

What Does it Mean to Give Faithfully in the COVID-19 Pandemic and Polarized America?: A Case Study of Liberal Mennonites

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Abstract

This presentation aims to examine the ways in which American liberal Mennonites collectively and individually allocate their financial resources to reflect their faith. Based on their religious interpretation, Mennonite congregations have encouraged their members to offer funds for peace promotion and support for the poor and socially disadvantaged. However, it is sometimes challenging to figure out the best way to do so with their limited resources. Recent situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and economic and political polarizations, created diverse occasions to reflect on how they could demonstrate their religious commitments through their offerings. Based on interviews and observations between 2020 and 2022, this study discusses how Mennonite congregations and their members individually and collectively deal with the many, and sometimes competing, needs and desires to give. With uncertainty brought on by the pandemic, congregations initially provided emergency assistance to those who were in need. Additionally, many congregants extended their contributions to aid such efforts. As the situation gradually returned to the pre-pandemic period, congregations began working to reinforce their religious communities and adjust the new spending priorities. While several members were willing to support such initiatives, their offering practices were not necessarily easily adjusted. Incorporating recent studies on religious giving, this presentation suggests that religious giving can provide an important window through which we can explore how believers imagine and reimagine their faith communities.

Keywords: Offering, Pandemic, Christianity

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Introduction

The global spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) has ushered many changes and challenges for communities, including the religious community. By examining financial offerings, this study investigated how American liberal Mennonite congregations and their members responded to changing situations. The study is based on on-line interviews and observations of two churches and their members in Virginia, United States, from 2020 to 2022. During this period, the congregations provided multiple and diverse church-related activities. Although there were some limitations in executing in-person visits and data collection, online tools were a good alternative and provided important opportunities for conducting this study.

Mennonites

The Mennonites are a Christian group, and their roots can be traced to the Anabaptist movement, which occurred during the Protestant Reformation era. In 16th century Europe, a group of believers opposed the practices of infant baptism and the close relationships between the Church and secular governments. These believers and those who followed them were called Anabaptists. Early Anabaptists were not accepted well by secular governments and religious authorities at the time and faced severe persecution. To find safe places, many people relocated to various parts of Europe. Some eventually migrated to North America. Although their religious practices varied, the Mennonites, as well as the Amish and Hutterites, grew out of these movements (Kraybill & Hostetter, 2001; Redekop, 1989).

As a religious group, the Mennonites share many basic tenets with other Protestant groups, such as belief in Jesus and his teachings. Mennonites are also known for their emphasis on believers' communities. Assisting members with the help of mutual aid is often strongly encouraged, although how this is practiced varies. Historically, the Mennonites have been strong supporters of peace movements (Redekop, 1989).

At present, there is considerable diversity among the Mennonites, and broadly speaking, they can be divided into three subgroups: Old Order, Conservative, and Liberal. They differ in their views on the application of religious teachings to many daily activities. For example, Old Order groups generally restrict the use of electricity and cars. They also have strict rules regarding clothing. Conservative groups have maintained some of these rules. Liberal groups have few or no such regulations (Naka, 2008, 2011). Despite these differences, these groups usually value their historical roots and religious emphasis on believers' communities and peace positions. This study is based on interviews and observations of liberal Mennonite congregations.

COVID-19 and Social Contexts in the United States

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused many restrictions and changes in the United States. Although in-depth discussions of these challenges are beyond the scope of this study, this section briefly highlights some major events that discuss the social contexts relevant to this case study. In the state of Virginia, where this study was conducted, the first confirmed COVID-19 case was reported on March 7, 2020 (Virginia Department of Health, n.d.). By March 11, 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak became evident, and the World Health Organization declared it a public health emergency (World Health Organization, n.d.).

To contain the spread of the virus, many religious organizations, including liberal Mennonite churches, have taken preventive measures. The congregations in this study offered alternative worship opportunities. They offered YouTube and/or live-stream Sunday worship services. During the early phase of the pandemic (Spring and Summer 2020), only a few pastoral members and church leaders gathered in the sanctuary and created these worship videos. Subsequently, short video clips of church members were incorporated so that viewers could understand how others were doing during the pandemic. Congregations have also explored online meetings and alternative forms of gathering to maintain congregational networks and church activities. Although such transitions were not easy for those who were unfamiliar with technology, pastors and other staff members provided technical support.

