

GIVING UP TO OUR POTENTIAL

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Christians are more generous than non-religious Americans, but most are not giving up to their potential. *Passing the Plate* by Christian Smith, Michael Emerson and Patricia Snell, reveals some truths about Christian giving. (Cokesbury)

Twenty percent give nothing; most give very little. Congregations stay afloat thanks to a few generous souls who account for sixty percent of giving; and affluent members give less than the poor. The book offers a sociological explanation for this stinginess.

Poor giving isn't always attributed to a lack of income. Americans collectively spend trillions annually on discretionary items. So the authors conclude, “their subjective perceptions of financial constraint appear to be an important factor limiting their giving money more liberally.” Captive to status consciousness, even the affluent think they're just getting by when they are “well-off” by any objective standard. Most Christians have the capacity to give more by adjusting priorities and perceptions.

Another factor stifling generosity is the silence about giving in the church. Money matters are considered private. Few people feel comfortable discussing money with friends or family, much less at church. Pastors tend to be uncomfortable dealing with money issues. They're so afraid of talking about it too much that they avoid it altogether. Consequently, members are confused about how to apply their faith to their finances. Intentions are good, but they are not given clear expectations. The result is haphazard, occasional giving.

The authors recommend: Communicate expectations about giving clearly; teach theology of giving confidently; build trust through improved financial systems; provide a variety of well-structured, regular means of giving. The book offers specific ways to increase giving.

Congregational culture is also a determinate of giving. The book contrasts two types of churches: “pay the bills” churches that view giving as an obligation; and “live the vision” churches that view giving as spiritual growth. The latter concentrate on building relationships and serving. Moving toward a “live the vision” mentality encourages giving.

The authors make this bold claim: “If American Christians were to give...generously – not lavishly...only generously – they could transform the world...They could generate...a total of another \$133.4 billion a year.” The potential good achieved through such giving is “staggering” and a Kingdom mandate to give up to our potential.

