Talking about the State of Faith and Giving:

Reflections on Lake Institute's 2024 Thought Leaders Convening

BY ELIZABETH LYNN AND DAVID KING

LAKE INSTITUTE
on Faith & Giving

In the summer of 2024 the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and Giving USA released their annual report on American charitable giving. The report contains several findings specific to religion.

The 2024 findings confirm patterns in faith and giving that have been visible for some time. They show continued declines in the percentage of charitable donations going to religion, and in the number of real (inflation-adjusted) dollars going to religion. These declines in giving to religion may in turn be related to other changes on the landscape of faith and giving, such as decreasing rates of religious attendance and affiliation, and a marked decline in the overall percentage of households that are engaging in charitable giving of any kind.

The 2024 Giving USA report offers a crucial '30,000-foot view' of the landscape of giving, and giving to religion, today. The view from above is stark and sobering. Both faith and giving are changing—and some of the changes look connected.

But what do these shifts mean for leaders on the ground, people who guide and support clergy and congregations, faith-based organizations, faith-inspired donor networks and foundations, faith-based higher education, and theological schools?

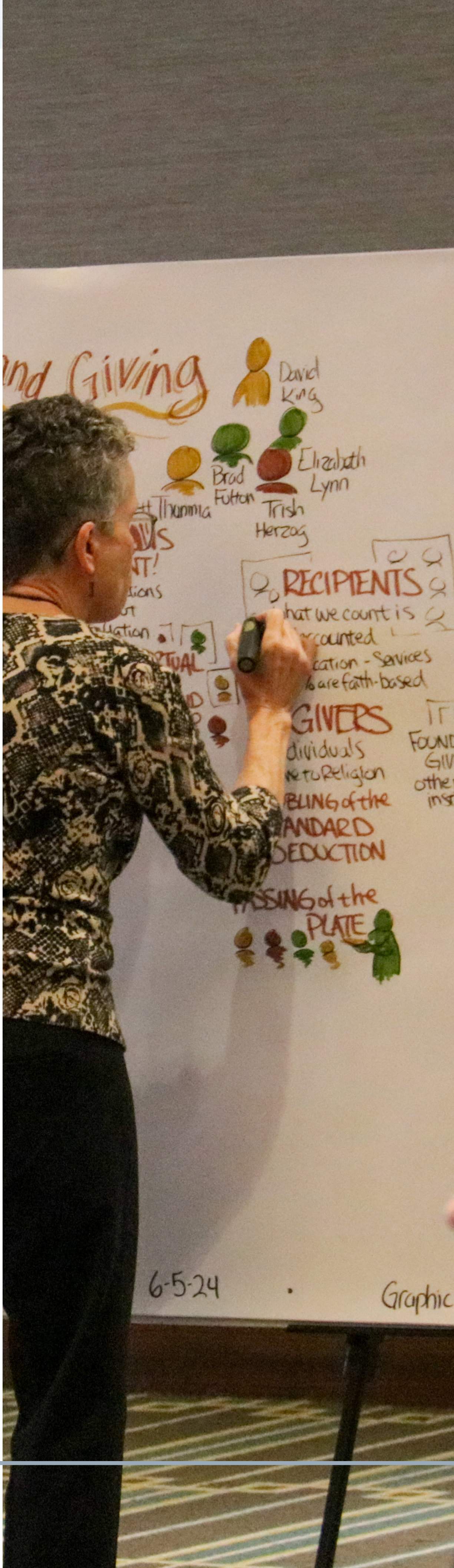
What can leaders on the ground do in response to these reported changes in faith and giving?

One thing we all can do is start talking about these changes—and with conversation partners outside our usual circles, sector, or denomination.

