

# HOW MUCH SHOULD I GIVE?

## HOW CAN CHURCH LEADERS BETTER FACILITATE THE DREADED 'GIVING CONVERSATION'?

**Susan Graham Walker**

GUEST COLUMNIST

■ In the church we are often vague on the topic of how and why to give our money, time and skills. Parish leaders spend a lot of time agonizing about how to get people to help pay the bills but miss the opportunity to teach about generosity, giving and gratitude as spiritual practices that deepen our faith. One question that most of us ask, at least to ourselves, is “How much should I give?” If this challenging question is actually asked out loud, it is usually deflected or left entirely unanswered. It is a serious gap when leaders, clergy and lay people don't have a well thought-out response that would help individuals make faithful, intentional and meaningful gifts to God's mission.

People don't ask how much they should give to be difficult, to make leaders feel uncomfortable or put them on the spot. They ask because the church hasn't explicitly taught about generosity as a practice of our faith, and it hasn't communicated its expectations.



Lately the pattern in the church has been to abstain from asking for gifts at all. There may be financial reports and indications of how far behind we are compared to this time last year; there may be challenges set forth for everyone to give a particular amount or a percentage increase. However, this is abdicating a responsibility of shaping disciples who model the gospel in every aspect of their lives—giving that trinity of time, talent and treasure.

It might be more helpful for parish leaders to open up a thoughtful conversation to encourage people to make

an informed and intentional decision about how they will give to support the ministry of the parish; to share the learning of others about their giving practices; to teach about giving as a response to God's generosity in our own lives—a conversation more about our need to be generous than the church's need to pay the bills.

“What should I give?” is an honest question that deserves to be explored, and not deflected with something like “Give what you can” (huh?) or the biblical expectation of the tithe of 10% (gasp). For a new person, this is not likely to be very helpful. For people who have been members for a long time, it doesn't encourage regular reflection on their practice of giving and generosity.

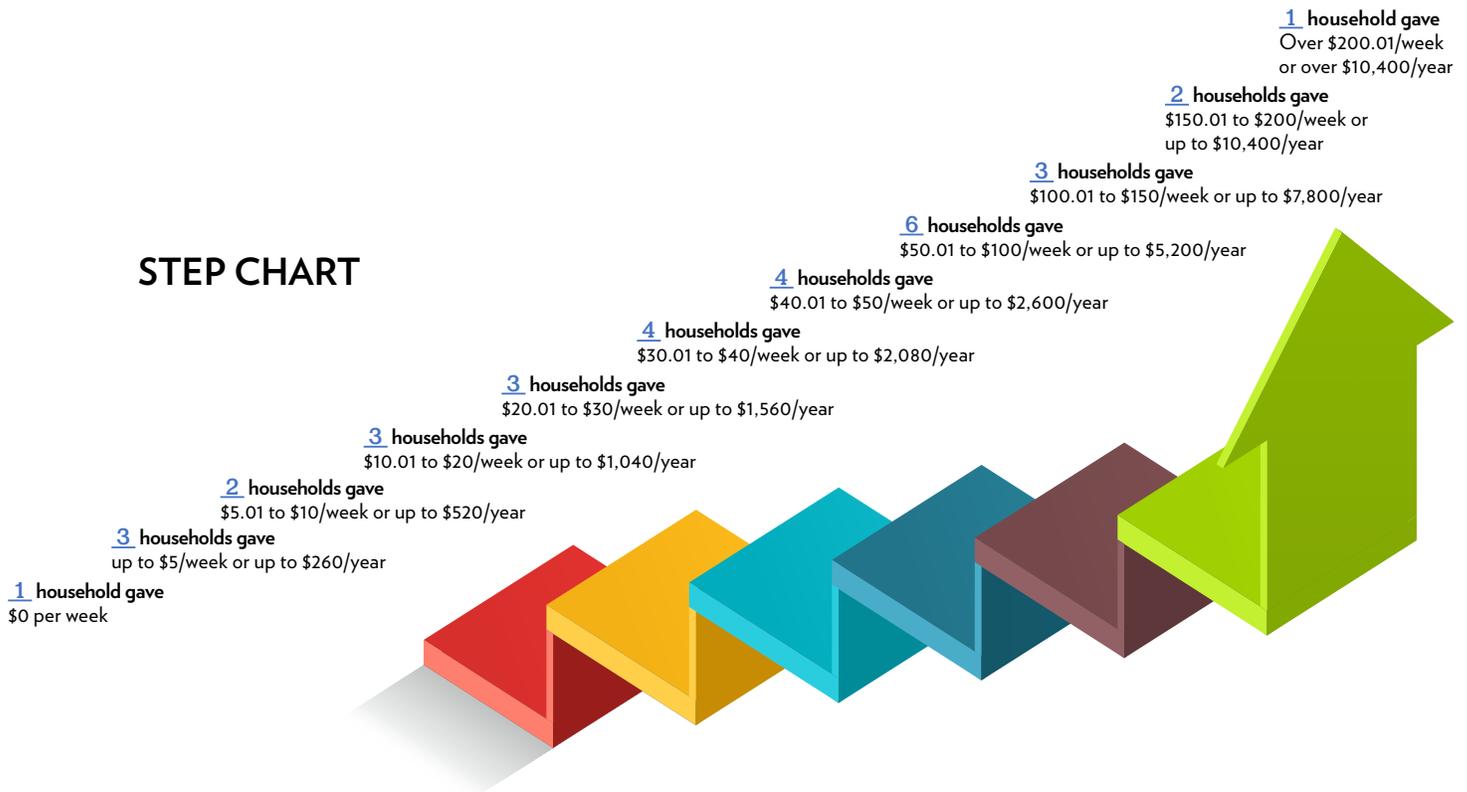
So how might we answer the question, “What should I give?”

