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- Browse by Feature Type

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- Staff Directory
- Program Offerings
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- Multimedia »
- Profiles »
- Q&A »
- Reflections »
- Sermons »

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Reflection: [Money](#)



An unexpected offering

A conversation with a stranger provides a reminder that financial decisions, especially during challenging times, must reflect our convictions.

by [David L. Odom](#)

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My seatmate on the flight from Louisville to Charlotte had rough hands, cowboy boots and a massive belt buckle. He told me he lived off the misfortune of failed businesses. His work was buying the machines from factories that were closing and turning them into scrap metal. For entertainment, he owned a stock car and traveled the country going to races. He asked me about my work.

When I told my companion that I am a pastor, he began to confess. One of his employees had stolen so much money he was nearly forced into bankruptcy. A wonderful second marriage had followed a failed first and produced the pride of his life, a 7-year-old daughter. He told me about congregations and ministers who had nurtured him for a time and then turned against him.

When we pulled up to the gate, he shook my hand, thanked me for the conversation and asked for prayer. As he got out of his seat, he stuffed his hand into the outside pocket of my computer bag and said, "You know what to do with this."

I waited until I was inside the airport to find his gift: Two \$100 bills. My first thought was, "Great!" A nice dinner. Christmas money. A gift to me that I could spend any way I wanted. It didn't take long to realize that this stranger and I had worshipped together, that this was a gift to God. Not a gift to me. An offering for which I bore responsibility.

Christian leaders collect such offerings all the time. The institutions we oversee, where we receive these gifts, have built into their core identity a love-hate relationship with money. We feel a conflict between needing funds to sustain our organizations and discerning how to sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel. This tension is heightened in our current time of financial uncertainty, when we are tempted to put our heads down and focus on survival.

But it is especially in such times that we are called to a more hopeful posture – to seize the opportunity

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to do God's work when such work is so desperately needed. To have faith in God's grace and abundance and make decisions that reflect our fundamental convictions.

Such was my call, too.

I sent \$100 to my denomination's missions agency, where I know many of the people and believe in their work.

The other \$100 was a problem. To honor my companion's personal story and sacrifice, I felt like some of the money needed to be shared with a specific person. Since I work at a divinity school, I determined that person ought to be a student.

In the weeks that followed, I listened carefully to the stories of students. I looked for someone who was discouraged or burdened. I decided the money might be both symbol and substance of God's help.

I found the student months later. She extends grace and radiates hope – the kind of minister who would have made a significant difference in the life of my traveling companion. She had financial need. I approached her the day before she was scheduled to lead our community in worship – an opportunity that made her nervous. The money, I thought, would be practical and encouraging. So, I found her in the library, told her the story and handed her the money. Her tears confirmed what I knew to be true: The money was where it needed to be.

It is the season when my colleagues and I will turn our attention to financial decision-making on a much larger scale. We are preparing our annual budgets, and I am reminded of a recent presentation by an administrator at the university where I work. He started with the "good news" – that we are better positioned than many of our peers to weather the current economic crisis. When asked for his guidance about budget planning, he told us, "These are the times when an institution must stand by its core convictions."

Many times, I have entered budget season with the feeling of just needing to get the paper work done. In this troubled season, it would be tempting to simply focus on cutting expenses. But true stewardship involves thoughtful management of expenses and revenue, and a longer view. The most significant assets are God's blessings. How different might our work be if we approached financial decisions with our eyes fixed on God's purposes?