Women of the ELCA

All about Thankofferings

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

The Widow's Mite, Mark 12:41-44

Women's offerings: a brief history

The idea of collecting donations in small offering boxes goes back to the very early 1800s, when women formed "mite" or "cent" societies to raise money. Mite boxes were given out as fundraising tools to collect pennies for the support of church projects and foreign missionaries.

These women-led cent societies, platforms for social activism as well as evangelism in the 19th century, published their own literature, Bible studies and other materials advocating around issues such as child labor, literacy and prison reform. In time, larger missionary and ladies aid societies developed out of this work because there was such an overwhelming demand not only for foreign missionary support but for support at home. These women's groups funded needs in their local churches as well as local community projects. Their capacity for fundraising was acknowledged and generally welcomed by their congregations.

The earliest American Lutheran women's missionary society was founded in New York in 1837 to financially support the education and ordination of foreign missionaries from their synod. In 1879, the first national American Lutheran women's missionary society, the General Synod's Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society, was founded. The original reason behind the creation? Funds were needed to

financially support two young women who wanted to be foreign missionaries but were denied funding by the Board of Missions. A national women's structure was born!

For this new organization, supporting missionary work both abroad as well as in the United States was seen as essential, and so missionaries were assigned to both foreign and domestic locations. For example, because of the support of the General Synod's Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society, a young pastor named Rev. C.W. Heisler was sent as a missionary to Los Angeles, California. He helped establish First Lutheran in 1887, which is now the oldest ELCA congregation in Los Angeles.

Less than a decade after the national missionary society was established, the wide-reaching impact of women's giving to the mission and ministries of the Lutheran church was evident.

Thankofferings: our history

Beginning in the late 19th century, Lutheran women were given small Thankoffering boxes to place in a special location in their homes as a visible reminder of blessings received. Women would add coins to those boxes almost daily as particular blessings were noted. From their use came the idea of an annual church service to celebrate their collection, and so the women of the congregation would come together for a Thankoffering service.

The concept of Thankoffering celebrations dates back more than 100 years and beyond Lutherans. The Episcopal Church Women held their first recorded Thankoffering service in 1889, and the World Thank Offering service of the United Methodist Women has been a tradition for over 100 years. In the Lutheran tradition, the General Synod's Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society created their first Thankoffering service in 1889 to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the organization. At that first Thankoffering, $6,100 was collected. Today, Women of the ELCA collects more than $1 million in Thankofferings annually for the ministries and mission of our women's organization.

Thankofferings: continuing the tradition

Thankofferings show gratitude for God's blessings and give us an important and tangible way to express that gratitude. It is a tradition grounded in our celebration of community, of meeting together to joyfully give thanks for what God has given us. Thankofferings have always been, and still are, our opportunity to say thank you to God in both significant and ordinary moments.

> The daily acknowledgement of God's blessings through mite boxes has been a spiritual benefit to more than one soul, and the committee recommended their use not only once in ten years, but every day of the year.
>
> *—American Lutheran General Synod Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society Thankoffering committee report: 1889*

Giving Thankofferings is grounded in scripture and in our constitution. "All income, whether received by the unit, cluster or conference, synodical or churchwide organizations, shall be viewed as being given to the total program of Women of the ELCA. … Thankofferings shall be gifts from individuals

How to Use This Resource

This is a tool for individuals and groups to use when talking about Thankofferings and stewardship. The purpose of this resource is to help participants understand the history and significance of Women of the ELCA's Thankoffering tradition. If you would like more information, including the most current Thankoffering service, please visit www.womenoftheelca.org. *If you would like to speak with someone directly about stewardship and giving, please contact Emily Hansen, director for stewardship and development at Women of the ELCA: 800-638-3522, ext. 2736, or Emily.Hansen@elca.org.*

in gratitude for blessings. These offerings shall be received by the unit and transmitted in full to the churchwide organization for the support of the ministries of this organization and the church" (Article X, Churchwide Women's Organization Constitution, Section 4, Item 1). The living words of our purpose statement further encourage our stewardship.

And stewardship is not just about providing assistance to others. It is also about provoking others to recognize their power to implement change through their offerings. It was this hope of change that motivated the women's cent societies 200 years ago, and it is the same today. Inspired by our spiritual foremothers, we continue to see our witness to the gospel, our capacity to serve and our community of women grow through our offerings.

Planning a Thankoffering service

Whenever Women of the ELCA Thankofferings are received, you can celebrate with a service. Collect a Thankoffering at Sunday worship or at a weekday gathering of Women of the ELCA and use the Thankoffering service provided by Women of the ELCA. Or you may choose to create one around the regular lectionary texts for a given Sunday, especially if those texts support discipleship or stewardship themes.

Invite a Women of the ELCA participant to speak at the beginning of the service to explain the significance of Thankofferings. Use the service as an opportunity for women to celebrate and continue their commitment to the ministries of the women's organization.

Women of the ELCA Thankofferings support the total outreach of the organization. It is appropriate to invite the entire congregation to participate in this service. Encourage everyone to give a gift so that we may continue the ministry efforts of women.

Questions for discussion: your history of Thankofferings

Were you ever given an offering box as a young girl?

Do you remember your mother, aunt or other relatives having an offering box at home?

When was the first time you attended a Thankoffering service?

When was the earliest Thankoffering service held in your congregation?

When was the earliest Thankoffering service held in your synod?

What can you find out about the history of your local women's organization?

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