

# Innovating Through Crisis

By GRACE POMROY-- Director of the Stewardship Leaders Program at Luther Seminary     APRIL 13, 2020

During this time of the COVID-19 crisis, the words of Epictetus ring true: “We cannot choose our external circumstances, but we can always choose how we respond to them.” Over the last few weeks, I’ve watched from the sidelines as many congregations I know and love have dramatically shifted their life from in-person to online. Some have resisted the change, while others have embraced it and found even more creative ways to connect.

Faith leaders cannot control much of what’s happening in our world right now, but we can choose to break down silos, bind together, and find new ways to be church together. As we adjust to the “new normal” of our daily life, we can also begin to find the “new normal” of church. This can be a moment of innovation, not isolation. It may even be the watershed moment many church leaders have been longing for—giving us permission to let the old ways die and inspiring us to follow the spirit’s leading into new life.

Who knows? This crisis could create lasting change that leads us through the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

Here are some opportunities for stewardship innovation during these turbulent times:

## **Create a more sustainable giving model:**

In many congregations, giving is centered around the offering plate and, particularly, cash or check gifts. This model intertwines giving to the church with participation in Sunday worship assuming that the only people interested in giving are those who are physically present, which often is not the case. As we reinvent the offering online, we have the opportunity to shift our focus to a more sustainable model: recurring, online giving. Rather than being the exception to the rule, online giving may become a congregational norm. This shift invites people to knit the mission and ministry of their congregation into their budget in an entirely new way, while also providing congregations with increased financial stability.

## **Reimagine the offering**

With the move toward online giving we have an opportunity to repurpose the offering time during worship. The Bible reminds us that the offering is about offering ourselves to God and caring for those most vulnerable among us—not keeping the church’s lights on. Instead of printing up more laminated cards, what if we used the offering time in worship to focus on more than just money? What if we invited people to share where they saw God this week—signs of hope in a time of crisis? What if we used the offering time to acknowledge our privilege (as a community and as individuals) and identify concrete ways to use it to further God’s justice, not our own?

## **Tell your congregation’s story**

There are likely people in your congregation who believe your mission and ministry is at a stand-still (or barely limping along) until this crisis ends. These same people likely also believe the pastor’s role is now limited to leading Zoom worship once a week. While the physical doors of the church may be closed for the time being, the mission and ministry are not. Share specific stories of what it looks like to be church in times of crisis. How are you living out your mission in new ways? How are you keeping cherished ministries alive during this desperate time? Be even more intentional about story-telling in whatever communication forms you have available. This allows people to see church as more than just a building and to connect their money to God’s (and your congregation’s) broader mission in the world.

## **Provide creative opportunities for leadership**

This crisis gives us the opportunity to shift our ministry models from one that’s pastor-centric to one that’s more community driven. Instead of feeling like you immediately need to be an expert on virtual meetings, online giving, social media, or crowdfunding, as projects come up invite members and friends of your congregation to

use their talents and take the lead. Someone who doesn't have time to serve on a committee long-term may have time now for a short-term project that aligns with their gifts.

### **Evaluate what we really need to “be church”**

Pay close attention to what's working in this new normal that you'd like to continue doing after this crisis, as well as the old things that are no longer missed. Resist the urge to let this be an intermission from “regular church life” and instead look at it as an intentional interim bridging between your congregation's life before and life after. You won't be the same and neither will your congregation. See how this shifts your mission and ministry—both the ways you live it out and the finances used to sustain it.

### **Talk openly about money**

Money is on people's minds right now. With the surges in unemployment, the stock market plummet, and rumors of a recession, people are feeling more anxious about their financial position. Instead of avoiding the topic, now is a great time to create a safe space to talk about these financial challenges and to consider how we might respond as people of faith. You don't need to be a money expert. The goal is not to offer people financial advice, but rather to give them space to process the emotional financial impact of the situation, support one another, connect with community resources, and equip them to think critically about how their faith impacts the ways they use their money now and into the future.

These ideas just scratch the surface of where God might be calling your congregation to innovate and grow in the area of stewardship during this trying time. I'd love to hear where you are seeing sparks of innovation. Join the conversation in the Faith+Lead Learning Lab.

### *ABOUT THE CENTER*

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*Grace Duddy Pomroy is the Director of the Stewardship Leaders Program at Luther Seminary. She's a lay, millennial stewardship leader, speaker, and financial educator based in Minneapolis. She is the co-author of the stewardship book, *Embracing Stewardship: How to Put Stewardship at the Heart of Your Congregation's Life*, as well as author of the 2013 ELCA stewardship resource, “Stewards of God's Love.” Grace blogs on her website: [www.gracepomroy.com](http://www.gracepomroy.com) where she helps people connect their money and their values to create a more fulfilling life.*