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eGiving: It's about More Than Money

Money doesn't buy all that it used to; neither do we spend it the way that we used to. In 2010, electronic payments accounted for 75 percent of all financial transactions. But in churches that same year, 90 percent of gifts came via cash or check. Not surprising when as few as one in ten churches offer parishioners the opportunity to give electronically.

Church leaders consistently offer three reasons for why they are slow to change: electronic transactions will rupture the traditional act of giving funds in worship service, it's too expensive, and it's too complicated. These concerns are fair. But here's the catch—if your congregation hasn't enacted online giving, it is missing an opportunity to expand the way members think about giving.

Don't Mess with the Offering Plate

A Virginia pastor recently summed up what hundreds of pastors have said about electronic giving: "The act of giving is, and has always been, central to the act of worship. Electronic giving could well undermine this."

Experience and data suggest those concerns deserve a second look. In the pews in any given worship service there are three types of people. Each group responds to calls for giving in different ways. Online giving will assist some more than others, but traditional giving practices can continue to have a prominent place in worship.

- *Established Members.* This group may or may not respond to online giving. Some will embrace it because it's easier; others will prefer dropping their offerings in the offering plate. **Net benefit:** No change—this group will give regardless. Online giving may make their act easier, but it won't motivate them to give more.
- *Engaged Nonmembers.* Increasingly, a growing percentage of people are not connected to worship services on a regular basis. In fact, 30 to 60 percent of people in a given congregation fit this category. Therefore eGiving makes it possible for people who want to give regularly, but do so erratically

because they are not regularly in worship, to do so. **Net benefit:** Possible significant positive change because giving is not tied to regular worship attendance.

- *Visitors.* These are people who probably feel comfortable giving during the service—indeed, they may expect to. Some new online giving opportunities are emerging (QR codes that allow people to give using their mobile device, for example), even while traditional giving modes remain attractive. **Net benefit:** May increase giving for some because people expect to make a financial gift during a worship service.

Free the Spirit

Leaders may still resist online giving for fear that they are asking eGivers to sit through an offertory with no chance to physically engage in the act of giving. Or they fear that eGivers may feel like they're being asked to give more than once. This need not be the case: eGiving may actually liberate this portion of the worship service for expanding on the idea of giving back.



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Among the options some churches practice:

- **Project giving.** In addition to the traditional offering, some worshipping communities use the offertory to highlight a special project, educate the community about its value, and collect funds. Projects can include humanitarian aid, special building funds, feeding programs, or mission work.
- **Telling the story.** Some use this time to have individuals talk about how giving has strengthened and improved their spiritual lives, or about the good that comes from their gifts. Giving becomes not a one-sided affair—the church asks, the people give—but a community event that gets everyone involved in both giving and celebrating the good that comes from financial gifts.

Mind the Cost

While it's true that most eGiving comes with a cost, not all costs are the same. In fact, it's a misnomer that the term "eGiving" refers to only one method of giving because there are many possibilities.

- **Online Banking:** In online bill pay, the donor authorizes an amount to be sent to the congregation through the donor's financial website.

The Good: Nothing for the church to do; no cost.

The Bad: Time lag from authorization to payment.

The Tricky: Usually, givers can set up recurring payments, but not all will. You will need to remind people about giving with monthly or quarterly statements.

- **Electronic Funds Transfer:** Known as EFT, this involves the church's financial institution receiving a fund from the donor's bank or financial institution.

The Good: Once set up, it's easy; recurring payments can be established.

The Bad: The church has to set it up, and costs vary greatly.

The Tricky: Good EFT providers are out there, but there are a lot of them and leaders need to practice due diligence.

- **Credit and Debit Cards:** Works the same as an EFT, but with credit or debit cards.

The Good: Same as for EFT.

The Bad: Same as for EFT.

The Tricky: The last thing many churches want to do is to encourage people to take on debt; it is possible with some providers to limit these transactions to debit cards only.

- **PayPal:** A third-party vendor through which parties exchange funds.

The Good: Easy and fast to set up.

The Bad: Many people are turned off by these services, and they can be clunky for users.

The Tricky: If you go this route, stay on top of changes in fee structures.

Throw Me a Lifeline!

Concerns over complexity are clearly legitimate. Online giving requires serious planning and testing. And eGiving represents a cultural change in how churches operate. Because of this, church leaders should consider the following strategy:

Come to the table. Most people expect to be able to pay for things electronically. So unless the church is very small or it ministers to a community where a majority don't conduct their day-to-day affairs through traditional banking institutions, eGiving is here to stay.

Come with a servant's heart. Although eGiving usually increases the total number of dollars given, a more important reason is serving members. Through eGiving, educational opportunities to talk about financial responsibility and stewardship arise. Through highlighting service, eGiving showcases ways to support the church's ministries, the community, and the world.

Come with a worshipful spirit. Far from a threat to the traditional practice of gift-giving, eGiving can free members to think broader and deeper about giving.

Come with a student's mind. The eGiving world is constantly in flux as new systems and better ways of moving money come online. Stay atop the trends and don't be afraid to make a change if deemed appropriate.

Come with an analyst's attitude. Measure the results. Ask parishioners what works best for them. If it's failing, end the program. And if it's succeeding, work to discover how to improve.

Make It Easy

Make it easy for your congregation to use these new tools. Explain what the church is doing—on the website, with videos, in newsletters, in materials to new members, and in quarterly or annual statements. Most people today expect to be able to transact business electronically. Let them know they can and how. But most importantly, let them know why.

About the Writer: Martin Davis owns Sacred Language Communications, formerly directed Alban's Congregational Resource Guide, and has 20 years of experience working with congregations (www.sacredlanguagecommunications.com).