Donations to religious groups down during pandemic

Charities in the religious sector, such as churches and temples, and in the educational field, such as universities, had a tough 2020 when donations fell after Covid-19 first upended the world.

Donations to religious groups dropped by 13 per cent from $1.34 billion in the 2019 financial year to $1.17 billion a year later, while donations to educational charities decreased by 13 per cent from $4.837 billion in the 2019 financial year to $4.185.5 million a year later.

Charities in other sectors, such as social and welfare, health and community, saw a rise in donations in the 2020 financial year despite the pandemic.

Still, religious charities took the lion's share, or 37 per cent, of the $3.12 billion in donations to all charities in the 2020 financial year, according to the Commissioner of Charities’ (COC) 2021 annual report released at the end of November. A spokesman for the COC said the total donations for the 2020 financial year are compiled based on charities' annual submissions for their respective financial year, and this varies across charities. For example, some charities' 2020 financial year ended in March 2020, while others' ended in December 2020.

The Straits Times checked the annual reports and financial statements of more than 10 religious groups with significant donations and found that most of them saw a fall in donations in 2020.

For example, City Harvest Church collected about $30 million in donations in 2019, and this fell to about $26 million in 2020. Faith Community Baptist Church collected about $26 million in donations in 2019, but about $24 million a year later.

Donations collected by churches are in the form of tithe and offerings from their members. A tithe usually involves a worshipper giving 10 per cent of his income to the church, which uses the donations to help fulfil its religious missions. The Loyang Tua Pek Kong Temple's collection in 2019 was $7.6 million, but went down to $5.4 million in 2020. Devotees go to the temple to pray to Taoist, Buddhist and Hindu deities, according to the temple's website.

Meanwhile, the Sri Sivan Temple, a Hindu temple, collected about $50,000 in donations in 2019, and this fell to about $40,000 in 2020. Institute of Policy Studies Social Lab head Mathew Mathews said that given the pandemic restrictions such as caps on the size of congregations in 2020, places of worship scaled back their services and celebrations of major religious festivals, when devotees would often make donations. And during the circuit breaker from April 7 to June 1, 2020, all places of worship were closed.

Dr Mathews said: “Such collections would have gone down substantially with lower footfall in religious spaces. Still, it’s clear that people continued to give generously to religious causes despite watching religious services online or participating in rituals in a scaled-down way.”

Besides charities in the religious sector, donations to educational charities, such as universities, also saw a sizeable fall.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) raised $150 million in donations in its financial year that ended in March 2020, and this fell by 51 per cent to $74 million a year later. An NUS spokesman said the donation figures listed on the COC website reflected only non-endowed gifts it received.

Including endowed gifts, NUS received $880 million in its financial year that ended in March 2020, and this fell to $770 million a year later. For its last financial year, which ended in March 2022, the sum collected was $890 million.

An endowed gift is one where the principal sum is preserved and invested to earn returns to support the purposes of the donation. Meanwhile, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) raised $69 million in donations in its financial year that ended in March 2020, but this fell by 35 per cent to $45 million a year later.

An NTU spokesman said: “The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the world in unprecedented ways. In navigating this crisis, we observed that donors have been adopting a more conservative approach in giving.”

The spokesman added that NTU saw a decrease in donations, particularly in gifts from companies and foundations, which made up the bulk of the gifts it received in the financial year that ended in March 2020.

But there are charities in the educational and religious sectors that bucked the falling trend.

For example, New Creation Church collected about $126 million in donations, such as through tithes and offerings, in 2019. This sum rose to about $132 million in 2020 as church members gave more generously, its 2020 annual report said.

The Singapore Management University raised $25 million in donations in its financial year that ended in March 2020, and this rose to $27 million a year later.

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