

The Generosity Task Force received the following note from Charlie Berthoud. Charlie is pastor at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Madison, Wisconsin...

Inspired by another church, we tried something new at Covenant several years ago...and it worked! I had heard about a church where one hundred percent of the loose offering on Christmas Eve went to a mission project. I brought that idea to our finance committee and, knowing the loose offering on Christmas Eve was substantial, there was some hesitation about not having those dollars to support our operating budget. Covenant's finance committee, like most, is appropriately cautious and fiscally conservative. But, with the recommendation of the finance committee and the blessing of our Session, we decided to take a leap of faith.

In 2015, we designated ALL of the loose offering on Christmas Eve for Syrian refugees through the work of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. During the worship service, we showed slides of Syrian refugees and talked about how hard it must be to leave one's home. We spoke about how Jesus came to make a home with us and teach us to love one another. We received THREE TIMES the amount of any previous Christmas Eve! A member of the finance committee shared that her young adult daughter was back in Madison and had attended our Christmas Eve worship service. Knowing nothing of this new offering, she told her Mom something like, "That offering was cool. If it had just been for your church, I probably wouldn't have contributed anything."

We have had a Christmas Eve Mission Offering every year since, while continuing to receive the Christmas Joy Offering on the Sunday before Christmas with no discernible decline in giving. In recent years, the Christmas Eve Mission Offering has been designated for South Sudan famine response, hurricane and wildfire relief in the United States and the River Food Pantry in Madison. I have a hunch that, in the long run, this leap of faith has actually helped our operating budget. People feel good about the ministry of Covenant church and, when it's time to make a pledge, they're willing to support our operating budget. Thanks be to God for the generous members and friends of Covenant Presbyterian Church! We updated and thanked the congregation the following Sunday and in our weekly email to the congregation. And each year we mention what we did the previous year. God is good!

The John Knox Presbytery Vision Narrative states, “Congregations are vehicles of grace through which God changes the human heart and reaches a hurting world.” Covenant’s story is one more example of how the congregations in our Presbytery are living into this vision. Covenant’s “leap of faith”, to receive an offering on Christmas Eve while continuing to receive the Christmas Joy Offering, was indeed a bold idea. There are good reasons it was successful.

The process churches use for special offerings or fundraising of any kind is key to its success. The method used by Covenant, and the same one recommended by the Generosity Task Force, can be reduced to three words: inform, invite, thank. The result would have been much different if, on that Christmas Eve in 2015, the offering had been introduced with a single sentence, “We’re receiving an offering for Syrian refugees tonight.” Instead, there were pictures. Instead there was information about the situation and the needs of the Syrian people. Instead, the congregation was challenged to think about the difficulties of the Syrian people and the urgency of their situation. Intentional effort to inform the congregation made the situation the refugees were facing real.

After presenting the plight of the Syrian refugees and the reasons the church was supporting this outreach, an invitation was offered to those in attendance. Not a demand. Not begging. An invitation. Something like, “We have heard God calling us to help the refugees and we have partnered with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to streamline our response.” And, to complete the process, there was gratitude. This is an important step in all fundraising. It’s essential to express gratitude. In the church setting, saying thank you lets your donors know that you appreciate their support. It’s as true today as it ever was: God accepts what we offer and makes it amazing.

The churches in John Knox presbytery are generous in their outreach and ministry, locally and around the world. Does your church have a generosity story to share? Contact the Generosity Task Force at generositytaskforce@jknox.org.