

11 for 11: Ideas That Work

Generosity Becoming a Fundamental Spiritual Discipline for Churches

by Chris Willard

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“My name is Brian and I am an addict—to stuff like nice Toyota trucks and flat screen TVs. I cannot get over the power that money and stuff has over me. Dealing with it is a lifelong process for me.”

These words were not spoken in a support group, but in a sermon by Pastor Brian Tome as he launched a series on living in a culture of consumerism. Brian had been confronted with the reality that many people attending Crossroads Church in Cincinnati, OH (www.crossroads.net) were overwhelmed with stuff. As just one indicator, the amount of space occupied by self-storage containers in America is the equivalent of more than three times the size of Manhattan Island! In his message, Brian wanted to show that he too was not immune. But even more, he wanted to lead the congregation on a pathway toward true generosity.

Brian’s message series was called “Consumed”¹ and week after week he challenged his church to stop being driven by the “kingdom of thingdom.” People took the challenge and identified their various addictions to things. Many actually took the challenge to fast from activities like buying new clothes.

In turn, Crossroads shared all of their resources—sermons, media support



Senior Pastor, Brian Tome preaching at Crossroads Church.

and small group curriculum—for free, and dozens of Cincinnati churches walked through the journey with them. “We realized we’re not here just to fund our local church ministry,” Brian says. “We’re part of a revolution God initiated to change the world. The revolution starts with every person at our church being a blessing to people around them.”

Crossroads is becoming a dynamic example of a new wave sweeping through some leading U.S. churches, a wave that is changing the trajectory of

their ministries and impacting God’s kingdom in new ways. Churches that are leading the charge in becoming generous congregations are taking their giving to a whole new level.

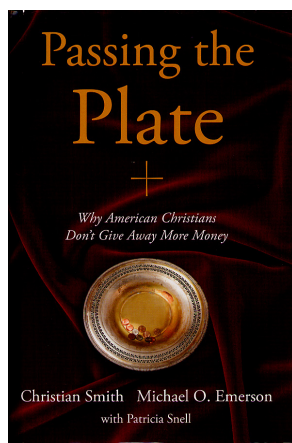
Many have seen the Navigator wheel of discipleship² that was popular in the 70s and 80s. It depicted four “spokes” as essential elements of a growing disciple—prayer, Bible study, fellowship and ministry. Today’s churches like Crossroads would identify a fifth spiritual discipline for the Christian life—generosity. They

are modeling the generous life at every level of leadership, and leaders are mapping out comprehensive strategies that are transforming their ministry direction and changing the hearts of their people.

Metrics

- **The average Christian in America gives 3% of their income to the church.**

At least one out of five American Christians gives literally nothing to church, parachurch, or nonreligious charities, according to several national studies reported in the book *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money* by Christian Smith and Michael Emerson. The rest average about 3% of pre-tax household income as annual donations to all religious and charitable causes (and by comparison, nonreligious Americans give less than 1% of their income on average). The more frequently a person attends church, the higher the income percentage given to charity, including one's church. But despite a massive growth of real per capita income over the twentieth century, the average percentage share of income given by American Christians not only did not grow in proportion but actually



Research from the book *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money*, found that American Christian groups typically give away very small percentages of their income.

declined slightly during this period.³

The 3% statistic may actually be good news because it means that churches that cast vision and inspire giving can see that percentage increase significantly.

- **The typical megachurch gives 14% of its budget to outside ministries or organizations, such as foreign missions or doing good in their community.**

This is also an encouraging idea and contradicts the notion that very large churches raise money only to fund bigger buildings and higher salaries.⁴

Trends

- **Generous churches are teaching differently about money.**

In the churches many of us grew up in, it seemed like pastors were always talking about money. Seeker churches reacted against that, and intentionally shied away from talking about finances—until leaders discovered they had to somehow fund their fast-growing ministries. So money became a utilitarian topic. It often felt like there was a pretext for the reason we talked about money: We're behind on the budget, or we need to raise money for a new building, so let's "give until it feels good."