These online activities offered alternative ways to connect with those who ordinarily did not participate in worship or other church activities. They included individuals who were completely new to Mennonite congregations, as well as others who previously attended these congregations but were now relocated. Some new attenders said that they found YouTube worship services, which were interesting and started to partake in them regularly. Pastors and church leaders noticed this trend and conducted online meetings to introduce themselves and their congregations to newcomers. The congregations in this study gained new members in this manner, although they also lost members who died during COVID-19.

Simultaneously, the US society faced numerous challenges. Some people lost their jobs or income directly or indirectly because of the pandemic. This created a sense of uncertainty and raised questions about how best to respond to dynamic situations. Religious congregations, including many Mennonite churches, were also concerned with those who were economically and emotionally affected by the pandemic. As discussed briefly, the congregations in this study explored how they could support others in the community and within their congregations.

The response to the spread of COVID-19 has also brought divergent perspectives. Some people were willing to adopt face masks and maintain social and physical distance. Some were also willing to receive COVID-19 vaccinations and struggled to protect themselves and others from the virus. Still others have not implemented these measures. These different responses were often intertwined with religious and political positions. To make the situation even more stressful, the pandemic coincided with a transition of political leadership in the US. While the pandemic was not the only major issue affecting political leadership transitions, responses to it frequently intertwined candidates' political positions. Ultimately, a presidential transition was witnessed, but societal divisions were not resolved.

Mennonite congregations were not immune to these tensions and conflicts. Many church members expressed feelings of unease. They respected other points of view, but it was not necessarily easy to find a way to express their position of peace and religious teaching in a shifting context (Naka, 2023).

Religious Giving

Many religious traditions encourage believers to offer economic and other resources to support their activities. Some religions prioritize their own religious members; however, many Christian groups do not necessarily restrict their charitable contributions and activities to those who share their faith (McCleary, 2007). Historically, as well as today, Mennonite

congregations have also provided support for others, such as aid in disaster recovery, education, and food insecurity (Kraybill & Hostetter, 2001; Redekop, 1989).

Previous studies among Christian groups generally indicate that believers consider financial contributions as an important way to express their religious commitment. These studies suggest that, for believers, monetary giving does not only mean expressing support for their congregations and missions, but also provides ways to become part of wider communities of Christian believers (Bialecki, 2008; Harding, 1992, Naka, 2011; Zaloom, 2016).

These studies also suggest divergent views on the actual practice of giving. Some studies (Bialecki, 2008; Harding, 1992) indicate that the emotional and spiritual aspects of providing financial resources are of paramount importance to believers. The act of “giving up” helps believers deepen their religious understanding because it resembles Jesus’s ultimate death and sacrifice. Extravagant and spontaneous financial giving can also symbolize a strong dedication to God. However, other studies (Naka, 2011; Zaloom, 2016) suggest different religious emphasis of financial giving. Careful allocation of money, for example, can have religious significance, as it can suggest careful stewardship of God’s creation. These studies indicate that the act of giving has religious significance, but there are divergent ways how believers find religious significance in their financial giving.

To examine further, this study explored how members and congregations make decisions regarding charity by incorporating insights from recent anthropological discussions on morality. The topic of morality has long been studied in anthropology and other fields. The focus of these earlier studies was on the rules and regulations of society. In contrast, recent studies such as Mattingly (2014) and Kleinman (2007), suggest the importance of examining how people make moral decisions in dynamic and challenging situations, where ordinary regulations and expectations are no longer appropriate. This study explores how congregations make decisions while managing diverse, and sometimes competing, needs and desires. Further, COVID-19 and other social situations in the US have created many challenges for members and congregations. The inability to worship as in the pre-pandemic period, for example, led them to explore other ways of expressing their religious commitments. By examining congregational and individual members, this study explored how the Mennonites responded to new situations.

Research Setting

This study is based on interviews and observations of two liberal Mennonite congregations and members in Virginia, United States. The congregations examined were relatively large among liberal Mennonites, with over 300 members. This study refers to them as Church A and B for convenience. Both churches are well established. Church A has existed slightly longer. Each church has three pastors (male and female, full-time and part-time), along with several salaried church staff members. There are also Mennonite and other nearby educational institutions. The congregations welcome people with diverse racial, cultural, religious, and economic backgrounds, but the majority of members are white and have grown up in Mennonite families.

Congregational Discussions on Giving

Offering time is important for both congregations. The offering time is included in each Sunday worship service, even when there are no in-person services available. These

congregations provided several options on how to give prior to the pandemic. In addition to putting money or checks into the offering plates or boxes, members can choose to send checks by mail and set up bank withdrawals. They also accept online giving through their website. These arrangements are not unusual among liberal Mennonites or other Christian churches in the US.