Always begin with thanks, offering personal and sincere gratitude for what you know the individual has contributed in time and presence. Be specific in mentioning how the person or family gives in many ways.

Share what the impact of generosity is for the parish. Not where the money goes—share what the money *does*. Ground the giving in the life and ministry that follows God's call on us to serve. Explore what the money will accomplish (feeding the hungry), not what it will pay for (heating the parish hall).

In terms of personal giving, acknowledge that there is a biblical teaching of giving 10% to God from your “first fruits” (and in these scripture passages this is regarded as the beginning of giving, not the end). However, times have changed, and there are now many ways we “give” to accomplish what the Bible expects. We pay taxes, for

## STEP CHART



This step chart shows a sample breakdown of a congregation’s giving pattern in a particular year. “The step guide challenges people to ‘step up’ to the next level.”

example, which pay for services for the benefit of all.

Perhaps be bold enough to share how you make your own decision: “We aim to give 5% of our pre-tax earnings to our church and then give another 2% to other charities.”

Or: “We started out giving a fixed amount. Then we decided to figure out what percentage that was of our total income. It was lower than we thought, so now we are on a path to increase it by X percent per year.”

Or perhaps share other suggestions: Start with the equivalent of an hour’s salary in a week or a day’s salary in a month. Or give what you would normally spend on (*coffee, fast food, etc.*) a week. “Try that out and see how it feels.”

Suggest that whatever the decision, they need to feel comfortable and cheerful with it; that it fits in with other obligations and that the amount of the gift can change—in either direction—should circumstances change. One priest expresses it this way: “Work on it prayerfully. Give ‘til it feels right.”

Finally, offer decision-making tools to help make an informed choice based on concrete information.

A proportional giving chart gives a clear picture

of what a percentage of income means as a weekly or monthly offering to the mission of the church. It can be used either to set a personal goal or to identify the percentage one gives at the moment (after looking at a year-end charitable tax receipt). Then encourage prayerful consideration about what to give now.

A step chart shows where a gift level fits within the giving pattern of the congregation—how many people are giving at various levels. This can help a person see where they are in relation to others in the congregation. The step guide challenges people to “step up” to the next level.

Giving is an important practice for our spiritual lives, not just a church’s bottom line. Speaking honestly, holistically and frankly about our giving practices can help us deepen our generosity and our faith. ■

**SUSAN GRAHAM WALKER** is the stewardship ministry associate at the Anglican Church of Canada’s national office and manager of congregational giving and stewardship for the United Church of Canada.