

Electronic Giving to the Local Church

By David S. Bell

Electronic fund transfer (EFT) is one of the fastest growing services provided by American financial institutions. Industry leaders suggest that this growth trend will continue for the foreseeable future. Recently, church members are following this same trend by choosing to have their contributions automatically withdrawn from their personal checking account or savings account. Indeed, most mainline denominational finance offices have established relationships with companies specializing in EFT services. These relationships enable local churches to implement electronic giving programs with relative ease. The EFT process is remarkably simple for the customer to initiate. Churches with only a few participants can enlist in an EFT program. Moreover, the typical cost to a church is limited to a reasonable fee for enrollment authorizations and transactions.

While some churches have decided to accept credit card contributions, this method may support the dangerous practice of credit card overspending. Many Americans face seemingly insurmountable consumer debt as a result of credit card overspending. Encouraging parishioners to support the church through credit card contributions could add compounding burdens for these already overextended individuals and families. Churches are best to avoid credit card contributions as a means of financially supporting the church.

One of the key benefits to an electronic giving program for both the church and the contributor is convenience. In fact, the convenience factor is the primary reason cited by individuals who have elected to pay recurring bills by EFT. The same rationale is true for parishioners electing to support their church by an EFT contribution. "You are giving members something they want. You are providing a convenient method for members to give," stated Lynette von Schilling, a church account manager with an EFT company.

However, convenience is just one among many benefits. "Some processors have claimed that churches can increase their [contributions] by 10%-30%, while steadying cash flow and freeing up dozens if not hundreds of volunteer hours," according to Matt Whitaker, president of a third party administrator. Statistics have shown that persons, who contribute regularly to the church, give more to the church than persons who give sporadically. An electronic giving program will cultivate more regular givers and, thus, increase the church's income.

Not all church leaders are supportive of electronic giving programs for the church. Some leaders believe that electronic giving programs disregard the offering as an act of worship. Critics of electronic giving claim that an electronic giving program equates church giving to paying personal bills. Some of the most outspoken critics of electronic giving suggest that it may even be a compromise of the tithing principles, may enhance the cultural view that money belongs to individuals, and may further distance the biblical imperative of generous giving.

While church members and leaders alike have raised some level of concern about electronic giving, most mainline denominational leaders consider the benefits of electronic giving to far surpass the potential concerns. In response to the concern that electronic giving inhibits parishioners from participating in the offering, churches have developed special offering cards for electronic giving participants. These cards, similar in size to an offering envelope, state that the church member has given through an EFT. Parishioners are able to be active worship participants in the offering by placing this card in the offering plate.

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A growing number of churches are finding electronic giving programs to be one more means of providing parishioners with an opportunity to be Christian stewards and to be generous givers in their local church. As one church member stated, “Thanks to the EFT program at my church, I am able to consistently support the mission and ministry of our church. Before the EFT program, I would contribute just a few dollars whenever I attended worship. Sadly, I spent more money buying coffee in one day than I gave to the church each week! Now, I feel like a full participant in the ministry of the church. The EFT program has helped me develop my financial discipleship. It’s amazing! I am far more involved and interested in the church since I have made a financial investment in the ministry!”

While the church can provide numerous financial tools to accommodate the busy lives and to encourage the consistent giving of its members, none of these services will replace the need to call people to be Christian stewards. We are called to recognize that God is the owner of all that we possess. Our response to God through Jesus Christ, regardless of our method of giving, should be the same – a spiritual discipline of joyful, generous giving.

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Frequently Asked Questions about Electronic Giving

Why would people want to give to the church electronically?

Many people who give regularly find that giving by electronic transfer is a convenient option. Convenience is especially important during times when one cannot attend worship. Electronic giving also helps the church predict its income so that the mission and ministry of the church can be planned adequately.

When would this automatic contribution be withdrawn from a personal account?

Most automatic contributions are withdrawn on a bi-weekly or monthly basis. The contributor is informed of the specific numerical date of withdrawal when the EFT is established. Most third party administrators withdraw funds around the 5th or 20th of each month, although the numerical date is selected by the local church.

What does a parishioner need to do in order to set up an EFT with a church that has an established electronic giving program?

In most instances, a parishioner simply completes an enrollment form, attaches a voided check, and submits them to the church office. After approximately three weeks, contributions will start being deducted on a regular basis.

Is there a minimal amount that a parishioner needs to give in order to establish an EFT transaction?

Most churches do not have a minimum contribution requirement.

Is an EFT transaction risky?

No. Actually, an EFT transaction is considered to be safer than writing a check or giving cash. An EFT is governed by strict regulations and guidelines. Nearly 10 billion EFT transactions are processed annually in the United States and Canada.

How can one keep a record of one's contributions?

Each bank statement will include an itemized list of automatic withdrawals from the account. The EFT contribution to the church will be included in this list. Most churches will continue to send members a year-end giving statement.

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What if the church member changes banks, closes/opens accounts, or desires to make a change in the contribution amount?

A church member can change accounts or the amount contributed by contacting the church office or volunteer in charge of EFT transactions. The change will be effective with the next withdrawal. In the event that notification is not received with enough advance notice, an adjustment will be made within a few business days.

Will church members face any bank charges for EFT transactions?

No. In fact, the church member will actually save money since no check is written to the church.

Can parishioners give to the church by making a credit card contribution?

Although some churches do accept credit cards transactions as contributions, serious concerns may arise from a church accepting credit cards. These concerns include the high service fee assessed to the church in processing credit card contributions and the potential impact that credit card acceptance may have on the escalating consumer debt. Extreme caution should be exercised for both the church and the parishioner before completing credit card transactions.