Both congregations made efforts to communicate the church's finances to their members. As in other liberal Mennonite congregations (Naka, 2011), the amount of money offered to congregations is announced in church bulletins. Some money offerings are used for general purposes, while others are used for specific purposes, such as local and overseas missions. In both congregations, the financial committees provided additional financial information, such as up-to-date spending and income information, to members through church newsletters and meetings.

In fall, both congregations send special letters to encourage members to consider their financial contributions for the next financial year. The letters ask members to return a form in which they enter their expected financial contributions for the following year (hereafter “the annual promise form”). These forms give both congregations a general idea about their contributions to the church for the following year. This is important because members’ contributions constitute a large proportion of the church income. In both congregations, the fiscal year cycle starts in January and ends in December. In January, both congregations hold budget meetings and let members know the state of the church’s finances and plans for the new year.

My analysis indicates that the budgetary situations of both congregations differed between the early phase of the pandemic (March 2020–December 2021) and the later phase (January 2022 to December 2022). As the COVID-19 situation became rampant in March 2020, neither church foresaw the pandemic situation when they planned their 2020 budget. The rapid changes due to the pandemic have led both churches and their members to wonder how they could survive financially. For example, one finance committee member in Church A said that in fall of 2021 the committee initially worried that the members’ offering amounts might decline significantly due to the pandemic.

Indeed, the pandemic has brought considerable changes to church operations. Both congregations rent space in their buildings, and rental fees usually generate income. Additionally, both congregations have affiliated childcare centers, garnering income to congregations. However, the pandemic has affected these incomes because their activities have been restricted.

The pandemic has brought about changes in some members’ offering practices. Although both congregations had already introduced non-in-person offering methods, such as online giving, some members preferred in-person offerings. Due to the pandemic church access was restricted, and it caused difficulties for members to contribute in their preferred way.

Furthermore, congregations faced unexpected expenses to accommodate the pandemic. For example, Church B offered only an in-person Sunday service before the pandemic began. Unable to conduct in-person worship, pastors quickly moved their services online. In both congregations, this required additional skills and equipment, such as video cameras, tripods, and microphones. They also needed to establish online videoconference accounts. This was

especially important for maintaining good communication among members and church communities as well.

Despite these challenges, neither congregation faced a significant shortfall at the end of fiscal year 2020 (December 2020). For example, Church A not only made ends meet but also received more contributions than expected. Church A received fewer annual promise letters submitted in fall 2019, and fewer offerings were promised by these letters. However, the congregations received more money from those who returned the annual promise letters. The church also received more money than usual from those who did not return the promised letters in fall 2019.

Furthermore, both congregations undertook additional projects to assist the local communities financially. For example, Church B ordinarily provides fellow members with funds to assist their lives. In response to the pandemic, Church B received money to assist with this program in 2020. As the money collected exceeded the members' requests, the congregation decided to offer one-time financial assistance to those in need beyond their church members.

However, as the pandemic continued, the financial contribution to congregations slowed. Although neither congregation encountered a significant decrease in members' financial contributions, they did not receive the expected amount of money. For example, toward the end of 2022, which was also the end of the fiscal year, both congregations announced that they had not received the expected proportion of the offering to meet their budgets. Starting in November, congregational newsletters and bulletins repeatedly announced how much they received so far and how much more money (by amount and percentage) was required to match the expected yearly offering goals. The tone of these requests was gentle, and the pastors and other church leaders mentioned that their congregations tended to receive more financial offerings in December. Although both congregations were able to collect enough money to cover their expenses, these calls for offerings were not seen in the two fiscal years prior to 2022.

Financial reports also suggested slightly smaller contributions from members. For example, in the financial meeting in January 2023, Church A noted that it received fewer returned annual promise forms and fewer promised contributions. These declines are likely not big enough to cause immediate financial strain to the congregations because church incomes for the rentals are recovering as the pandemic situation improves. This situation is similar in Church B. In contrast to quick responses to the pandemic, these situations suggest somewhat slower financial support from members.

When this trend continues, it may become a concern, especially because additional long-term budgetary adjustments may be necessary to fully adapt to the post-pandemic social environment. For example, although both congregations gained new members during the pandemic, they also lost long-term members. Because these members tend to be constant financial contributors to congregations, their departures may have long-lasting impacts. The needs and expectations of new and existing church members may have been affected or transformed by the pandemic. Online connections have created new dimensions; however, maintaining both in-person and online activities can be challenging. Church B continued to video-stream its worship services and other online activities. As they did not engage in these activities before, they needed to add audio-visual equipment for long-term use. Both congregations had to reconfigure ways to strengthen their church communities after the

pandemic. New outreach activities may require additional financial assistance. With these changes, both congregations may face financial challenges. However, recent trends in overall financial contributions suggest that members' contributions may not adapt quickly to new situations as they did during the early phase of the pandemic.

