

Editorial – The Offering

Paul Beasley-Murray

Since *Ministry Today* is a journal devoted to the practice of ministry, I thought in my editorial to raise the issue of church collections or offerings. What does one do with them? How does one manage them? Is it not perhaps time that we abolished them?

Let me explain. Many moons ago, when I was young, the church collection or offering was the opportunity for a natural break - the organ played, the plate was passed round, and often quiet conversations took place. In those days few people paid by standing order - cash was the name of the game. But today things are very different. We are living in an increasingly cashless society. Like many others I rarely have any cash in my pocket - instead my wallet bulges with cards. Most of the serious giving in my church - and I guess in most churches - comes through standing orders. Those who put money in the offering bags are a minority - for the most part they are either the elderly, who feel that church is not church unless they put money in the offering, or the less committed who wish to give God a 'tip'. The result is that when the gifts are brought forward, the prayer of dedication tends to have little relevance for the majority, unless one specifically mentions the money given through banker's orders!

Some churches have adopted a 'Pay-As-You-Enter' scheme. A receptacle is placed at the door so that people can give as they come in. I am uncertain as to how effective this scheme is. My church treasurer assures me that by passing the plate or bag round people are more likely to give than leaving it at the door. And any rate, there is still the problem of the prayer of dedication.

We have tried to be a little more creative in the way in which we take up 'the offering'. In the first place the offering is no longer part of a natural break, instead it is taken up in the singing of a song of praise - in this way we seek to underline that the offering is our response to the grace of God. We also ensure that in the offertory prayer we present not simply the gifts, but the givers - and dedicate to God the week that lies ahead. But if the truth be told I still find the offering an unnecessary embarrassment.

I would love to abolish the offering. It would certainly make it much easier for my church treasurer and her team if they didn't

have to count money immediately after the service. On the other hand, I know that my church treasurer still appreciates the offering, for it still yields a tidy sum. So what do we do? Ideas please on a post-card!

PS: From a York Minster order of service: "I heard the voice of Jesus say: The collection is taken during this hymn"!

THINGS ARE NOT AS BAD AS YOU THINK: MINISTRY IN A SECULAR AGE

Martyn Percy

One of the great paradoxes of modernity is that churches believe in the steady decrease of public faith almost more than any other group. During the last half of the twentieth century, it has been popular to believe in a new credo: secularization. Promoted by a few busy sociologists in league with disenchanted voices in the media, the faith is simple enough: the more advanced of modern society becomes, the less it looks to the spiritual and the religious. Ergo, church attendance declines, and the once golden age of Christendom, at least in the West, is coming to its end. The thesis appears to be supported by statistics; less people go to church than, say a hundred years ago, so it must be correct. But is it?

As with most things, the truth is not nearly so simple. Granted, less people belong, formally, to a Christian denomination when compared to the inter-war or Victorian periods. But almost all forms of association have declined steeply since those days. There are fewer Scouts and Guides; Trade Union membership has waned; and there are now less members of the Conservative Party than there are Methodists. Recreationally, there are fewer people in our cinemas and football grounds than seventy years ago – yet no one say these activities are in decline. Indeed, it is a sobering thought that in so-called secular Britain, there are still more people turning to God each weekend at a church than watching a game of football. In fact, last year 35 million people visited an English cathedral.

Another problem with secularization is that, after sociologists and the media, the body that believes in the thesis most passionately