

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A FA'ATOETOEMULIOLA READING OF MARK 12:41–44 WITH REFERENCE TO THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SAMOA

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Abstract

This article offers a Pasifika relational reading of Mark 12:41–44 through the Samoan concept of Fa'atoetoemuliola, in conversation with the life and practices of the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS). The widow's offering is often interpreted as a model of sacrificial faith and total devotion and is frequently used to encourage Christians to give generously to the church. However, in contexts where church members already carry significant financial obligations, such interpretations can become harmful, especially when they place pressure on the most vulnerable to give beyond their means. This article argues that within the MCS, the theology and practice of giving have been shaped by a complex entanglement of Samoan relational values and missionary-introduced monetary systems. While giving remains central to the life of the church, the glorification of "giving all" risks distorting both the biblical text and Samoan understandings of communal sharing. By drawing on Fa'atoetoemuliola, this paper proposes an alternative theological framework in which giving is understood not as self-depletion for institutional survival, but as a relational, life-giving practice of sharing that preserves dignity, reciprocity, and communal wellbeing.

Keywords: fa'atoetoemulioa, relationality, methodist church of samoa, tautua lotu

Introduction

The story of the widow's offering in Mark 12:41–44 is often preached as one of the clearest biblical examples of sacrificial giving. The widow is commonly presented as a model of faith because she gives "all she had to live on" (Mark 12:44). In many Christian contexts, this interpretation has been used to encourage believers to give generously and wholeheartedly to God. Yet such a reading becomes deeply problematic when it is applied in contexts where people already face significant financial burdens, and where church giving is shaped not only by faith but by social, cultural, and institutional pressures.

This tension is particularly relevant for the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS), where giving occupies a central place in the life of the church. The MCS, like many Samoan churches, is sustained largely through the offerings of its members. This article does not seek to dismiss or degrade the importance of giving to the church. On the contrary, it acknowledges that the church depends in large part on the faithful contributions of its people. However, this essay raises a critical question: Can the language of "giving all" be responsibly preached and practiced in a way that does not endanger the wellbeing of individuals and families?

As a Samoan and as someone reflecting from within the life of the church, I am concerned not simply with whether people give, but with how giving is theologically understood and culturally practiced. In the Samoan context, giving is never merely an individual act of generosity. It is embedded within relationships, kinship obligations, reciprocity, and communal identity. This means that church giving cannot be examined only through biblical exegesis or church finance but must also be understood through the relational worlds that shape Samoan life.

I suggest that the common use of Mark 12:41–44 to praise total sacrificial giving can become dangerous when it is used to normalise financial self-depletion, especially among those who are already vulnerable. In response, I propose a Pasifika relational rereading of the widow's offering through the Samoan concept of Fa'atoetoemuliola. Rather than treating giving as an isolated act of individual sacrifice, Fa'atoetoemuliola offers a framework for understanding giving as relational sharing that is tied to communal life, mutual care, and the responsibility to live life for others.

I should also note that, as a Samoan attempting to write from within my own cultural world, I do not claim that this article presents *the* definitive Samoan understanding of giving or of Fa'atoetoemuliola. Rather, what follows is a Samoan construction that draws together biblical interpretation, theological reflection, and cultural concepts in order to contribute to a wider conversation about faith, money, and relational life in the MCS. I argue that Mark 12:41–44 should not be uncritically used in the Methodist Church of Samoa as a model of total sacrificial giving, because such a reading can reinforce forms of religious and cultural pressure that burden vulnerable households. Instead, I propose Fa'atoetoemuliola as a Samoan relational hermeneutic that reframes faithful giving not as self-depleting sacrifice but as life-sustaining communal sharing grounded in responsibility, reciprocity, and the continuation of relational life.

Biblical Giving

In the biblical tradition, the practice of giving was initially centred on the religious life of Israel and directed largely inward, toward the temple and its functions. Offerings, tithes, and other contributions were given to sustain worship, priestly service, and the wider life of the covenant community (Freedman 1992). In this sense, giving was closely tied to the maintenance of Israel's religious and communal identity.

A significant development occurs, however, in the Christian ministry of the Apostle Paul. While remaining rooted in the Jewish tradition of communal support, Paul extends the practice of giving beyond ethnic and geographic boundaries through what he calls “the collection for the saints” (τῆς λογεῖας τῆς εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους) (Downs 2008, 1). Through this collection, predominantly Gentile churches in Macedonia, Achaia, and Galatia were invited to contribute to the needs of the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem.

Paul's commitment to this collection is evident in the amount of attention he devotes to it in passages such as 1 Corinthians 16:1–4, 2 Corinthians 8:1–9:15, and Romans 15:14–32. The collection was not a minor administrative concern but a significant theological and communal act. Indeed, in Romans 15:30–31, Paul reveals the seriousness of this mission by expressing his willingness to face danger and even possible rejection in order to personally deliver the collected funds to Jerusalem.