In June 2024, Lake Institute on Faith & Giving did just this. We brought together fifty leaders of religious networks and institutions, organized philanthropy, donor associations, higher education, the private sector, and the non-profit sector, for a unique conversation about the state of the field of faith and giving. The two-day convening was designed to help inform Lake Institute's ongoing research and education agenda, while building shared awareness and relationships among different kinds of organizations on the landscape of faith and giving for the benefit of those we serve and our common life.

All these leaders are actively engaged in and impacted by the complex ecosystem of faith and giving in American society. And yet, notably, no one knew everyone in that room, and most people knew just a handful of other participants. Together, starting with the "30,000-foot view" of how faith and giving are changing, we crafted a conversation—and the beginnings of a shared vocabulary—across well-established silos.

This brief report summarizes what we heard from this distinguished group about what leaders can do on the shifting ground of faith and giving, and what kinds of help we all need in order to lead well.



I. What Can Leaders Do on Shifting Ground?

TALK ABOUT DIFFERENCES …

From the start, this diverse group of leaders accepted the basic premise of the 30,000-foot view: namely, that faith and giving and associational life are shifting in significant and related ways, and that new imagination and partnerships are essential for faith communities to thrive on shifting ground. These core concepts served as a kind of foundation and framework for conversation throughout the convening.

At the same time, participants stressed the importance of attending to differences, both in how specific communities engage in faith and in giving—and in how they are experiencing reported changes.

> Congregations across America have differing models of faith and giving, shaped by unique racial, ethnic, cultural and regional traditions, and they face divergent obstacles and opportunities, given longer histories of systemic inequality in access to resources.

Congregations are also on varying timelines of development. On any street in America today, an immigrant congregation may just be getting started, while a neighboring mainline Protestant or Catholic congregation may be approaching its endpoint.

In short, while leaders value the 30,000-foot view, they told us they are hungry for more context-specific descriptions of what is happening, both in their own communities and beyond.

FEEL THE URGENCY …

A sense of urgency for new action on this shifting ground was also in the air and in the conversation.

Participants repeatedly underscored the urgency of the current moment. This urgency is related to the rate of change in faith, giving, and associational life; the rise of polarization, distrust, and profound personal loneliness; and the impact of all these changes on individuals, congregations, and communities.

The urgency is also grounded in a feeling that, if faith communities and organizations do not act now, the opportunities of the moment will be lost. Leaders spoke about the issue of time, how to understand the arc of change we are in, and how to do work that is at once immediate and pressing, and yet perhaps necessarily slow.

This sense of urgency is shared across sectors. For many worshiping communities, the urgency is also quite concrete—and it is felt perhaps most concretely in the problem of buildings, a topic that threaded much of the large group conversation. But again, participants stressed that building problems vary widely by context. Some congregations have extensive facilities and campuses that no longer align with mission and ministry. Others have buildings that are missionally essential but badly in need of repair, often because they have been systematically excluded from investment and support. Meanwhile, immigrant faith communities are sometimes inheriting the buildings and building problems of Catholic and mainline congregations.

INNOVATE ... WITH NEW PARTNERS!

And yet, amidst the urgency of the moment, participants also found great hope in signs of innovation on both sides of the faith and giving relationship. They emphasized the power of stories of innovation and creativity to offer encouragement and hope, such as the stories found in Lake's Faithful Generosity Story Shelf.

> Faith communities are looking afresh at their substantial assets (human, theological, material, and financial), and thinking creatively about how to re-purpose those assets for mission and ministry.

In order to innovate, they also recognize they must engage new partners, both in their local context, and across sectors.

Engaging with Local Communities: Participants emphasized the need for congregations to focus hyper-locally in this time of change, assessing community needs and forming partnerships to address those needs, perhaps by starting with people in their congregations who are already connected.

Engaging with Philanthropic and Government Partners: Participants also emphasized the need for new funding pathways between faith communities and philanthropic organizations and government entities, while acknowledging that building these pathways will require change on both sides.

