

How are you being like Jesus in the world?' Church hands out checks to congregation

[Madeline Mitchell](#), Cincinnati Enquirer Published 9:20 p.m. ET Oct. 20, 2019 | Updated 12:08 p.m. ET Oct. 21, 2019



Bill and Kathy Shuman, of Oakley, pose in the sanctuary at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Kenwood, Ohio, on Tuesday, Oct. 8, 2019. The Shuman family received a \$500 which they donated to support the music program at Taft Elementary School. (Photo: Sam Greene/The Enquirer)

Bill and Kathy Shuman, of Oakley, pose in the sanctuary at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Kenwood, Ohio, on Tuesday, Oct. 8, 2019. The Shuman family received a \$500 which they donated to support the music program at Taft Elementary School. (Photo: Sam Greene/The Enquirer)

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church member Katie Zink sat up in the balcony with most of the tween-age kids, as usual, the day the “big announcement” was revealed.

Church staff had kept their secret since June. Even Zink's husband, who is on the staff, would not tell her what the excitement was about.

Senior Pastor Heidi Johns began by asking one member from each family to come up and grab an envelope.

"As soon as (Johns) said that, and I think within 10 seconds, there were the kids from each family running forward, ready to get their envelope," Zink said. "And I think it's cool because kids sometimes show what we're feeling inside, because they don't have the inhibition."



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church gave out "blank" checks worth \$100, \$250 and \$500 to families in their congregation to do good. (Photo: Enquirer/Madeline Mitchell)

Some members of the Kenwood church had shown up in the yellow T-shirts that Good Shepherd hands out once a year for its God's Work, Our Hands initiative, which usually takes place in the fall. They thought maybe the announcement would have to do with a service project.

They weren't totally wrong – but the work was not going to be done that day.

Inside the envelope

Once each family was settled with their unopened envelope, Johns began to explain what was inside: a check, for either \$100, \$250 or \$500, with the "pay to the order of" line left blank.

This year the initiative would be called God's Grace, YOUR Hands, Johns told them. Each family was to decide how to "use this money to bless the world."

The checks were designated by luck in a blind draw, church authorities said. A total of \$60,000 was distributed.



Church council vice president Rob Zink and council president Tracey Long pose in the sanctuary at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Kenwood, Ohio, on Tuesday, Oct. 8, 2019. (Photo: Sam Greene/The Enquirer)

"My daughter's face just lit up," Zink said. "She couldn't believe that we were getting this gift, and as a family, we're going to get to decide what to do with it."

The only requirement? A deadline of Oct. 20.

"It was very exciting," church member David Dietrichson agreed. "The facial expressions were just wheels turning all over the place. And they're still turning."

A 'happy burden'

Former church member Ruth Grassman died a few months short of her 100th birthday.

Associate pastor Patricia Badkey says she remembers Grassman regularly attending church until she was moved to a nursing facility.

"The church was important to her," Badkey said.

That being said, no one was prepared for the gift she would leave to the church after her passing. And her gift came with no strings attached.

It's because of Grassman that 250 families are able to contribute to the God's Grace, YOUR Hands program.



Pastor Alex Hoops poses with his wife Emily Hoops, daughter Amelia and son Harvey in the sanctuary at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Kenwood, Ohio, on Tuesday, Oct. 8, 2019. (Photo: Sam Greene/The Enquirer)

"It felt so unmerited," associate pastor Alex Hoops said. "What does it mean to receive something like this? Out of a generous heart knowing that the mission here is pure? It's to bless our neighbors, it's to help heal the world."

Church council president Tracey Long says that she hopes the gift will enable a movement that reaches an even bigger platform.

"I think we're planting seeds of faith and service that will go far beyond this check," she said.

Church members are encouraged to add their own money to multiply the gift, to talk as a family and to pray to find out where the money should go.

"What's the thing that lights a fire in you? That moves you to compassion and grace?" Hoops asks the congregation. "Because this gift isn't about you earning it. It's about recognizing that that's how God works. God loves people, and so do we."