Now pioneering generous churches are taking a different approach with a much deeper reason behind the focus on finances. Church leaders are having this conversation with their people now because, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. I'm your pastor. I'm concerned about your heart. So we're talking about money." Leaders are making the connection that a generous Christian with a generous heart is a mature believer. Church leaders just can't ignore this topic, or make it a practical exercise to meet the needs of the church. This goes way beyond tithing and giving to the church to a different heart.

Andy Stanley, lead pastor of **North Point Church**, Alpharetta, GA (www.northpoint.org), has popularized a statement that sums it up: "We talk about money, not because of what we want *from* you, but because of what we want *for* you." This is something a teacher can't fake. Leaders are having a personal experience in their own heart with generosity, they're teaching it to their congregations in a way that deeply impacts their hearers' souls, and they are figuring out strategies to help support many forms of generosity among their membership.

- **Generous churches are taking modeling to a new level.**

Cross Timbers Church, Argyle, TX (www.crosstimberschurch.org), did the last thing you would expect from a church in the middle of a capital campaign: The congregation gave away its \$240,000 Easter offering to four ministries outside of the church. They didn't know what was going to happen that day. Somebody might have dropped a \$1 million check in the offering; but they were committed in advance to every bit of it leaving the building. **Community Christian Church**, Naperville, IL (www.communitychristian.org), has taken the principle one step further by forecasting the church's budget on 51 weeks of offerings—with intentional plans to give away their biggest offering of the year.

Leaders of generous churches are going to great lengths to model generosity on a corporate often massive-scale. And generous churches are also turning these types of giving events into *celebration events*. They are applauding, cheering, and raving about how great it is they get to share with other organizations and ministries. They point out and celebrate acts of generosity in the church, community and world. Celebrating engages hearts in a way that's different than instruction and exhortation. People are enthusiastic about giving to their



More churches like Gateway Church in Southlake, TX, are partnering with other outreach organizations to do everything from handing out Thanksgiving food boxes at local missions, providing “goody” bags for the prison ministry, to assembling new bikes for local children.

church when they realize that the church is serious about being generous in the community and the world.

- **Generosity is the new evangelism.**

Along with celebrating their church’s generosity and its impact, members of generous churches are inviting their non-Christian friends to these services. A church sharing with others becomes magnetic both to believers and non-believers. On another week, Cross Timbers announced ahead of time that everything that came in would be going to a school in Africa that might cost \$75,000 to build. People wanted to bring their friends to see what would happen in the offering that day! Sacrificial giving to those in need is often amazing and impressive to those inside the church—and outside. Generous behavior by Christians validates what we believe about God

and the Bible. Authentic generosity becomes magnetic to those who don’t yet believe in Christ.

Questions

- **When seeking to inspire generosity, how does effective communication differ between women and men?**

Too often, the conversation about generosity and stewardship in the church has been a “man-to-man” conversation. In fundraising circles, pastors or ministry leaders typically talk to men who work or men who have significant resources. What they often forget is there might be a wife or another significant money earner in that conversation who views things differently. Men often emphasize a Return on Investment when talking about giving, but in some cases

transformation stories are going to be more motivating to a female audience. We might want to rethink how we talk about money and giving. Are we communicating in a language that speaks to the unique needs and wants of a woman, and not just of a man? Photo collage: Merry Christmas Gateway, mission metroplex, spokes for hope, warm the winter- caption- More churches like Gateway Church in Southlake, TX are partnering with other outreach organizations to do everything from, handing out Thanksgiving food boxes at local missions, providing “goody” bags for the prison ministry, to assembling new bikes for local children.

Predictions

- **The best is yet to come, because the next generation of Christian leaders**

will advance the idea and practice of generosity even further.

I had a revolutionary experience at the Exponential church planting conference in 2011, where none of the speakers talked about raising money to get these new churches off the ground. From time immemorial, church planting conferences have included content on fundraising—if you’re going to get a church off the ground, you have to generate dough. But that’s not what this group of entrepreneurs wanted to talk about. These folks are figuring out even before they get started that they want to understand the heart of generosity. And they want to build a generous church—not just a church that’s well-funded. Like the churches I’ve worked with in the Generous Churches Leadership

Communities, they are creating a common language and identifying models of generous churches that are becoming the new normal.