Positively, the philanthropic leaders present noted that some foundations are taking a new look at faith-based organizations as partners for the common good—and seeking to be more accountable to communities that have been excluded from funding in the past, through innovations in grantmaking like a common application and a re-granting process. Meanwhile, government leaders emphasized the opportunity to develop more transformative relationships with faith communities, especially around affordable housing projects but also in other kinds of community service.

But leaders across the sectors also talked about the challenges of innovation, especially in the inherent tension between sustaining organizations while supporting and fostering creativity at the same time. Congregational innovation, in particular, requires clergy and lay leaders to work together in new ways, and this can be a hard ask of clergy who are often exhausted by the basic work of keeping the doors open and the lights on.

II. What Resources are Needed to Support Leaders on Shifting Ground?

Now, we turn our attention to three kinds of resources these leaders told us they need to make these crucial turns on the shifting ground of faith and giving today.

MORE ABOUT THE WHY OF GIVING

Across sectors, these leaders want help in better understanding not just how donors give today, but why they give.

To be clear, leaders value data reflecting trends at both the local and 30,000-foot level. Trends in the use of digital giving platforms and pledge campaigns are important to note; so too, are patterns of decline in affiliation, attendance, and membership. But underneath the trends lies a larger question: alongside attending to what is happening, it is equally important to ask why these changes are occurring and what they mean.

In synthesizing the "why" questions that leaders raised, they were eager to better understand a growing distrust in institutions, discern how to articulate the mission/vision of faith communities outside their walls, share and pass down traditions of generosity between generations, and consider what giving means when a commitment to duty and obligation rings less true compared to engagement with particular passions and causes.

Some answers to the "why of giving" might come from fields such as psychology and sociology. For example:

- What motivates generosity in a life of faith, such that the religiously affiliated give more than the unaffiliated?
- What mental models inform and inspire giving today?
- How are religious givers formed to give?

But leaders also sought more resources for theological reflection that can connect giving and stewardship to economics, spiritual practices, and the nature of communities— both in congregations and broader communities well. The questions that emerged focused on issues such as:

- What theological models inform and inspire giving today—and for whom?
- Who is my neighbor and what does that mean?
- What does our theological anthropology tell us about what we owe to others, and to which others?
- What are the emerging theologies of money and theologies of giving that we can think and talk about with one another?

While silence and anxiety have too often predominated when religious leaders consider questions of money, the tone among leaders now seems to indicate that this is changing, as questions of money and giving are not as often segmented off from larger questions of economic well-being, justice, and the flourishing of our communities. The pressing question then seems to be how to encourage leaders across multiple sectors to employ their theological imaginations to ask broader questions and develop the tools and resources necessary to bring these theological traditions to bear on our practice.

RESEARCH THAT IS ACCESSIBLE AND CONTEXT-SPECIFIC

When asked what kinds of research could best serve their constituents, these leaders emphasized that, in addition to the overarching landscape of faith-based organizations and the nonprofit sector, there is a need for accessible and context-specific materials. New research might take the form of case studies, interviews, and other qualitative data that looks at what is going on in local communities from the ground up. The big picture matters, but so do the individual stories.

Even more than new research, however, participants emphasized the need for access and appropriate translation. Take existing resources and add contextualization, they told us. Make this information more accessible and empower its use by religious practitioners. In essence, the stories matter, but so does the storytelling. As Lake Institute Associate Director Meredith McNabb noted, “A good story builds connection, sparks imagination, and creates space for people to see themselves in the story.” Providing leaders a full complement of stories and empowering them to share these stories throughout their communities is vital.

As a bridge between research and practice, Lake Institute strives for this translation, and we hope to further cultivate partnerships that cross religious traditions as well as sectors, grounded in a shared focus on the big what, how, and why questions at the intersection of faith and giving.

Key to empowering the use of all these resources is the role of intermediaries—people who can help faith leaders put resources into play in their own context. Participants mentioned the need for embedded coaches; trusted advisors; partnerships that are deeply relational and that cross sectors and denominations, as well as bridge builders between business leaders and faith communities to work together on affordable housing. Too often, leaders across sectors remarked that they felt their own work was siloed off from larger conversations, and perhaps they only had a limited picture of both the challenges and opportunities.