Where is the \$60,000 going?

Hoops' 4-year-old son wants to help dogs.

When the suggestion arose, his daughter chimed in.

"Oh, yeah," she said. "Cats, too."

Hoops said he wouldn't have thought about using the money to help animals. But his kids have identified needs that adults in his family don't always think about, he said.

That new perspective is what the whole project is about. Hoops said he's learning where the "heart of the church is" by seeing where members are putting their money.

"When you talk about the corporate church, a lot of times it's a lot of adults making decisions," says director of faith formation Jen Jarman. "And so this puts that decision in the hands of families and kids. And when you can demonstrate to kids 'we trust you, we believe in you, we love you, and this is what faith looks like,' that is where future fruit of the church is."

Jarman has three kids aged 3, 6 and 9.

“Never once have our kids said, ‘we don’t want to do this,’” she said.

Her children discuss the gift with their church friends. They want to find out what everyone is doing with the money.

And the significance of this money is something that they can see and understand, Jarman said. It’s tangible.

“When pastor Heidi stands up front and says, ‘Hey guys, we raised \$19,000 for Habitat,’ that goes over (their heads,)” Jarman said. “I think this is just such a life giving opportunity for families to really practice faith. I can only speak for our family, but we are talking about it at the dinner table and when we do our evening prayers.”

Some people are using the money to help Cincinnati’s ALS community. Some funds are helping people affected by Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas. One family created “smile bags” filled with books and toys that their children have passed out to kids in need.



Gift bags for children made from blank check from church. (Photo: Provided/Good Shepherd Lutheran Church)

However the funds are used, Johns says the message is clear. These acts of kindness are a symbol of stewarding God’s gift of grace.

“We really are stewarding our whole lives and all of our money all of the time. But we don’t always think that way,” she said. “But to hand someone some money and to say ‘Okay, this truly is a gift. Now what are you going to do with it?’ and does that then translate over to ‘Oh yeah, all of my life is a gift from God. Every breath I take. Every dollar in my checking account is because God has gifted me to do a work.’”

‘Jesus was broke’

Director of campus ministries Alice Connor took some of the leftover checks to a church group she runs at the University of Cincinnati.



The complete church council poses in the sanctuary at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Kenwood, Ohio, on Tuesday, Oct. 8, 2019. (Photo: Sam Greene/The Enquirer)

She says her students' eyes grew big when they heard the news.

"I mean, they're college students," Connor laughed. "One of them was like, 'so I have a \$500 check? What do I do with this?'"

Most college kids don't have the money to give, Connor explained. Some of the students played hot potato with the checks, not wanting that responsibility.

But it really should be considered a "happy burden," as Johns and Hoops say.

The same attitude could be seen in some of the younger, newer families in the congregation. Many families just don't have the chance to be generous in this way, Hoops said.

But that shouldn't matter. Dollar amounts aren't the lesson here.

"The ideal here is not about how much you give," Hoops said. "The ideal is how are you being like Jesus in the world? Which— that guy was broke. Jesus was broke."

Future plans

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church doesn't think they will be able to spring a surprise quite like this again for a while.

But they might be able to do a smaller version, similar to how Preston Meadow Lutheran Church in Plano, Texas, runs their blank-check campaign by giving funds to confirmation students. Good Shepherd got their inspiration for God's Grace, YOUR Hands from the Plano church in the first place.

Long, the church council's president, believes that the ripples from this year's program will reach far out into the future of Cincinnati's community.

“How does that help to make for a better life and give them faith again and belief in that understanding that God loves them?” Long says of the benefactors. “We talked about: what’s success? We’ll know from the stories.”

Those stories are steadily coming in and being posted on Good Shepherd Lutheran Church’s website. Members who gave and organizations who have received funds through God's Grace, YOUR Hands are encouraged to post.

Above all, the church wanted to remind its congregation about grace.

“Grace isn’t about merit,” Hoops said. “Grace isn’t about earning it. Grace is unmerited favor towards your neighbor.”