

THE
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POINT

**WHO WILL
TEACH THE NEXT
GENERATION TO
GIVE?**

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Who Will Teach the Next Generation to Give?

By Chris Looney

For generations, religious congregations served as the most reliable training ground for American generosity. Weekly services were not just spiritual rituals. They were civic classrooms where people learned the value of giving back, supported causes larger than themselves, and practiced the habit of regular contribution. From the offering plate passed on Sundays to the tzedakah box in synagogues and zakat traditions in mosques, faith communities gave Americans their first and most consistent exposure to philanthropy.

That training ground is shrinking. America now has 20 million fewer regular churchgoers than a generation ago, and the trend is accelerating. This decline has not only weakened congregational life, it has reduced the number of consistent donors who were once habituated to giving weekly or monthly. The breakdown is real: fewer donors, less frequent gifts, and a rising generation with less practice in the act of giving.

Giving as a Muscle

Philanthropy is like a muscle. It strengthens with repetition, with the small and consistent acts that become second nature over time. Religious congregations used to provide the perfect gym. Weekly offerings were predictable, expected, and tied to community identity. The discipline mattered as much as the dollars. When 20 million fewer people are showing up, it means 20 million fewer people are training those muscles.

Some argue that giving is "in our DNA" as Americans. But even DNA, if not activated, can degrade. Without training, the instinct to give weakens. Without practice, the philanthropic muscle atrophies. And without teachers, we risk a generation of Americans who see generosity as optional rather than essential.



Who Will Step In?

If churches, synagogues, and mosques no longer play the same role they once did, the question becomes urgent: who will teach the next generation to give? Colleges and universities are obvious candidates. They already form the civic imagination of young people, shape their values, and expose them to global challenges. Why not philanthropy as well? Imagine if giving was part of the student experience, as natural as service-learning, athletics, or internships.

Nonprofits themselves are also stepping into this space. Many organizations now encourage small recurring gifts of \$11 to \$19 per month. These aren't just revenue strategies. They are training programs in generosity. Just as weekly tithing once cultivated a donor's habits, monthly recurring donations help build the philanthropic reflex. Nonprofits are becoming the new congregations, teaching people how to give by asking them to do it regularly, at a level that feels achievable.

The Call to Action

The decline of religious affiliation is not simply a cultural story. It is a philanthropic one, with profound consequences for the nonprofit sector and for civil society as a whole. Unless new institutions step forward to train generosity, we risk not only fewer donors, but a culture that is less equipped to sustain the common good.

The question is pressing: Who will be the next trainer? Colleges, nonprofits, and civic groups all have a role to play. The time has come to recognize that philanthropy is not self-sustaining. It requires practice, discipline, and educators willing to shape the next generation of givers.

Giving may be in our national DNA, but DNA is not destiny. It requires stewardship. It requires cultivation. It requires new institutions willing to take up the mantle once carried by America's churches and synagogues. The muscle of giving must be



exercised, or it will wither. And our future depends on whether we build a society strong enough to lift together.

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