

# On the first day: weekly envelopes

Paul's very practical advice about giving in 1 Corinthians 16:2 finds expression in the familiar and well established practice of weekly planned giving envelopes. This paper explores the value and the limitations of weekly envelopes and offers some practical advice on their use.



The paper *Fruitful Soil* explores the value of planned giving and should be read as background to this paper. This and *Planned Giving by Weekly Envelopes* mentioned below can be found under *Key Principles* at the *Planned Giving* tab.

Paul advised the church in Corinth: 'On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come' (1 Cor. 16:2). Weekly giving envelopes have long provided a concrete way of putting this good advice into practice.

### Simplicity and confidentiality

Weekly envelopes offer the advantages of being tangible and easy to use. On the mantelpiece or in a drawer, week by week they are a reminder of our commitment to give. There is something to hold in the hand and put in the plate. Envelopes are also very easy to use and have the attraction of being a very familiar way of giving. When understood and properly managed (on which, see below), envelopes make our giving far less dependent on weekly attendance at church. They offer real advantages over loose plate giving. When people miss a Sunday they can simply put two envelopes on the offering plate. It is also worth noting that many people still manage their money by using cash, either by preference or by necessity.

### Giving and worship

Going a little deeper, planned giving envelopes make a formative and tangible connection between our giving and our worship. The physical act of putting the envelope on the offering plate and the accompanying prayer of thanksgiving and dedication can help to shape how we think and feel about giving. There is something about the connection between giving and worship that underwrites the lasting appeal of weekly envelopes as a way of giving in a planned manner. Envelopes offer an early and formative connection between worship and giving.

### One small step

The connection of giving and worship is part of a bigger picture. The move to planned giving is perhaps the most significant turning point on a journey to generous giving and, indeed, financial discipleship. It is a decision, conscious or unconscious, to be intentional about giving as a personal commitment. There is a strengthened identification with the church and perhaps recognition of its financial needs. The physicality of weekly giving envelopes helps to bind that decision.

We need to be wary of claiming way too much at this point. Many long-standing envelope givers give at a very low level and some are impervious to change. Moreover, in *Redefining Commitment*, Adrian Sargeant and Elaine Jay argue that, today, fundraisers cannot assume that how people give, say a decision to give by standing order, is a sign of increased



commitment. They note how nearly a third of those recruited by face-to-face fundraisers in the street *planned* to give for a year or less.

It is true that we cannot automatically assume that a willingness to give in a planned manner is in itself a sign of commitment. However, we should also note that the dynamic in the church is different because we know and see and talk to our givers in a way that most charities cannot do.

But what Sargeant and Jay also noted was that the first twelve months were the most fertile period for building a stronger, more lasting, relationship with a new donor. The request for envelopes and those early months offer an opportunity for growing givers. That is why it is so important that, when a church member asks for weekly giving envelopes, there should be a *personal visit* to meet that request and to provide supporting information. It is also why annually thanking givers for their gifts is regarded as a key stewardship task in the local church. And what is true for weekly envelopes is no less true for other forms of planned giving, standing orders, direct debits or charitable giving accounts.

### Managing the weekly envelopes

At worst the move from loose plate to weekly envelopes simply baptises previous practice. For this step to be effective, attend to the practicalities.

- Always make a personal visit to take the weekly envelopes to those who ask for them. Seize the opportunity to build relationships and talk about the purpose of giving, not just a new way to give.
- Envelopes are effective only if people know how to use them properly. Don't assume new people know to bring two envelopes to church if they miss a Sunday. The *Planned Giving by Weekly Envelope* brochure offers the script for a conversation and to leave with people. This simple brochure explains how weekly envelopes work and the advantages of giving in this way.
- In a conversation, avoid giving the impression that simply taking an envelope is in itself a response and not also the challenge to increase giving.

### Health warning

Weekly giving envelopes are exactly what some people need for their planned giving but, for all their advantages, they have some limitations and should not be the only method of planned giving a church offers to its members.

- Although weekly giving envelopes are big enough for cheques and notes, they risk implying a small-

change mentality that determines the level of the gift. The medium can become the message and we see this when street collection tins are offered to us. It is worth taking a few moments to audit the verbal and subliminal messages that your practice with envelopes and any literature about planned giving may contain.

- Developing this point, where many people (but by no means all) manage their finances by standing order and direct debit, weekly giving envelopes can subliminally suggest that this particular financial commitment is peripheral, insubstantial.
- Though helpfully tangible as a reminder to give for many, the act of filling an envelope each week is vulnerable to last-minute, even casual, attention and to what cash is available to hand.



- Finally, patterns of church attendance are changing rapidly and envelopes may simply not be the best way to manage the scale of those changes. Electronic giving will be more appropriate and more attractive for many people.

For these reasons, as noted above, the *Planned Giving by Weekly Envelope* information brochure includes a brief reference to standing order giving as an option to those who might prefer it.