More and more, churches are catching the heart of a leader and heart of a congregation such as **Gateway Church**, Southlake, TX (www.gatewaypeople.com), and it’s Senior Pastor Robert Morris. For Robert, generosity is his life message, and he has pumped massive resources—\$1 million when his church was only five years old—into developing Gateway’s people in the area of financial stewardship, giving and generosity. As Robert puts it, “Jesus is the **subject** of the Bible, He’s the noun. **Giving** is the verb.” And for Robert, talk isn’t cheap. He’s given away everything he owns—house, bank accounts, everything—at

least once, and he’s given away more cars than he can count.

Like Robert, leaders of generous churches are having a profound personal experience with generosity, and they are teaching it, modeling it and planning for it as an important spiritual discipline. When it reaches this level, generosity can’t be relegated to only one staff person to think about, or something that comes up only when you need to raise money. It becomes a spiritual law that permeates everything a church does—you must live a generous life as much as you must read your Bible and pray. When a church gets to the point where generosity is that essential, its leaders start building it into every aspect of the church. And that’s when things take off.

¹ <http://www.crossroads.net/my/media/messages.php?page=4>

² http://www.navigators.org/us/resources/illustrations/items/the_wheel

³ Smith, Christian, Michael Emerson, and Snell, Patricia. *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don’t Give Away More Money*. Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 24, 29, 48. See also Warren Bird, 2010 Large Church Finances and Staffing Report, Leadership Network, free download at www.leadnet.org/salary.

⁴ Warren Bird and Dave Travis. *2008 Leadership Network Salary and Economic Outlook Report*, p. 8. Available for free download at www.leadnet.org/salary. Percentage confirmed for 2010 through internal research by Leadership Network.

About Leadership Network

Leadership Network's mission is to accelerate the impact of 100X leaders. These high-capacity leaders are like the hundredfold crop that comes from seed planted in good soil as Jesus described in Matthew 13:8. Leadership Network is a division of OneHundredX, a global ministry with initiatives around the world.

To learn more about Leadership Network go to www.leadnet.org

About 11 for 11

The idea behind 11 for 11 is to profile eleven specific ministry innovations (one per month) during 2011. The total series will also include Global Connections Churches, Rapid Growth Churches, Trends in Collaborative Leadership, Large Church Senior Pastors, Missional Renaissance, Externally Focused Churches, Multisite Churches, Next Generation Pastors, Generous Churches, and Next Horizons.

Generosity Becoming a Fundamental Spiritual Discipline for Churches is also available in these formats.



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About the Authors

Warren Bird, Ph.D., who is overseeing the 11 for 11 initiative, directs the research division of Leadership Network, bringing a background of pastoral ministry and seminary teaching. He has co-authored 23 books on various issues of church vitality and health. His bio is at www.leadnet.org/warrenbird



Chris Willard currently serves as the Director of Generosity Development for Leadership Network. Chris has also served as a Leadership Community Director focusing on key topics including generosity and rapid growth. With nearly 25 years of experience in ministry leadership Chris served as the Executive Pastor of **Discovery Church** in Orlando, FL, before he joined Leadership Network. His bio is at www.leadnet.org/chriswillard

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Contagious Generosity: Creating a Culture Of Giving In Your Church by Chris Willard and Jim Sheppard. (Zondervan, available April 2012).

Secrets of Generous Churches: Creating a Culture in Which Serious Stewardship is Normal by Liz Swanson. (August 28, 2006)

Suggested Reading

A Revolution in Generosity: Transforming Stewards to be Rich Toward God by Wesley Willmer. (Moody, 2008)

Generosity: Moving Toward Life That Is Truly Life by Gordon MacDonald and Patrick Johnson. (National Christian Foundation, 2008)