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Giving to the church until it hurts

by Mariam Williams

At the Intersection

The worship leader makes an announcement. I hear obligatory applause. I take out my checkbook, calculate 10 percent for the line on the envelope that reads "Tithe," and glance guiltily at my new boots as I ponder what amount to write in the line that reads "Offering."

This has been the scene for me many a Sunday morning when the giving portion of the worship service rolls around. (I don't have on new boots every week -- I probably buy boots once every few years; I'm much more into dresses -- but you get the idea.)

I started thinking about this after sitting in on a conversation between a speaker we brought in for work and a group of students in a youth program. They got on the subject of the beef between Harry Belafonte and Jay Z. To summarize for those even less into celebrity "news" than I am, Belafonte blasted Jay Z for not using his money and name to influence social movements, as Belafonte had done during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and as an anti-apartheid activist. A young man in the group insisted that until Belafonte gave up all of his wealth and was poor, struggling and living paycheck to paycheck, he was in no position to criticize how another rich man spent his money.

The conversation was really about political influence and responsibility (points beautifully articulated by scholar Robin D.G. Kelley here), but the young man's position reminded me of something I've often heard in church when it comes to my money: "Give until it hurts."

At its core, "Give until it hurts" means "Put God first," but we can show our priorities in any number of ways when it comes to giving. Give even it's not convenient to do so. When you write out your budget and see the amount for tithes and offering is larger than the amount for groceries, don't worry about where your food will come from. Drive a beat-up, unreliable car for a little while longer or take the bus if you have to, but make sure the church can keep its lights on. Sew up the holes in your clothes and don't worry

about style; God is worth more than new clothes, and he doesn't care what you look like anyway. But stop before you go broke, because the church needs people who have money.

I don't say that sarcastically or to deride the body of Christ. Houses of worship -- the physical locations where believers meet -- need money to function. Lights, heating and cooling systems, and all the charitable work the church does cost money. That work depends on believers' voluntarism and their monetary giving.

Personally, I struggle with how much I should give God both out of my wallet and in my time and talents, the other two ways I was taught one can pay tithes. I believe God will always deserve more than I can give him, but still, sacrifice is hard. The worship leader reminds us that God loves a cheerful giver, and while I give with gratitude that I'm able to give because I have a job, I rarely get as excited about giving to God as I do about a purchase I've made just for me. And with my time as constrained as it is, forget extras like singing in the choir; every second church service goes "over" the time it theoretically should end feels like a sacrifice.

I'm not sure how I got to this point, but I dislike feeling this way. I think I used to be a more cheerful giver and desire to get back to that. I want to return to the time when giving until it hurt didn't feel painful.

[Mariam Williams is a writer born and raised in Louisville, Ky., where she's received numerous arts awards. When not working in the field of social justice research and taking graduate courses in women and gender and Pan-African studies, she blogs at RedboneAfropuff.com. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw.]

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