What became even clearer, as we reflected on the state of the field of faith and giving, was that we will have to move beyond existing siloes to address today's pressing questions. At the same time, there was renewed energy and excitement to find ways to work together. The challenge, again, is empowering leaders to see themselves as intermediaries able to make connections and see beyond their particular contexts.

Finally, to build these relationships, a shared, cohesive vocabulary across sectors is needed. When addressing faith and giving, we can too easily fall into abstractions or use a specialized vocabulary that might prove difficult for others to find their way into. Working together to ask ourselves what we mean by the words we use, and how to make sense of our many frameworks across the multiple sectors in which we seek to operate, is another important step.

WHAT COULD BE A FIELD-CHANGER?

In closing, we asked the gathered leaders to name something that, if it were to happen, could change the whole field of faith and giving (a question we recommend you use to spark conversation in your own place and way).

> Above all else, participants emphasized the urgent need and opportunity to rethink the role of the congregation in the community as well as reconsider why giving is important in a life of faith—two deeply intertwined topics that should be taken up together, not separately.

And they pointed to the importance of equipping faith leaders and their organizations to do this crucial work through re-aligned education, research, and conversation.

In the months to come, Lake Institute will be attending both to “Big Picture” data and to diverse on-the-ground stories of faith and giving, asking what these mean for our work, and seeking out conversation partners across sectors and silos as we go. We will also be exploring the why of giving more deeply, working to translate and share relevant research, and seeking to better connect and empower partners who are eager to work together across sectors and silos.

Amidst the challenges, the future is bright for meaningful new work at the intersection of faith and giving. Lake Institute is excited to be focused on this work, and we hope you will be a part of it with us.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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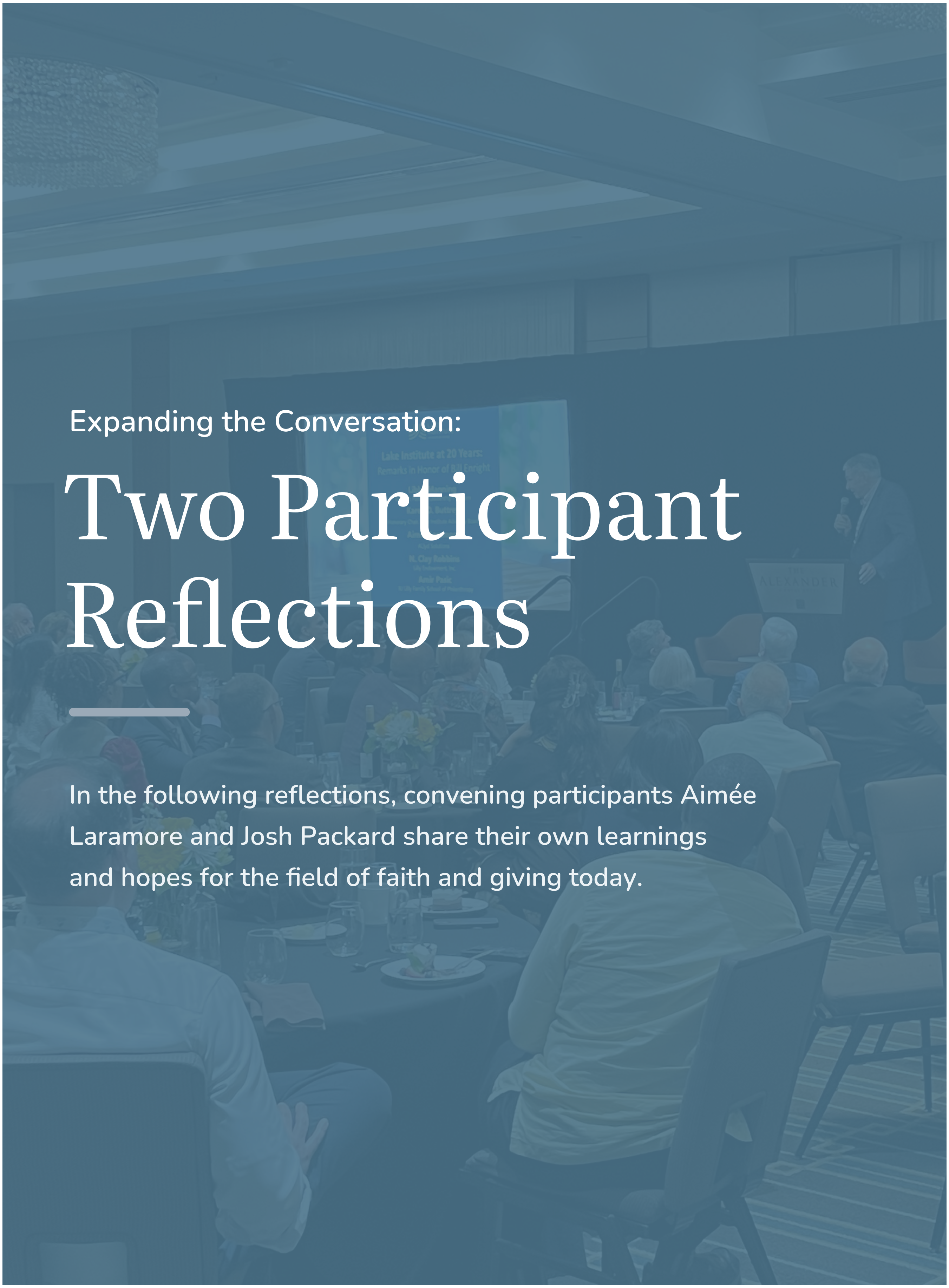

