

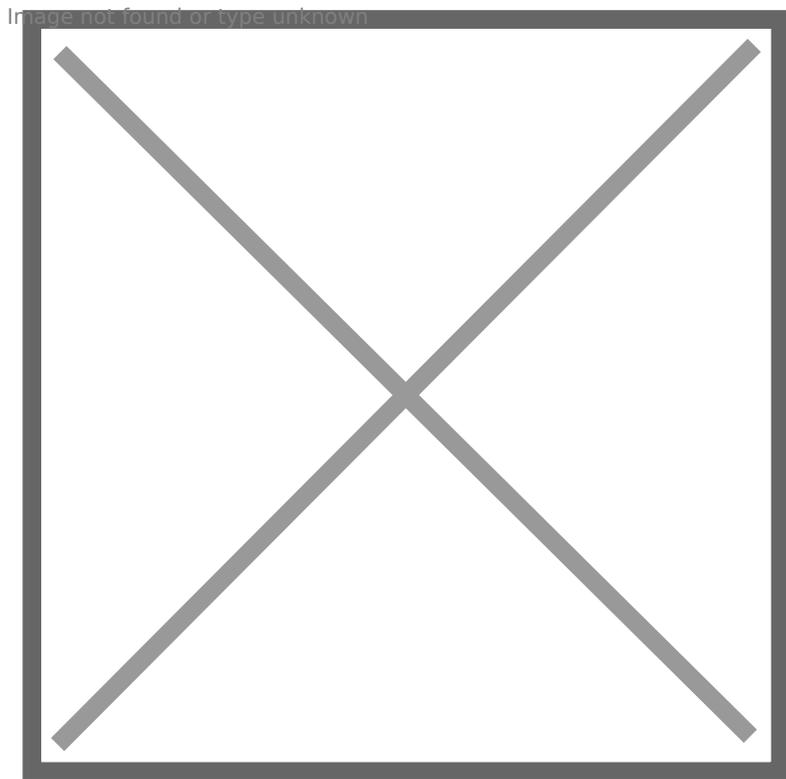
A Christian without a church

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

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The other day our nine year old came home from school with a coin collection box for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. “Do you have any coins, Mommy?” she asked, and I sent her upstairs to raid the plastic jug on our dresser. The cardboard bank is now sitting on our kitchen table.

What’s not on our table? One of these:



For you non-Presbyterians, that’s one of the infamous “fish banks” handed out to children in church during Lent. These are turned in as part of the [One Great Hour of Sharing](#), collected on Palm Sunday or Easter, and benefiting disaster assistance, hunger relief, and self-development of people.

In terms of church attendance, our family is nomadic at the moment. That, plus some crazy Sunday morning weather recently that impacted church attendance, means we didn’t receive a bank.

It feels strange not to have a bank, but not for the reason I might have thought. Yes, a fish bank is a connection to a particular Presbyterian community, and sustained action is important, and we can do more together than separately. This I believe. But it also feels strange because it's not strange at all. In fact, there are abundant opportunities to share my resources, all around me, all the time. And whenever I give, whether it's to the church or the American Cancer Society, I do so out of my Christian values. (Others share their resources out of their own values as well, which may not be Christian or even religious at all. So much the better.)

I'm glimpsing some of what Barbara Brown Taylor talks about in *Altar in the World* when she talks about people seeing God show up in places they never expected to. I always knew this. Now I'm experiencing it firsthand. To be clear: once we land in a local congregation, we will support that congregation financially. But this nomadic period is reminding me that even though I am a Christian, I don't need the church in order to give to organizations who do mission, charity, and justice.

My running group takes up collections for food pantries and Toys for Tots. My e-mail box is full of appeals from organizations I believe in and support when I can. My children's schools have clothing drives. Friends are running and walking various events and I am supporting them. I can give \$10 simply by sending a text message, not unlike throwing some extra cash in the offering plate when the Spirit moves. Opportunities to give are folded into every facet of my life.

Some church folk might balk and say that this leads to a scattershot approach, that there's no substitute for sustained collective action. Yes. But a lot of crowd-funding and peer-to-peer fundraising *is* communal—it's friends asking friends to learn about a cause and join in with the contribution of funds. Maybe the church does the sustained part better than some. But even that can be present without the church.

I was at a workshop on financial stewardship in the church a few years ago. The speaker is one of the respected names in this field and is helping all kinds of people think more creatively about giving and yes, fundraising, in a way that gets beyond outdated ideas of duty and institutional maintenance. During a break, a colleague told him she was thinking about editing her church's pledge cards to include a place to (voluntarily) share of the giving people do beyond the church. The idea is, when we collect those cards in worship we should be lifting up prayers for all of our giving, not just the giving we offer to the congregation.

My ears perked up because this is something I've thought about too. (As another friend says, "The congregation ends up becoming a money-laundering organization for other charities. Let the people give directly to them!") To my surprise, the stewardship guru rejected the idea: "You want to encourage church giving. Bringing in these other organizations just muddies the waters."

Lots of us are thinking missionally these days. The church is not a location but a people—a sent people. Wherever we are, that's where the church is. If that's true—if we really believe that—should we not encourage a lifestyle of giving to all kinds of organizations, not just the church? And what is at stake if we don't? If we feel that giving to a local congregation is paramount, is that a sign that we're only intent on our own survival? Or are there larger theological issues at play?

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