

Over the last several years I have studied some of the factors that influence church giving including the weekly offering, special gifts and bequests. I have a few friends that have made this kind of study their life work. I have a friend at the General Assembly Office who has worked most of her career encouraging Christian generosity. One recent study’s intent was to analyze why some parishioners give at high levels and others do not. Also, why do some denominations have higher or lower giving per member? These topics bewilder many people, partly because the subject is loaded with secrecy and partly because of subtle theological complications.

The research attempted to capture the actual practices of church members regardless of how noble or ignoble the practices appear to be. What was discovered and proven time and time again is that there are primarily four important motives why and how people make their gifts. The research is loaded with inferences and estimates so it may not be as scientific a statement as some might want. The most important motives noted were:

- 1: reciprocity with a social group
- 2: reciprocity with God
- 3: family altruism
- 4: thankfulness

Each of these four has efficacy in a specific kind of situation.

Secular philanthropy has been the subject of a number of good empirical studies and generally agree on one conclusion: *MOST GIFTS OF MONEY ARE GIVEN WITH AN EYE TO WHAT THEY MIGHT PURCHASE FOR THE DONOR LATER.* This does not infer guile, but most gifts are given in a general framework of reciprocity, either explicit or hoped for. When a large charitable gift has been given by one person, another may respond later in a way that the donor will be able to purchase self esteem from other important people.

When face to face fundraising real dollars is used, there can be a feeling of social pressure. This is usually only found in the church during capital campaigns. The motive of reciprocity is omnipresent more or less depending upon who is taking the pledge and the trust as to who all gets to see or know the pledge. I cannot guess how many times I have been asked, *WHO ALL WILL GET TO SEE THIS CARD?* I might share with you that this is a greater concern with Canadian Presbyterians than either those of the PC America or PCUSA.

Then there is the political type of gift. Such gifts are given with the whole intent that there is something special and the gifts are only given under certain conditions. The conditions usually have a sense of pay-off or pay-back. What if the powerful party is God, and not a politician? God can bestow gifts far greater than any politician and anyone who believes that God is open to a reciprocal relationship will not hesitate to make enormous gifts. No one would refuse, regardless of the amount.

This then leads to two crucial theological questions:

1: Does God enter into reciprocal relations with humans?

2: Does God reward big givers?

Some say, *yes! God will repay you for your gift many times over.* This is often considered crass and can even border on the old idea of selling indulgences. It transforms religious giving into a kind of religious insurance premium. You may have heard it said that, *God will repay you spiritually for your tithe.* Some sermons may go like this: *Remember, God is in control of the universe and determines what happens to all of us. God blesses those who give to Him, and, God expects a tithe from all of His faithful. God has promised, for example in Malachi 3, that He will pour down an overflowing blessing on those who tithe. If you tithe you can be assured of God's blessing for now and for eternity.* There is a negative element to this also, but less commonly said aloud, *if you don't tithe, God will not bless you, and you may experience spiritual problems later in your life.*

So we need to study, what does the Bible say? The New Testament is not clear on this point and various lessons can be taken from that. The most famous passages hint that God will reward a giver. ie: Jesus in Matthew 6 taught about how to give alms, *Do not let your right hand know what the left hand is doing. Give your alms in secret. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.* This is reciprocity with God. Most protestant pastors denounce this reciprocity with God idea, saying that the gift back from God is not the physical but the spiritual benefit. But it is true that the presence or absence of this motive strongly influences how people choose to give.

Behavioural scientists disagree over altruism as to whether it exists, how to measure it and where it takes place. My reading is that altruism clearly exists and occurs in predictable situations. This is most common within the family setting. Gifts are given from one family member to another; typically the giver feels joy in the giving. Gifts within the family feel different from other philanthropic gifts. A gift to a family member is the same psychologically as a gift to oneself, because both parties are a part of the gift. It doesn't feel like you are losing money when you give a gift to your grandchild. If the donor loves their congregation, a gift to the congregation will not feel like a loss or a sacrifice, but a gift of joy. Of course, not everyone in the congregation family loves each other equally, but when the love is strong, in the general sense, the gifts may be made with gladness and these limits can be extended through nurture and education. Family altruism has been a part of our congregation for most of its 231 years and I pray that it will continue to be. This is what takes place when people join in making a pledge or a promise for the work of their church home.

The fourth motive is not as elemental as the others and in some people it is entirely absent. Some Christians feel a sense of thankfulness based on the blessing that they have received. Thankfulness then leads to generosity. Thankfulness is not natural to everyone; it needs to be nurtured and taught. An example of this might be the ease or strain that some people experience in saying a meal-time grace. We Christians have received countless blessings from God and we feel an urge to share them with others less fortunate than we are. We have been blessed, therefore we want to serve others out of thankfulness. It is my opinion that your giving ought not to be related to guilt. My thought is that giving ought to

be a positive experience related to how you as an individual feel about how God has entrusted you with the good things of life, wealth, vigour, health, education, employment, family, memories, this beautiful place to live, etc.

In our worship, I pray that both the appeal and the response to giving is something other so that it is not the same as secular fund raising. Many pastors do not like to preach stewardship in fear of offending. I am not one who likes appeals but I do feel that together, we as a family, and I as your Pastor in residence at this time, need to remind one another of the spiritual responsibility we have made upon our membership in the Body of Christ as it is physically here in the Church. In your confirmation or transfer of membership you were asked, ***WILL YOU BE A FAITHFUL MEMBER OF THIS CONGREGATION,***

GIVING OF YOURSELF IN VERY WAY?

This is not just a matter of money. It is a matter of the Holy and the Spiritual. My personal attitude to Christian and church giving is based on two statements:

GIVE AS YOU ARE ABLE

GOD LOVES ONLY A CHEERFUL GIVER

I pray that as you consider prepare your year gifts and planning your support for the ministry and mission of St. John's in the new year, that you will be able to give a happy gift, and you will give as you are able.

This congregation has not had a Stewardship Campaign for a number of years. A new programme to encourage regular giving will hopefully be introduced over the next few months. As a responsible, caring church member I ask you, as before God, to think about how you might fill out a pledge card if one were placed in front of you. We will not be circulating pledge cards, but your renewed commitment to God and to the rest of the congregation is just as vital in how you ultimately make your decision to how you will participate to do your share in the current and future ministry. The Presbytery will continue to direct the Session that the central focus for St. John's congregation is on the preparation to receive your new minister. I hope your decision will be based with the thought, *if I am able, I will commit to God and the work of His Church, x,y,z,\$\$ to help bring the new minister here; to heat, light, clean, maintain etc our church home; and x, y z, giving of my time and talent to sing in the choir, teach Sunday School, visiting the sick and the shut in, helping with chores around the church home, etc.* Then feel, *I am happy to be able to give these gifts.*

May God bless you as you meditate on these thoughts I have shared with you this morning. Amen.