Expanding the Conversation:

Two Participant Reflections

In the following reflections, convening participants Aimée Laramore and Josh Packard share their own learnings and hopes for the field of faith and giving today.

The Balcony View: Embracing A Beautiful Mess

BY AIMÉE LARAMORE

Imagine sitting in the upstairs seats of an auditorium, sporting event, or theater. Although we get excited about being up close and personal for our favorite artists or performers, over time there we gain appreciation for being a bit removed from the fanfare and frenzy that can dominate the space. Shifting to the balcony, we gain a different view of the action, a different space to take it all in. You are close enough to feel the energy and excitement, far enough to catch a breeze and spread out a bit.

Being on the balcony allows you to catch a second wind and decide exactly where to go and what to do. If only we take the time to look at each season with a different lens.

Over time you realize, being on the floor can be messy. Our goal is to ensure our deeply engaged ministry, fundraising and community engagement is messy with meaning.

For years, religious leaders and fundraisers alike have benefitted from the information at the balcony view. Yet, we often find it difficult to build in the time necessary to reimagine our next move. From best practices in changing times, to rallying calls to get back to the basics, our leaders, practitioners, and ambassadors are constantly working towards effectively framing the challenges while simultaneously seeking solutions at the ground level.

> At our best, we approach the reminders of decreased giving and decreased affiliation with a deep, sometimes uncommon hope, that data has the potential to drive new decisions in the thick of floor-level work.

In development, alongside our peers and colleagues who offer a special vocational service to faith-based institutions, we are being challenged to explore new vantage points in shifting times. Recent conversations have provided equal attention to impact investing, corporate social responsibility, and donor advised funds, while never losing sight of theological frameworks, spiritual practices, and the heart of the matter. Solutions require an intentionality around our faith and the way we forge ahead. We are better off when we dig beyond headlines and data trends to do the hard and complex work. There is simply too much at stake. There is a lot to be done on the ground where congregations, faith-based initiatives, community organizations and ambassadors continually unite to remove the barriers to connectivity and productivity in the public, private and nonprofit sector.

