

March Tool - The Offering Moment

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Where Did The Offering Plate Go?

There have been a few surprises over the past couple of years as the church has re-emerged from the pandemic. The oldest adults did not return en masse, but young families have shown up by the car loads. Sunday School rooms are thriving again while weekday small group attendance is more of a challenge. Worship bulletins have not re-emerged nor has the offering plate. **As a matter of fact, many churches are not even mentioning the offering at all.**

Before I share a few thoughts on the disappearing offering plate, let me give you a brief history for all the pastors under the age of 50. **In the 1970s the offering moment was oftentimes the most celebrated moment in the Sunday worship service.** It would happen right in the middle of the program. As the final hymn was being sung, minus the third stanza of course, in their best suits the Deacons would march in perfect unison from the back of the building to the front, distributing their offering plates from the altar table in front of the stage. One of them would approach the microphone to pronounce a prayer, then a well organized dispersion would occur across the auditorium as they approached their assigned sections. The most talented singer in the church would appear, backed by the choir and orchestra or a cassette tape track, to bring the house down while the offering was being received. It was a moving element in the service. **We have traveled a long way from celebrating the offering moment to being silent.**

Now back to the history lesson, the 1980s arrived and the church was rocked with one financial scandal after another. The internet did not exist so we all gathered around the television at night or read the newspaper in the morning to learn what was going on in the world. Unfortunately, the headlines for a long season were financial and moral scandals related to popular television evangelists. The church was not looking good at all. A few pastors began to introduce a phrase just prior to the offering to help mitigate the earned reputation of church leaders being terrible with the handling of money. The pastor would say, *"As the offering plate comes your way, guests you can take a pass. This worship service is our gift to you. It is a gift of our members' faithful service and generosity."* This led many churches to no longer talk about money, the spiritual gift of giving, or the power of unified generosity toward a greater good.

However, the church still needed resources. Yet it would be largely silent on the spiritual discipline of giving then run like mad at a three year capital campaign when they needed to fund vision. In essence, the poor money reputation outside the local church was fostering a fundraising mentality in the church. Pastors did not look forward to this season nor did their people. The idea of chasing money under pressure to fund vision was basically the only option.

Post 2000, digital giving becomes a useful service with online giving, kiosks, and eventually apps. Which means many people no longer needed an offering plate to give so it would be empty when it was passed. Many wondered, why are we even doing it? **However, the greatest impact on the offering plate was the recent pandemic.**

When March 2020 occurred church leaders knew the offering was going to be a problem. I was in the digital giving business at the time and I can remember waking up in early March to over 300 inbound leads of churches needing to upgrade their online giving. Over the next few weeks we would handle thousands of conversations. It was a crazy season for 90 days then as the dust settled, the offering ended up not being a problem at all. Churches spent less because of scaled back programming and people gave more because our country was hurting. The pandemic turned out to be one of the most generous years in history. Many large congregations were able to pay off their debts. Churches were taking in more, spending less, and saving more. This trend has continued for many churches today. It is not uncommon for me to be working with a large church that has recently retired its debt, has millions in the bank, experienced rapid growth, and is needing to fund new space.

Because the church by and large is not in a financial crisis, many have quit passing the offering plate or even talking about it. **We have certainly come a long way from the 1970's when it was a celebrated moment in worship.**

Here are some thoughts to ponder as the church looks to its future and what shape the offering may take right around the corner.

1. **I hope the pattern of taking in more donations while spending less continues.**
Storing up cash makes many dreams possible. I would actually suggest you make this your plan moving forward. Do not lose this momentum.
2. **I hope we start talking about generosity as an act of faith and worship. We need to start acknowledging the spiritual gift and discipline of generosity more.** If the church only talks about money when it needs it, that will re-create the poor money cultures of the past.

3. **Churches formerly noted in their bulletins how far behind their budget was as it relates to giving vs. expenses.** The idea was, you had to show the need for people to give. I think it might mistakenly reflect that church leadership is not great at budget planning and that your people are not generous givers. No one enjoys giving to a problem. Nor do we want to create the feeling of generosity-shame on our people. This is a far cry from joy-filled generosity.
4. **People love to know their church is doing well financially and that their money is going to a good cause.** I would encourage church leaders to begin restoring the offering moment around the positive message of biblical generosity and sound financial stewardship by church leaders.

This is where your Generosity Theology can come in handy. I provided some help with this in my February Tool. Also, I have created an ebook on Offering Talks. You can download both the tool and ebook on my resource page. In the ebook I discuss topics, timing, and a yearly schedule for Offering Talks. I even provide several scripts.

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5. **It is a big deal when someone makes a donation.** Every donor deserves to be thanked in an appropriate way. They also need to know their contribution is going to a good cause. I happen to believe that the church should be the most generous nonprofit in your city. Let's thank our donors, celebrating the difference they are making.
6. **Finally, there will be a day in the future when every church needs funding.** It will be talked about for sure. Just imagine the conversation going from generosity silence to a generosity megaphone. People are going to have culture shock.

It is a great day to talk about generosity. **People willingly make donations every week to your church. No one is forcing them to invest and they do not begrudge it. Giving is a great experience any way you cut it, so let's celebrate both the giver and their contribution to the vision.** Just imagine what it would be like to unleash generosity with all the potential it holds for the future. To do that you are going to need to carve out some time for the offering moment. You may not need to pass a plate, but let's throw it back to the 70's by making a big deal of giving back to God from what he first gave us.