

Frequently Asked Questions

Financial Leadership and Social Distancing

During these difficult times of handling our church operations outside of our normal processes and procedures due to social distancing requirements, finding balance between flexibility and accountability is crucial. Internal controls are in place for the protection of church assets, but also for the protection of church workers and volunteers. Questions have been asked recently requesting guidance on local church financial management during these difficult times. Frequently asked questions and responses are provided below to give some guidance that can be adapted to individual scenarios.

These are difficult times. Can't we just consider this an unusual situation and let our treasurer handle it?

These are difficult times! While it is definitely more difficult to use proper internal controls with required social distancing, for the protection of church resources (including church staff and volunteers), we must not allow ourselves to do away with proper financial management. It is not a time to back away from appropriate financial policies. These policies matter just as much now (and maybe even more so) with increased financial pressures in our churches. Stick with your policies, make adjustments where you must, and, "whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters" (Col. 3:23).

How do we handle the weekly offerings made by mail or in person making provisions for health and safety as well as cash flow (example, processing mail)? How can we count the offering utilizing social distancing?

Any process carried out by the church should be considered alongside social distancing requirements and best practices for preventing the spread of germs. While worship services are out, offerings may be received in person, through the mail, or electronically. Our normal processes require that a counting team be used to ensure no one is counting money and processing donations alone. This is more difficult considering social distancing but can be done. These are a few considerations you might make to help your current processes:

1. If mail is delivered to the church, have two people go to the office and collect the mail. If mail is sitting at the church several days in a row, it might be helpful to consider a Post Office box so that the mail can be held securely until someone can pick it up.
2. When the mail is retrieved from the church or post office box, sort out the contribution checks. In most churches, envelopes with checks can be easily determined without having to open all the mail if that is not the normal flow within your office.
3. Have the two people maintain proper hygiene including using hand sanitizer and proper social distancing. For example, the two persons can use face masks and gloves, and sit at least six feet apart to count offerings.

4. Divide up the duties: one person can open the mail and record the checks in whatever fashion you normally record them. Have that person slide the checks down the table to the other person who would stamp the checks and prepare the deposit.
5. It may be possible to deposit checks into your account with your bank's cell phone app. If that is not available, prepare a deposit and someone can take the deposit to the bank drive thru.
6. If two persons cannot be together, is it possible to have someone else join the person remotely through a video call or meeting? The goal is to not have one person doing everything without input or help from someone else. This helps protect the person from being vulnerable to accusation and carrying the load alone.
7. A log of offering counts and deposit totals should be provided to the person who reviews the bank reconciliations to make sure the deposits recorded by the bank equal what was sent to the bank to be deposited.
8. Bank reconciliations and reconciliation reviews should continue to be done with review of the offering logs, bank statements, and accounting records. Many documents can be provided in electronic format for review to avoid having to meet in person.
9. Contribution statements will be an important way to verify giving and that electronic or mail-in donations have been received. Consider issuing contribution statements more often during these uncertain times to verify donations are received but also to demonstrate to donors the importance of their continued gifts.

Especially during these unusual times, it is important to find a balance between flexibility and accountability. We still must demonstrate that the church is handling their gifts carefully and accurately. This is the time to encourage people who can give electronically to do so, if they are not already. Many people already use electronic means to pay other bills and might consider giving electronically to the church if it is suggested. Making gifts to the church electronically is not different than other electronic transactions and may be the most secure way to make a gift to the church, while also supporting church workers and volunteers in social distancing efforts.

How do we record gifts given electronically?

Gifts given electronically through the Conference website, PayPal, Vanco, or other electronic payment services should be recorded the same as if a donor puts a check in the offering plate or mails in a donation by check. The amount of the check should be recorded as a contribution and the gift should go on their contribution statements. If the donor chooses to cover any electronic giving fees, the total amount of the gift can be recorded as a contribution and the processing fees as an expense to the church. Any donor restrictions placed on the electronic gift should be honored by the church (if the church chooses to accept the restricted gift) just as restrictions would have been honored for a gift given in person or by mail.

