ask our wealthy members to give more? In one sense, we already do. God told us to give as he has blessed us. Blessed us how? By how much money he’s given us and by how much faith he’s given us. So, if everyone had the same level of faith, we could reasonably expect that people who make \$500,000 a year would give far more than people who make \$30,000 or \$40,000 a year.

But it’s not a straight ten percent. God does not command that to us New Testament Christians. God does command us to bring a generous offering, but again, generous according to how he has blessed us. So every family should prayerfully consider how much God has given them and give a gift that reflects their trust in the Lord. If we did that consistently, we could probably fund our whole budget. Most congregations experience “the 80-20 rule.” 20 percent of the congregation gives 80 percent of the offerings. That’s certainly true here. But it doesn’t tell us anything. Those 20 percent might be our most wealthy members. You can’t see in that ratio the retired widow living on social security who has to count every penny. Every dollar she gives to the Lord is a tremendous example of faith, even if it doesn’t impact our bottom line by much.

Our forefathers made our churches dependent on the weekly offerings of our members because it seemed like the most obvious way to put into practice God's command that all of us should give to him as he has blessed us. Now, you don't only do that when you give money to the church. When you give to charity because God calls us to help the poor, that is a gift to the Lord. When you give your time and your abilities, that's supporting the work, too. So working on the grounds and the building is a gift to the Lord. Cleaning the school is a gift to the Lord, just like your tuition is, because you could send your kids to public school. When you pray for our ministry, for me and for our teachers, for our leaders and our Sunday school teachers, you are absolutely contributing to the work of our congregation. Finally, even taking care of your children and your elderly parents is something God commands. The time and the money you spend on that, too, are gifts to God.

So why do we take offerings? Why do we pass the plate on Sunday? Couldn't we just do it online? Sure we could. Many congregations do. But we pass the plate to remind you that you are part of God's plan to support the work here. Now, does God need the Congregational Mission Offerings that we send to synod? Does God need our weekly gifts? No. He really doesn't. All that we have we get from him. The fact that we regularly pray and ask him to give us the resources we need proves that the money and time and talents we need to do his work come from him. We're just giving it back. So why does he ask us to give it? Why does he tell us to help the poor and to support the preaching of the gospel here and throughout the world? Why does he ask us to pay for missionaries in Africa and professors at our seminary, and to pay the bills at Peace and at HVL? Couldn't God just drop money from heaven on all those ministries? Couldn't he bring us some relative of Donald Trump who would drop a million dollars a week into the collection plate and let the rest of us off the hook? Sure he could. So why doesn't he?

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul says that we should give not under compulsion – not because we're forced – but freely and joyfully. He says that God loves a cheerful giver. God doesn't make us give. He lets us give. God lets us support his work and then he blesses us when we do. When I was growing up, my mom used to take a stool and stand it next to the counter in the kitchen. Then she would lift my little sister up on onto it and let her help with the cooking. She wasn't even five years old when my mom started doing that. My sister learned all kinds of practical things, like how to roll out dough and use the mixer. She could do a full Sunday dinner when she was just thirteen years old. God does let us help in order to give us practical experience in what it means to put him first.

But long before my sister learned to make whole meals by herself, she had special time with our mom. It was a gift of our mother's love to sit her on that stool and let her help. So it is with our offerings. God lets us help so that we can have the joy of being a part of what he's doing. God still does all the real work. He changes people's hearts and gives comfort and strength and hope. But he makes us a part of what he does. He puts our fingers into the preaching and teaching that we support.

The Apostle John says that when we support ministers we are working together for the truth. God puts you right next to me every time I preach, because you support the work. You're part of every time God uses me to bring someone to faith. You're part every time I baptize a baby and the Holy Spirit claims that child. You are there every time I teach a class and every time I comfort someone in the hospital. You're there when I stand next to the bed of dying Christian and assure that person that they are going home to heaven. And you're there in every class our teachers give here and at HVL. So even if you're like me and you think that math is the root of all false doctrine, when our teachers teach math, you're part of that work because you support it. When they teach our children to know the Lord, when they prepare those kids to navigate the godless age we live in, God lets you be a part of all that guidance and comfort. Of course, everything our synod does everywhere in world, you're part of that, too.

God does all that so that you can experience the joy of the gospel. Do you feel it? Does you rejoice to take a part of your hard earned money and give it to the Lord? Does that joy make you want to be even more generous in what you give? I hope so. But let's be honest. When we dig through our wallet at the last moment looking for the smallest bill we can find before the plate gets to us, is that a joyful and generous offering? When we have to force ourselves to write a check, is that joyful and generous? When we compare how much we pay every month for our cell phones or our internet connections or just going to Starbucks and it's more than we give to the Lord, is that joyful and generous? It's hard to rejoice at giving away the money we worked for. That's just as true for rich members as it is for poor ones. It might be harder for them. Why is that the case? Because we're sinners. We're born selfish. It's pure sin and selfishness to be stingy with God and to feel

anything less than joy at being a part of the work he gives us to do. That sin deserves God's punishment in hell forever.

But that's why Jesus came. He was born perfect and joyful and generous because we were born selfish and stingy. He lived a life in which he gave everything that he was and all that he had to God because we try so hard to keep the best for ourselves. He was perfect in our place. Then he paid for all that sin and selfishness. He suffered the hell that we deserve and then he died. Then he rose. He rose to tell us that his blood more than paid all we owe. He rose to tell us that God has bathed us in his love and grace. He rose to tell us that all that selfishness and all that sin is forgiven now and forever. All the times we fished out the smallest bill we could or wrote the smallest check or spent the least amount of time at church we could manage— all that sin is erased in his blood. We will not go to hell. We will live with Christ in heaven forever.

Now, in love, God sits us up on the stool next to him and lets us share the joy of doing his work. He lets us be a part of something that we could never really contribute to on our own. He uses us to send the gospel out into the world. He counts every moment of ministry that we support as if we were there. And he calls us to rejoice in what he does. Do you know what ministry you supported this week? Children heard the gospel. Your teachers and I attended conferences so we can grow in our faith and our ability to serve. This coming week, I'll visit members in the hospital. I'll teach classes and hopefully talk to prospects. Our teachers will lead our kids to know the love of their Savior better and to reflect that love in their lives. And you will be a part of it because you support their work. Rejoice in that God does here. And give a generous offering of your time, your prayers, your talents and yes, your treasure to your Lord. Amen.