Lake Institute brought an eclectic group of faith, fundraising, and thought leaders together, which framed what is possible with uncommon hope. The beauty of the experience was a conversation that allowed each of us to do more than embrace and effectively name the challenges of these times. We understand at the ground level, we have a beautiful mess on our hands, and a lot of work to do. Faith environments that champion authentic dialogue alongside integrated and informed solutions can be rare.

We need more of the eclectic spaces, the benefit of the information from the balcony, and the unparalleled energy and resolve on the ground. At our best, we leverage the view, and busy ourselves with the work of testing new approaches, innovating new ministry, and equipping our ambassadors to make meaning, even in messy situations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aimée Laramore, M.B.A., is the owner of ALlyd Solutions, a philanthropic services consulting firm, and leads limited life philanthropy at the Johnson Center for Philanthropy.

Reimagining Theological Models of Giving for Contemporary Faith Communities

BY JOSH PACKARD

The landscape of faith and giving is undergoing a profound transformation. Traditional theological models of giving, deeply rooted in institutional structures, no longer align with the sociological realities of modern life. The assumptions underpinning practices like tithing, recuring auto-draft donations or passing the plate—that individuals have stable incomes, long-term employment, and a deep trust in institutions—are increasingly outdated. Today's congregants, particularly younger generations, experience fluctuating economic circumstances and a growing skepticism towards institutional authority.

Research supports these observations. The 2024 Giving USA report highlights ongoing declines in both religious affiliation and charitable donations, reflecting broader shifts in societal trust and engagement. Simultaneously, studies indicate that younger generations, such as Millennials and Gen Z, are less likely to participate in traditional forms of religious giving due to their precarious financial situations and a preference for direct, project-based contributions over institutional channels. Underpinning all of this is a well-documented decline in trust for all social institutions and institutional leaders.

> In light of these changes, there is a pressing need for new theological models that resonate with contemporary socio-economic conditions and patterns of trust. These models must recognize that many people now perceive their contributions as part of a broader, relational network rather than a transaction with an institution.

This shift necessitates a theological reimagining that prioritizes personal connections and the flexible, varied nature of modern financial lives.

Firstly, emerging theological perspectives should emphasize the intrinsic value of diverse forms of generosity, such as micro-donations, time, and skills, rather than focusing solely on monetary contributions. This broader understanding of giving aligns more closely with the lived experiences of many individuals today, who may have fluctuating income but are rich in other resources they can offer.

Secondly, these models should integrate the concept of episodic giving—supporting specific projects or causes on an as-needed basis. This approach reflects the preference for tangible, immediate impact over long-term, institutionally managed funds. Episodic giving can be framed theologically as a series of intentional, spiritually meaningful acts that build community and foster direct engagement with pressing social issues.

Furthermore, fostering trust through personal relationships is crucial. Faith communities can cultivate environments where trust is built not through the authority of the institution but through authentic, transparent interactions among individuals. This relational approach mirrors the decentralized, network-based trust structures prevalent in society today.

Lastly, theological reflections must address the spiritual and communal aspects of giving in a fragmented, rapidly changing world. By highlighting the connection between generosity and spiritual growth, and emphasizing the communal benefits of collective action, these new models can inspire a renewed commitment to giving that is deeply personal and spiritually fulfilling.

Reimagining theological models of giving to reflect contemporary socio-economic realities and patterns of trust is essential for faith communities today. These models must move beyond institutional frameworks to embrace the diverse, relational, and flexible ways in which people now live, work, and express their generosity. By doing so, they can foster a vibrant, relevant practice of giving that resonates with the spiritual and practical needs of modern congregants.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Packard, Ph.D., Co-Founder of Future of Faith, is a sociologist with 20 years of experience as a researcher, teacher and executive focused on trends in American religious life.