Members Giving Practices

Interviews were conducted to explore the members' views about their offerings. These interviews were conducted between February and April 2022. The interviewees volunteered and were sometimes referred to by other members. This method was selected partly because of its practicality. Due to the pandemic, there were limited opportunities to call the interviewees. Those who participated were more willing to discuss their offering practices and be active in congregations. Their views provide important clues for understanding the offering decisions of those who tend to play active roles in congregations.

Overall, 17 individuals (7 men and 10 women) participated in the interviews. Their ages ranged from the 40s to the 70s. Most of the participants had a bachelor's degree or higher. Financially, they were stable, although some admitted that they experienced financial struggles in the past. Professionally, some were retired, some worked independently, and others worked in organizations and companies. Most of them grew up in Mennonite families.

While their exact ways of deciding how much and where to give varied, the interviews suggest several characteristics of how participants made their contributions. First, members routinely provided their offerings. This does not mean that they give it every Sunday. Some give monthly and others in other cycles. According to Herzog and Price (2016), who studied charitable commitments among Americans, routine giving is atypical. Charitable contributions are often made through spontaneous responses. Bialecki (2008) also emphasized the importance of impulsive and emotional giving for congregants. Of course, these styles do not necessarily exclude routine-giving practices. However, this difference in offering styles is interesting and may be a good topic for further research.

The interviews also indicated that the members gave based on their own methods of deciding how much to give. Using these methods, members plan their offerings in advance. The idea of setting aside resources for the church and other institutions was familiar to many members because there are Bible passages that mention tithing (such as Leviticus 27:28–32, Genesis 14:18–20). In fact, all members mentioned that the idea of tithing could be a good guideline for believers. However, their actual decision making was more complicated. This is because although the word "tithe" means one-tenth, Biblical passages and interpretations do not necessarily emphasize offering to be ten percent. Indeed, in both congregations, while the practice of the first fruit offering (giving priority to setting aside earnings for the church and God) was highly encouraged, specific amounts or proportions were not emphasized. It is up to the members to decide how much and where to give based on their faith.

The interview suggested that the members allocate some percentage of their income to give. For example, Jennifer, in her 60s, said that her donations were based on her annual income. While she did not specify the percentage, she provided a proportion of her income. Similarly, Margaret, who is in her 40s, made decisions based on monthly earnings. As these examples suggest, these methods were described like a formula, which enabled members to decide their giving without deep thinking.

According to the interviews, each member gradually developed their own method of giving. Margaret gave financial offerings even when she was in school and early twenties, but her giving was not planned systematically. She said that she started to give routinely only after she started working full-time. She then gradually began to use her current method of giving, as described above. Similarly, others mentioned that they started to practice proportional current-giving after working full-time. Other events, such as marriage, illness, and job loss, were also mentioned as being considered while making offering decisions. For example, Lucy, who was in her 70s and retired, said that she had faced financial difficulties years ago and gave less at that time.

The interviews also indicated that members gave to diverse organizations in addition to their churches. For example, Donald, who is in his 60s, said that he gave five percent to the church and an additional five percent to other charitable institutions. In Donald's view, the latter contribution was a part of his religious offerings. Jennifer also divided her contribution between her congregation and other institutions. She said that in the past, the deacon of her congregation requested that she direct all her contributions to the church. However, she decided not to and included other organizations, albeit giving priority to her congregation.

Members' comments suggest that the annual promise form plays an important role in their planning. Donald, for example, said that his employment position allowed him to earn his annual salary. He and his wife planned to give the following year when they received the annual promise form in fall. With the form, each offering requires less time and decision making.

Thus, the interviews suggest that members routinely provided information based on their religious beliefs. Members had their own ways of deciding how much to give, and the offering amounts and recipients varied. These methods of deciding how much to give help members offer routinely, without constantly wondering about how much to give. Simultaneously, their comments about offering methods also provide important insight into why congregations seem to have a rather difficult time making long-term transitions after the pandemic. As members usually make offering plans in advance, it takes longer to change routine offerings.

Of course, members' offering practices allow for adjustments. For example, Luke, who was in his 70s and retired, had occasional income from his consulting jobs. He uses this income to make additional contributions to the church and other institutions. Margaret also stated that her giving increased in 2020. She said that she did so because, despite the economic hardships of many others, she had a job, and her income was not affected by the pandemic. These additional offerings are important in responding to urgent and unexpected needs. They provided sufficient support to both congregations during the early phase of the pandemic.

