Understand Why People Give and What You Can Do

Book Review
Not Your Parents’ Offering Plate

Author: J. Clif Christopher
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About the author:
Dr. Clif Christopher, has his MDiv, a CFRE designation (Certified Fundraising Executive), and is the CEO of his own successful fundraising company, Horizons Stewardship Company (since 1992).

As a fundraising professional for many years, I can tell you that the reasons people give have changed.

Dr. Clif Christopher captures this in his 120-page book, Not Your Parents’ Offering Plate. Christopher describes real-world experiences of why generous and joyful giving by all types of people has changed and is changing. His analysis is particularly compelling because his perspective comes from having one foot in the secular charitable world and one in the religious church-based world. He outlines how the who, what, where and when of generous giving has been changing for the last decade and continue to shift. Churches have failed to recognize and embrace the changes, and take action. While Christopher is an American and is writing for the American context, Canadian research bears out his observations: giving (annual, major and estate) to secular charities (education, arts, health, environment, the United Way, etc.) has been increasing while giving to religious charities has been declining.

Christopher’s book is a call to action for congregations. He shares a personal story where he was scanning his local newspaper and saw an intriguing headline: that one of his friends, a devoted church member of over forty years who has made several gifts of a few thousand dollars to his church each year, made a multimillion dollar gift to the local university. When Christopher asks his friend why he chose to split his giving as he had, he hears the following, “Clif, I do not want you to think that I do not care for the church. I do. … I just do not want what my wife and I worked so hard for to be wasted going forward, and the president [of the university] convinced me of its [my donation's] life-changing value at the university.” This gentleman wanted to see that his gift would have an impact and felt that the university’s plan to shape and transform lives far exceeded that of his church.
Canadian church members would do well to read and understand the trends Christopher is putting before each reader. At the end of each chapter he provides a list of questions and at least two suggestions of what can be done to remedy a particular challenge.

An example from chapter two – Reasons People Give. Christopher outlines why a strong mission and vision are key drivers in fundraising, followed by regard for leadership and fiscal responsibility (none of these are new to fundraisers outside of the church context). The questions are: How well are you telling your members/donors about what you’re doing to impact and change lives? How can your leadership relate better to donors? Does your leadership even know who and what people are giving? Are people always being asked to shore up the annual budget alone? Do you inadvertently do things that communicate that the church is not fiscally sound? Do people talk openly about their giving to others reflecting a culture of open discussion about money? (pg. 24). Once you’ve answered all of his questions he provides options for going forward.

Giving and givers are changing and there is hope to be found in Christopher’s book. I recommend this book to those who are looking to make a difference in the area of fundraising as ministry in your congregation or group.