This is important because it marks a shift in the theological imagination of giving. Giving is no longer directed only inward toward one's own religious centre, but outward as an expression of solidarity, mutual care, and shared belonging across difference. Paul's collection suggests that Christian giving is not merely about sustaining institutions, but also about participating in a wider network of relational responsibility. This broader biblical framework is important for examining how giving is understood and practiced in the life of the contemporary church.

Giving in the Methodist Church of Samoa

The practice of giving within the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS) has undergone significant transformation since the arrival of Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century. As Kolia Tulia (2020) observes, traditional (pre-Christian) Samoan giving was largely qualitative and relational, expressed through the giving of food, fine mats, agricultural produce, and other forms of communal contribution. Such giving was embedded within shared values of reciprocity, kinship, and collective responsibility rather than being reduced primarily to monetary exchange.

With the arrival of Christian missionaries, however, this relational economy of giving was gradually reshaped through a Western model of monetary contribution. Giving became increasingly tied to the financial support of church structures and institutional operations. Carrington Aiolupotea (2012) notes that this shift became formalised through the introduction of the May Offering, modelled after the English practice of setting aside a Sunday in May for mission fundraising. Over time, this developed into a central feature of the economic life of the MCS.

Both Tulia (2020) and Aiolupotea (2012) show that this historical shift produced a complex intersection of theology, culture, and economics within the MCS. On the one hand, giving continues to function as an important expression of faith and commitment. On the other hand, when monetary giving is absorbed into a Samoan social world already shaped by reciprocity and obligation, offerings can come to carry meanings beyond devotion alone. Aiolupotea (2012) highlights how offerings may also become markers of family honour, social standing, and prestige within the church and village community.

Tulia (2020) builds on this concern by arguing that such practices, particularly in relation to major church offerings, can become financially burdensome for families. This burden is intensified by expectations tied to the cultural value of *tautua* (service), where households may feel compelled to give beyond their actual capacity in order to preserve dignity, belonging, and respect within communal life. In this sense, giving in the MCS cannot be understood simply as generosity or stewardship; it must also be examined as a theological and cultural practice shaped by obligation, identity, and institutional expectation.¹

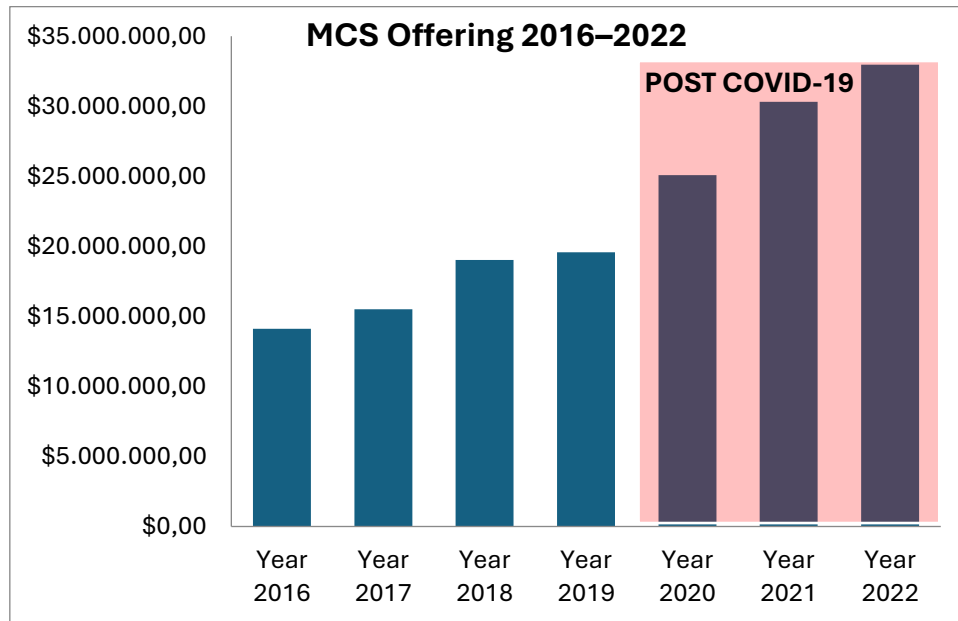
Annual Offering During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Samoa was among the countries that initially managed to delay the spread of COVID-19 until 2021. Despite relatively low infection rates in the early stages of the pandemic, the economic impact was significant. Samoa's economy, heavily dependent on tourism and remittances from Samoans living in the diaspora, faced considerable strain when international borders were closed. Restrictions on social gatherings, including church attendance, further disrupted traditional patterns of community life and economic exchange.

Given these conditions, a decline in church offerings might reasonably have been expected. However, the opposite occurred. As shown in Figure 1, annual offerings within the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS) not only remained stable but increased. In the 2017 MCS financial report, the annual offering reached 15.4 million tala (WST\$), marking a 9.2% increase from the previous year. But by 2022, total contributions had risen even more significantly, even within the context of ongoing economic uncertainty generated by the pandemic.