However, these offerings were not the same as those based on the members' ordinary methods of giving. Incorporating a regular offering requires time and consideration. For example, Donald's comments suggested that changing his practice requires discernment. As mentioned earlier, Donald is a routine donor for congregations and other charity organizations. However, he expressed his strong reservation to respond to telephone and letter solicitations by charity organizations. He said that he would like to know the institutions and activities well before making donations and that he was not going to make quick changes in his offering by one-time or occasional request.

Other interviewees also suggested that they tend to take more time and consider it before providing routine financial support. Some members said that they investigated the expenses and outcomes of their organizations. Many mentioned that they checked whether the organizations had a good reputation and were trustworthy. Some members said that they used charity rating websites (such as charity watches) to read the organizations' annual and financial reports. Others relied on personal networks and their experiences with organizations. Reliable, long-term relationships were also important for individuals. Lucy, who volunteered at an organization that assisted those who had recently finished their prison term, said that while she received requests for financial assistance from those she met, she was reluctant to do so. She explained that such giving was difficult for her because she did not know how her money would be used.

These donations differ from offering to the congregations. Interviewees mentioned that they trusted the budgetary plans of their congregations. The interviewees received financial updates from their congregations. Lucy described how she gave to the church, sometimes with the feeling of letting go. As Bialecki (2008) claims, giving the church this way is an important religious experience for some believers. Nevertheless, these interview comments suggested how slow it could be to modify their system of offerings in terms of how they decide the amount and designations of their money.

Additionally, the interview comments suggested that changes in how to offer at church sometimes indirectly affected their contribution. As mentioned earlier, congregations provide multiple offering methods such as automatic deposits from banks. However, the pandemic led some members to use different offering options. Luke is an example. He said that he preferred to check the offering plate during Sunday worship services. He believed that giving could have a more demonstrative effect. He said that he would like his grandchildren to see him give, just like he did when he was young. Since the pandemic, he and his wife started using the bank deposit option. It was more convenient and helped him not forget to give. Similar comments appeared in other interviews. The members mentioned that arranging automatic deposits for congregations helped them donate their money routinely. This is convenient, particularly because donors plan their donations in advance. However, this shift has certain drawbacks. It provides less visible occasions for members to see others' commitments. Furthermore, because adjusting the donation amount requires additional actions, such as calling banks, making changes in their offering can be slower and take longer than placing cheques on the plates.

Thus, the interview comments from church members suggest a few characteristics of the congregants' offering practices. Members tend to have their own methods of deciding how much to give. They preplanned their annual or monthly contributions. These arrangements helped them routinely provide financial contributions, although they also allowed members to respond to occasional urgent and unexpected situations. The interview comments also suggest that members usually took time to adjust where and to what extent they would give their money. They would like to give their money to places they could trust with their money. Given these tendencies, it takes time to make long-term changes to their offerings.

Conclusion

This study examined the financial contributions of two liberal Mennonite congregations and their members. Despite the challenges brought about by the pandemic, the congregations continued their church activities and provided spiritual services to their members and the

surrounding communities. Financial discussions by congregations suggested that while these churches received sufficient financial support from their members in the early pandemic stage, the congregations and members required more time to make long-term adjustments.

Interview comments by church members provide important insights into the reasons for such differences in financial support between the earlier and later stages of the pandemic. The members tend to rely on their own methods of allocating financial resources. With this system, members provided routine and steady financial contributions to churches and other organizations. Depending on their method, most members allowed room to make additional contributions. This helped them and their congregations respond to the initial phase of the pandemic. However, because of their offering methods, long-term changes in their offerings require time and effort. Most of them decided their annual and monthly contributions in advance, and reallocation of their financial resources to contribute did not occur quickly. In addition, the members' comments indicated that they preferred to contribute to what they considered trustworthy organizations and people. The members' decision processes for choosing appropriate recipients varied, but deciding where to give took time and thought. These situations made it more difficult for members to quickly change their offering practices.

Based on their religious interpretations, members and congregations consider financial offerings important. Unlike earlier studies that focused on the emotional factors of extravagant giving (Bialecki, 2008; Harding, 1992), careful and routine giving is emphasized among liberal Mennonites. Simultaneously, as in recent studies on morality, other factors, such as more diversified giving options, intricately affect financial offerings. A close examination of how offering decisions are made can provide important insights into how religious beliefs affect, and are affected by, people's practices.

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