

# TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

## Connecting Resources with Ministry

### Church Development Discussion Papers

**TITLE:** Putting Yourself Into Your Offering

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Near the end of a noisy, frustrating session in her church school class of nine- and ten year-old boys, the church school teacher asked: "Why do you think I'm here?" The children were surprised by her question. The teacher was surprised by their answer. They replied that she *had* to be there because she was being paid! More surprise came when the teacher explained that she was *not* being paid, she wanted to be there. This was a way she put her faith into action. It was a sharing of her love for God and her belief in God's love for others, including a noisy church school class.

It would be great to say this exchange led to quiet, cooperative church school sessions. That did not happen. The class was as noisy and boisterous as ever, but something did change. By her words and actions, the church school teacher helped her class discover that an offering is not just something you bring to church. It is who you are and how you live in the world in response to God's love for the world. The noise centered around a new interest in giving of oneself to express God's love for others.

Too often, people come to worship looking for what they can receive without discovering the gifts they *bring*. Children and youth may be treated as those who are supposed to sit back and receive the offerings of their church school teachers or leaders. No wonder they think such persons are paid!

If excluded from the offering, how can children and youth learn the response of giving? If their offerings are not taken seriously, how can they learn to make serious responses of faith? Providing a paper cup into which children stuff money or giving a patronizing pat on the back does not take the gifts of children and youth seriously.

The challenge is how to help children and youth discover the church as a place to offer their gifts and to activate the offering of themselves to the needs of the world. Perhaps this is a challenge for all ages.

What needs to change is our attitude toward the offering. It is not a sidelight of worship and the Christian life; it is the centre. What also needs to change is

our attitude toward the offerings of children and youth. They do not need to wait for adulthood to bring gifts to share with their church and the world.

The offering is central to every act of worship. Without the response of offering, worship is incomplete. Yet, in many worship programs for children and youth the offering may be left out, with the underlying implication that they have nothing to give. Sometimes the offering is trivialized as something to get through with embarrassment, reinforcing the idea that their offerings don't really count for much.

Perhaps we would treat the offering differently if we saw ourselves on the offering plates. The money we bring is a symbol of ourselves, not a substitution. The offering can be a time of discovering how we can be gifts of time, encouragement, kindness, talent, and effort for peace and justice. We can put more on the offering plate than money. We can put symbols of our actions and gifts for sharing with the world. This would help persons of all ages see their actions in the context of the offering and of worship.

### **Look for Opportunities for Participation**

*Invitations to the offering can include:*

- Stories of young people involved in mission and outreach.
- Stories of the local church's offering to others in the community and the world.

*Young people can present symbols of the offering with:*

- A telephone, representing a crisis center supported by the youth.
- Cards for persons in the hospital made by a church school class.

*Young people can participate in the worship service offering by:*

- Reading mission and ministry information.
- Extending the invitation to the offering.
- Giving the prayer of dedication.
- Choosing or writing the offertory prayer.

The offering is a response to the word of God experienced in preaching, teaching, and the actions of people's lives. Preparation for offering happens in the sharing of stories, both biblical and contemporary, at home or in church settings. When the church school teacher shared with her class the story of why she was there, she helped them discover that the offering was much more than what they had thought. When she involved them in learning about the offerings of others, she also helped them learn about their own opportunities for being offerings. The curriculum of the church school needs to be translated into actions of giving, supporting, and offering that bring children and youth into the life and work of the church. They are not simply those who watch from the sidelines. They are the church, too!

Making room for the offerings of children and youth and treating these gifts seriously communicates that their gifts do matter. Attitudes developed at home send messages about the offering to children. Coins from the bottom of a change purse or pocket, hastily given, demonstrate one attitude about offerings. Sitting down as a family and discussing the offerings that each can make involves children and youth in a more positive way. The offering of money can be seen as something in which all family members have a part. The use of envelopes and family activities of giving time, talent, and money for others shows that the offering is a way of life.

Children, youth, and adults bring to the church and the world the precious gift of themselves offered in response to God's love. The challenge is to enable and celebrate this treasure.

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