

The Generosity Project and the pandemic in the room

You know the expression “the elephant in the room”? Well, when it comes to *The Generosity Project*, we need to talk about the pandemic in the room.

The Generosity Project has been in development for three years now, but literally while the book was being printed and we were planning the launch, the COVID-19 pandemic started to wreak havoc across our world.

And so church leaders have been scrambling to quickly find solutions to the problems of not being able to gather together. Praise God that many of you have done that brilliantly well. But pastors have been adapting to new technologies and learning new skills—on top of preparing sermons and caring for your flock. At the same time, many people in our churches have lost their jobs and are stressed by sudden and severe financial problems.

It’s been stressful, and hectic, and amidst all of that I thought to myself: “I can’t launch a major new resource at this time. Nobody is going to be paying attention, and even if they happen to hear us, they’re not going to think now is the right time to be running a course on generosity.”

So I went to my Board and said that I was thinking we should postpone the launch.

But I was surprised at their response.

They agreed that we should delay a little, while church leaders sort out the basics of pandemic ministry. But the idea that the next 6-9 months was not a time to be talking with church members about generosity got a lot of pushback from my board.

And so I consulted with a bunch of other Christian leaders to get their perspective too. And I want to share where I’ve landed on this now, because I suspect a lot of pastors will have the same initial reaction that I had: that now’s not the time to be working on the culture of giving in your church.

But before I do I want to say one preliminary thing.

Many of you as church leaders are exhausted physically and mentally. It’s an extremely tough period. So if you just have no headspace for thinking about the culture of generosity in your church this year, or you don’t think your people would cope with it, that’s okay. I don’t want to create any sense of guilt. I really don’t. You know your own specific situation; I’m just making general observations.

Having said that, let me share five thoughts that I hope might be helpful.

Point 1: Have you noticed that generosity is already in the air? We’ve seen it in Australia in the midst of our terrible bushfires earlier this year. And now, with the pandemic, we’re hearing about acts of generosity all over the world—from offering toilet paper to neighbours right through to healthcare workers risking their own lives for the sake of others. People are reaching out to elderly neighbours they’ve never talked to before to offer to do shopping for them. In the UK, 750,000 people volunteered their time to help the National Health Service.

In all sorts of ways, the massive and obvious needs caused by the fires and the pandemic have already made generosity a more obvious part of our wider culture.

The goal of *The Generosity Project* is not to just teach Christians what the Bible says about giving, it’s trying to do something deeper: it’s trying to get generosity to be part of our conversation and part of our church culture — not just money in the plate, but a big-hearted approach toward other people in our time, our money and our care.

So maybe this time is an opportunity to build on that spirit of generosity that's emerged in our wider community, and to shape it in biblical ways within our Church community. Maybe this is actually an easier time to see culture change happen than times of prosperity and ease?

Point 2: The biblical idea of generosity is not limited to times when we have plenty. Biblical generosity happens even in hard times. Think of what the Apostle Paul says of the Macedonian's generosity, in 2 Corinthians 8:

In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. (v2)

The Macedonian Christians were richly generous even in their "extreme poverty".

If we're unwilling to encourage people to generosity in hard times, are we in fact robbing them of the "privilege" of serving (as Paul puts it in v4)?

Point 3: Some of the people who still have their jobs may actually have more discretionary income than ever— because we know they're not going on their expensive holidays, nor going out to restaurants and concerts, and they're not even paying the cost of a daily commute to work. Interest rates are at an all time low, so their mortgage is under control. No, some in our church perhaps have more capacity to be generous than they have had for a long time.

But **Point 4:** some people in our churches are actually in need of generosity for the first time in a long time. And some of them perhaps need to be challenged as Christians to accept generosity from their brothers and sisters. Not to mention that our church budgets are going to be in sore need of some increased generosity.

And lastly, my **Point 5** is this: Bible study groups on Zoom are hard work for leaders, and the group interaction we normally have is just trickier to do online. Practically speaking, I think this is where small group material with video components — like *The Generosity Project* — is potentially very helpful to that online small group context.

So there you are. Those are some of the things I've been thinking about, and I hope they are helpful to you in your own thinking. And I do hope they might prompt you to at least take a good look at *The Generosity Project* to see if you think it would help your people.

If you've got thoughts on all this, please drop me an email. I'd love to hear from you.
[ceo@matthiasmedia.com.au]