How do we address the importance of continuing to give?

Helping church members understand the importance of continuing to give is best accomplished when we demonstrate the ministry that is made available through their generosity and through teaching the theology of stewardship all year long. When members understand the stories of mission and how we are connected to God's generosity as Christians, attention to stewardship practices and discipline follows. In practical terms, providing an easy way to give helps, such as offering online and recurring electronic giving options. Church members can also mail a check to the church. One stewardship idea posed recently is to send two self-addressed stamped envelopes to all those who are not able to give online with a pastoral letter of support and reminder of the need to support the local church.

What methods are churches implementing to collect, maintain, or encourage online giving?

Some churches are new to online giving so enabling online giving at all is a venture into unfamiliar territory. In addition to the [Local Church Online Giving](#) page on the NC Conference website, some churches have expanded their offerings to allow individuals to give in other ways that make them more comfortable. Some of these new resources include text-to-give programs, instructional videos teaching how to give online, and adding new giving platforms to better match the preferences of donors. Examples of online giving platforms include Apple Pay, Google Pay, Vanco, Zelle, Pushpay, PayPal, Stripe, Venmo, etc. The General Council on Finance and Administration has negotiated reduced rates for electronic giving with Vanco (see <https://www.vancopayments.com/egiving/methodist> for more information).

Can the conference office set up an online giving account where donors can give to any church in the conference?

An online giving page is available at <https://nccumc.org/giving/church/> that will allow donations to any church in the conference to be processed online. A list of [Frequently Asked Questions](#) about this service explains the details.

What should we do if we cannot pay our essential bills or payroll for our staff?

If resources are so low you think essential bills or payroll may not be able to be paid, please be in touch with your District Superintendent. There are options for assistance through Conference COVID-19 Response Fund and NC Conference local churches can apply for funding in several different areas. Check out the [Local Church Assistance Request Form](#) for more information or to apply for assistance. Please work to take an early look at cash flow and reserve levels for the church and be in touch with your District Superintendent before a critical point is reached.

Can church staff who cannot work as normal apply for unemployment?

The federal Coronavirus response acts expanded eligibility for unemployment benefits to include employers who would not traditionally qualify. Employees who have been laid off or are experiencing reduced hours due to the pandemic can apply for unemployment benefits. If an employee becomes sick with COVID-19 or is asked to quarantine due to suspected illness, provisions of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act may require the employer to provide sick leave, the cost of which can then be credited to the employer in later tax filings.

Are there resources for coping with decreased giving during crisis?

Several options are available for churches seeking assistance in addressing giving and stewardship both during a financial crisis and financial discipleship all year long. Some of these resources include:

- NC Conference [Financial Resources webpage](#) providing information and links to informational articles on federal Coronavirus response acts as well as giving and assistance options through the NC Conference.
- NC Conference [Center for Leadership Excellence webinar series](#) covering topics such as [The Pandemic and the Offering Plate](#), [Livestreaming Jesus](#), and many more.
- Church Law & Tax webinar on [Church Financial Management in Challenging Times](#) – addressing church giving methods, communication approaches with the congregation, and the financial fundamentals necessary to reduce costs, shore up cash reserves, create operational efficiencies, and maintain sound internal controls.
- Horizons Stewardship [series of articles and webinars](#) on topics including PPP loan forgiveness, how to stay connected during times of social distancing, and best practices for leading through difficult times.
- United Methodist [Discipleship Ministries webinars and resources](#) for preaching, leading, and growing discipleship during a pandemic. Specifically, on May 7, 2020, consider attending the webinar Talking About Money During the Coronavirus Crisis to learn more about how we can help people respond to the financial difficulties that confront our churches and members in a way grounded in scripture and our Wesleyan heritage from a pastoral perspective.
- [United Methodist Foundation resources](#) for the New Consecration Sunday stewardship program, planned giving, stock gifts, and investment options for local churches