

Take this \$500 and do good in the world

When our church received a windfall, we tried an experiment.

by [Laura Sumner Truax](#) and [Amalya Campbell](#)

This article appears in the [April 12, 2017](#) issue.



Photo © WendellandCarolyn (Thinkstock)

In September 2014, more than 300 people made their way to a downtown Chicago church for what they expected to be a typical Sunday service. Hours later they emerged from church surprised, perplexed, excited, and nervous. Each had been given a \$500 check accompanied by one short sentence of instruction on what to do with the money: “Do good in the world.”

That summer, LaSalle Street Church had received notice of the sale of a property it had invested in years before, when the church had joined with three other faith communities to create a low-income housing project called Atrium Village. The notice of sale announced that each of the four churches would receive a check for over \$1.5 million.

Because it was the middle of summer, with many members and staff on vacation for weeks at a time, those of us in leadership chose to hold off announcing the news to the church until September, when the fall programs would begin.

But waiting to make the announcement didn't mean we were waiting to discuss how that money would be spent. This sum—which ultimately rose to \$1.6 million, roughly double our annual budget—came during a time of acute financial pressure. Just a month earlier we had stood in front of our congregation and informed them of a \$50,000 deficit. We had already cut our operating expenses as much as possible. We knew we might have to reduce staff hours. Additionally, we struggled with the loss of access to a neighborhood parking facility. The prudent side of us knew that this new windfall shouldn't be used to plug a hole in the budget or mask unsustainable aspirations. Still, looking at all that money did make us wonder if perhaps just a little could be set aside for our operating expenses.

During the discussion that ensued that summer, a wild counterintuitive idea emerged: Why not give some of the money away? Not just a token amount, but 10 percent, or \$160,000. What a surprising example of grace and freedom it would show the world. Churches are infamous for repeatedly asking for money. But we were in a position to give money. Why not give the first 10 percent to the people of the congregation and ask them to do whatever they thought God wanted them to do with it?

The idea led us to deeper questions: What if we showed the congregation we trusted them to do good with gifts they never sought or expected to receive—in the same way God has trusted all of us by placing this world into the hands of men and women in the first place? In fact, what if this entire exercise of tithing to the people became a metaphor for what God does for us every single day? We would be pointing to the reality that every one of us has something far more valuable than free money, and that daily we are being asked to do something good with it.

These reflections led us to that September Sunday when we distributed a LoveLetGo check for \$500 to every member and encouraged them to give the money away.

When we recognize our identities as givers, we start seeing others differently. Our framework of interpretation shifts, and we expand beyond the confines of labels and ground rules. We begin to see the roles other people play in the same story of generosity in which we participate. The reframing becomes contagious—others begin to see themselves, us, and the world differently, as LaSallers discovered in giving away their \$500.

One of the church members who received a \$500 check was Dan West. Dan plays many roles at LaSalle, but most of our congregants know him as the “voice of God.” Often when a scripture passage calls for God’s voice, we enlist Dan, whose robust and resonant timbre keeps us at rapt attention. Dan also epitomizes the image of the gentle grandfather, with his warm smile, hearty laugh, and billowy, milky-white beard.

After weeks of reflecting on how to use his check, Dan felt compelled to start giving away his money in person, \$20 at a time, with his own hands. Rather than donating to a nonprofit organization to do great work, which certainly would have honored the intent of the campaign, Dan wanted to do the work directly himself.

On his first trek into his local neighborhood, after meandering the streets for two hours with \$20 still nestled in his pocket, Dan came across a daycare center bearing this sign: *Naptime 1-2:30. Please do not ring the bell. Knock quietly.* The middle-aged woman who opened the door upon Dan’s gentle tapping had a spit-up stain on her shoulder, and her weary countenance suggested she needed a nap as much as the children. Dan explained why he had come, saying, “I thought maybe you would know of someone among the parents of these children who really needs it.”

“Nah. I don’t know nobody like that,” she responded as she began to close the door. Determined, Dan held out the \$20, insisting he didn’t want anything in return, he wasn’t selling something, he just wanted the money to do some good.

What makes us suspicious of a grandfatherly figure who comes to the door offering money? Why does our fear radar activate, setting off warnings to be vigilant in the face of danger? When someone comes to the door offering \$20, we presume he or she expects \$20 worth of something in return. But Dan was peddling grace, and he expected nothing but the connection that grace creates.

The longing for connection and relationship contrasts with our typical transactions—much of the time we actively avoid establishing connection. Thanks to the self-serve checkout line at the grocery store, the ATMs or phones we utilize as bank tellers, and the ability to purchase almost everything online, we no longer need to know the person who sits on the other end of a transaction. Within our homes and offices, we find ourselves communicating via text or e-mail with someone sitting several feet away. Given the ease with which we can avoid interactions, we might wonder if any attempt to live relationally is fighting a losing battle. But in the generous life, proximity and relationship matter.

Yet money itself seems to have a distancing effect. To understand the subconscious role of money in our lives, psychologist Kathleen Vohs and her colleagues carried out nine experiments during which they primed some participants with the idea of money. (An example of priming is using the word *soup* and then later asking someone what five items a household typically stocks in its pantry. People are more likely to include soup in the response if they have come across the word recently.)

In one of Vohs's experiments, people sat down at a computer to fill out a questionnaire. After six minutes, a screensaver appeared on some of the computers. Some participants saw images of money floating underwater, some saw fish swimming underwater, and others saw no screensaver at all. After the participants completed the questionnaires, each of them next set up two chairs: one for themselves and another for a second participant who would soon enter for a get-acquainted conversation.

Those primed with the brief, subconscious image of money placed their chairs more than one foot farther apart, almost 50 percent farther apart than unprimed participants. The take-away: exposure to the mere image of money distances us physically from others, without our conscious awareness.

