

StewardCAST

A monthly e-newsletter of LCMS Stewardship Ministry

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Has the Offering Plate Been Passed By?



It is highly likely that the offering plate ... is a thing of the past.

There have been several short-term casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic: professional, collegiate and high school games and tournaments; haircuts; manicures; dinners at restaurants and even visits to grandma and grandpa. The church is not without its short-term casualties either. Corporate worship, regular feasts at the Lord's Table, day schools and Sunday schools are all on our list. There isn't any aspect of life that is without major changes in the spring months of 2020.

COVID-19 and the offering plate

But now is the time to start looking at what the next steps are so that they can be planned with the proper balance between careful stewardship of the ministry and careful stewardship of the health of the congregation. When this happens, many of the short-term casualties will recover. Buildings will once again be filled with faithful saints listening in person to the

preaching that has been in the virtual realm. The Table will once again be set with Christ's Body and Blood to be shared for the forgiveness of sins. Organs will roar to life; instruments will be tuned for praise. Voices will be raised in petition and song.

But there are some treasured items that will be long-term casualties. There is an indication that the handshake will be out for some time to come. Pews jammed to the brim will be out. Hygiene and sanitation will rise in importance and visibility for both safety and peace of mind. Common-use hymnals may need to be replaced by personal copies brought from and returned to the home of the worshiper. Ushers handing out bulletins, and perhaps even bulletins themselves, could be a long-term casualty.

And this leads us to something that is almost certain to be a long-term casualty of the shutdown. It is highly likely that the offering plate that is passed from one worshiper to the next is a thing of the past. Centrally-located, convenient offering boxes and the rise of electronic giving, combined with the surface contact concerns with the plate may make it one of the last pre-COVID-19 practices to return. Unless congregations will return to the use of the *klingelbeutel* (an offering bag on a long stick), it is difficult to imagine the gathering of the offering to quickly return.

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The importance of visible stewardship

What are the impacts of this long-term casualty? One is pastoral. The second is practical. Firstly, the steward has been created to manage all of life and life’s resources freely and joyously for God’s purposes. This stewardship is a priestly worship function. When the steward offers up their sacrificial financial gifts, it is an act of worship. There is a reason why the offering has a place in the liturgy. It has never been meant to be the “halftime show commercial” that is there only to pay the bills. God’s people, stewarding the First Article grants from the Lord, give from the Lord’s bounty for the work of the Gospel. God grants. We respond. All through the liturgy we see this. The Word proclaimed is a grant of the Gospel that is met with prayer and offering. Not having this visible response to God’s generosity toward us is a loss for God’s people. It is also a loss for the next generation. Children learn generosity from the generations before them. When they see grandparents and parents making sacrificial gifts for the work of the Gospel, their future piety is formed. The selfish, stingy heart of an unbeliever was given to them at birth. The grace of giving is granted in Holy Baptism and modeled by faithful believers. The visual participation in the offering is part of preparing the next generation of faithful Christian stewards.

There is also a practical aspect to this. If there are not visible ways that the offering is connected to worship, there is speculation that generosity might fall. While less likely in congregations that regularly and systematically form a culture of faithful stewardship through their teaching and preaching, a change in mechanics does offer the potential for a decline in faithful financial stewardship in the congregation.

“Out of sight” often leads to “out of mind.” This should be a practical concern for the ministry of congregations.

Forming stewards into the future

So what are we to do if the passing of the plate becomes a long-term casualty of COVID-19? The key is formation. Preaching and teaching of stewardship is

essential. Congregations can no longer sit back and hope against hope that the resources will appear. It will be necessary that every congregation formalize and execute an annual stewardship formation plan. Teaching the “why” of faithful stewardship is the starting point: The steward was made for this task. Failure in it is idolatry. Souls are at stake! Teaching stewardship is not about budgets. It is about showing people who God made them to be and who Jesus has redeemed them to be for the sake of the Gospel!



The fate of the plate is up in the air right now. The generosity of God’s people is not.

This can be done practically as well. If you are in a congregation that uses the offering box and electronic giving, the offering should still be presented at the proper time. A couple of ushers can empty the offering boxes and present the gifts at the altar. Congregational communications should regularly talk about giving in all its forms. Should your congregation still not have electronic or text giving, every bank has a bill pay option that could be used by the individual Christian so that they may freely and joyously give for the sake of the Gospel!

The fate of the plate is up in the air right now. The generosity of God’s people is not. The worship aspect of faithful stewardship will return, and should be extolled. We stewards are made for this! God can and will grant us the grace to overcome and be who He has made and redeemed us to be!