All nine experiments by Vohs and her colleagues demonstrated similar results: money-primed participants acted more independently than unprimed subjects.

No wonder that child-care worker nearly closed the door on Dan. Her involuntary, subconscious mind-set prevented her from seeing Dan for who he was—one beggar showing another where to find food.

Dan's encounter reveals how the mention of money increases our likelihood to want to keep our distance from others. It also demonstrates an insidious assumption we

make in the presence of money: someone wins and someone loses—also known as a zero-sum game.

With zero-sum games, keeping score seems pretty straightforward. If we work for a company offering year-end bonuses, we know that if our colleague down the hall gets more, then we get less. High school seniors applying to college recognize that if a classmate wins a spot, they're more likely to be on the losing end of the admissions lottery. Even young children breaking open a piñata at a birthday party realize that every piece of candy snatched by another preschooler means one fewer treat for them.

Part of us likes keeping score. We like to know where we stand. We like the concrete, definitive nature of wins and losses. We like setting targets for ourselves and for our lives. At the heart of it, we like keeping score because we believe scores tell a story. And in a zero-sum world, the story features winners and losers. Haves and have-nots. Us and them.

Keeping score, after all, is an ancient sport among members of the human race. Consider King David of the Bible, fondly called “a man after God’s own heart.” When we first meet David, he tends the family’s flock of sheep in the fields. Despite his unexceptional beginnings, David catapults onto the scene as the victor over Goliath, the conqueror of invading armies, and, ultimately, the king of a united Israel. In the world of zero-sum games, he merits the title “winner.” Given his meteoric rise, David deserves to feel proud of how far he and his nation have come under his leadership.

Yet in psalm after psalm, David sings God’s praises. He thanks God repeatedly and unabashedly for the graces and gifts he has received. David’s consistent message in every breath: *Not by my hand but by yours, Lord, have these blessings come.*

Until the day David begins to wonder. In 2 Samuel 24, David tells his commander Joab to take a census of the people “so that I may know how many there are.” David has a hunch he can tell an epic story with the numbers. By keeping score, he can document the story he believes the figures will tell: *Your kingdom, David, is huge. Massive. Well done.* After the counting is complete, a mere ten verses later, David awakens to his hubris. “Stricken to the heart,” he pleads with God for forgiveness, acknowledging, *I let the story become about me.*

Keeping score separates us from each other, from God, and from our core identities as givers. It moves our chairs farther apart.

We decided to trust the congregation to do good the way that God trusts us.

In October 2014, one month after our LoveLetGo giveaway, LaSalle member Eric Larson read a post from a Facebook missionary friend in Africa pleading for a woman named Fatou. Abandoned by her husband and family because a leg injury had rendered her incapable of typical women's work, Fatou had traveled throughout her country, trying various indigenous healing methods to no avail. At the end of her 13-year exodus, she ended up in the town where Eric's contact, Linnea, served. With Linnea's help, she received medical treatment. But the doctors determined that amputation presented the sole option to save Fatou's life. Linnea asked for donations of any amount toward the cost of the surgery.

That's when Eric reached out, asking how much in total was needed for the operation. The response: \$500. The figure got Eric's attention. And Fatou received her amputation.

In November, Fatou recovered from surgery. She spent much of her time with her new friends in Linnea's community, sharing her story of grace. After 13 years of exile, Fatou lived fully and happily.

But in the last two weeks of December, Fatou's health took a devastating turn, and in early January she fell into a coma and died.

When he heard the news, Eric wrote, "I felt like I failed because the funds didn't buy a cure." Because Eric works at a rehab hospital, he knew how long the recovery from an amputation would take, he envisioned what the rehab process would be like, he estimated when Fatou would be healthy enough for a prosthetic leg, and he imagined a future for her, including worthy work and perhaps a new or reunited family.

In his moment of feeling like a failure, Eric's transactional framework prevailed. This was far from a storybook ending: Fatou had lost her life, and he had lost a nobly desired outcome for her. Also, as Eric freely admitted, he felt like he had lost face, because other LaSallers would be coming back to church sharing incredible stories of impact from their \$500 gifts. Even when living generously, we are tempted to keep score.

Yet generosity has a bigger story. What looks like failure to us is recast. After some reflection, Eric saw tremendous victory in the final chapter. Fatou might have died

alone and desperate; instead, she died in a community of people whom she loved and who loved her back. Our transactional, zero-sum rules fall short when measuring what really counts.

Eric never met Linnea or Fatou. Yet through giving, he had a fledgling connection that he wanted to nurture. Generosity brought close what was far off.

After Dan West pleaded with the woman at the child-care center, she kept the door open. She listened to Dan, leaning in as he repeated his purpose. He only wanted to give the money to someone who could use it, and surely she knew a family in need. She hesitated. She paused. Silence filled the seconds.

Finally she asked, “Could I keep it and use it myself?”

It wasn’t the response Dan expected. “Well, are you really the person here who needs it the most?” he asked.

“Yes. I believe I am,” she replied.

So Dan leaned in, too, and put the \$20 into her hands. She blessed him and called him an angel, saying she never thought she would see an angel. With tears in his eyes, Dan blessed her back and walked home with an empty pocket.

When two givers interact, the ground rules change. A transaction becomes more than a simple exchange; the value gets amplified. We may be primed to keep score, but generosity brings us close and alters our perspective. That’s what LaSallers began to see when they gave of themselves along with their checks.

A version of this article appears in the April 12 print edition under the title “Take and give.” It was excerpted from Laura Sumner Truax and Amalya Campbell’s book Love Let Go: Radical Generosity for the Real World, just published by Eerdmans. Used with permission of the publisher.