¹ The Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS) consists of 17 synods across 6 countries, including Samoa, which is the Headquarters of the Church. The recorded membership of the MCS in 2022 was 35,078 individuals, with 69% residing within Samoa, 12% in New Zealand, 11% in the United States and the US territory America Samoa, and 8% in Australia (MCS Minutes 2022).

Figure 1: MCS Annual Offering 2021-2022



On one level, this increase may be interpreted as evidence of strong communal solidarity and commitment. It reflects the enduring importance of the church within Samoan society, as well as the cultural values of *tautua* (service) and *fa'aSāmoa*, where giving remains central to communal identity. For a church community of fewer than 36,000 members to sustain such levels of contribution suggests a deep sense of belonging and responsibility toward the church.

At the same time, this trend raises important theological and pastoral questions. If giving continues to rise even during periods of economic hardship, it invites reflection on the conditions under which such giving takes place. Is this increase purely an expression of voluntary generosity, or does it also reflect underlying pressures shaped by obligation, expectation, and the social importance of church participation? In light of the concerns raised by Sitivi Kamu Wright (2019), Terry Pouono (2021), and Jemaima Tiatia (1998), such patterns may also indicate that practices of giving are not always experienced as freely chosen but are entangled within systems of relational and institutional expectations.

This tension is critical for understanding the practice of giving in the MCS. While the resilience of offerings during the pandemic can be read as a sign of faith and commitment, it may also point to the need for a deeper re-examination of how giving is taught, practiced, and sustained within the life of the church.

Giving All in the MCS?

Sitivi Kamu Wright (2019) addresses the issue of excessive giving within the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS) through his reading of Acts 5:1–11, the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Wright draws this biblical narrative into conversation with contemporary practices of offering in the MCS, particularly the widespread expectation that faithful giving requires one to “give all” to the church. Wright challenges this interpretation by arguing that the problem in Acts 5 is not that Ananias and Sapphira failed to give everything, but that their offering was marked by dishonesty. In this sense, the text does not establish total material surrender as the standard of faithful giving. Rather, it calls into question the integrity and intention behind the act of giving.

More importantly, Wright critiques how this passage has been used within the MCS. He observes that the narrative is sometimes interpreted in ways that place pressure on church members to give beyond

their means, effectively transforming what should be a voluntary act of faith into an expectation shaped by fear, obligation, and coercion. In response, Wright argues that Christian giving should remain a voluntary and responsible practice. Offering should be made from the heart, but in a way that takes seriously one's relational responsibilities, including family wellbeing and daily needs.

Giving, therefore, is not about emptying oneself completely for the church, but about participating honestly and faithfully within a broader network of relationships. Wright thus exposes a critical tension within the MCS: the shift from giving as a relational and voluntary practice to giving as a pressured expectation. This raises an important theological question for the church today, namely, whether the call to "give all" reflects the intention of the biblical text, or whether it represents a misinterpretation that places undue burden on the most vulnerable members of the community.

Economic Strain

Pouono (2021) examines the implications of taulaga (offering) within the CCCS (Christian Congregational Church of Samoa), particularly in the context of the Samoan diaspora church in Aotearoa New Zealand. He highlights the significant financial pressures that church obligations can place on Samoan families, at times pushing them toward extreme measures such as mortgaging homes, borrowing from loan sharks, or turning to gambling and other harmful means of survival. Pouono further notes the wider social consequences associated with these pressures, including domestic violence, gambling-related problems, poor educational outcomes, migration, shifts in church affiliation, and in some cases even suicide.

Tiatia's sociological-theological analysis similarly observes that "the practice of the love offering made to the pastor places financial strain on the parishioners, providing young people with a motive to reject their traditional churches" (1998, 143). Taken together, these studies show that church giving is not merely a theological or cultural matter, but one that carries significant social and economic consequences for Samoan families.

Pouono also explores how taulaga has been translated from the village setting into the urban and diasporic context of Aotearoa New Zealand. He describes this process as "re-traditionalization," where cultural practices are reshaped and reapplied within new social environments. At the same time, he questions the CCCS's responsiveness to contemporary global and social challenges, calling instead for a more prophetic and responsible theology of stewardship.

Importantly, Pouono does not argue for the abandonment of taulaga. Rather, he proposes that giving to God should be understood more holistically. This includes not only financial contributions to the church but also forms of service such as caring for the homeless, supporting safe homes, and responding to broader community needs. In this way, he reframes taulaga as a practice that should contribute to the flourishing of people and communities, rather than deepen their hardship.

Declining Membership in Samoan Churches

Alec Thornton, Maria Kerslake, and Tony Binns, in *Alienation and Obligation: Religion and Social Change in Samoa* (2010), examine how urbanisation, globalisation, and increasing economic pressures are reshaping Samoan kinship obligations and religious participation. They document how mainline churches, including the Methodist Church, have struggled to adapt to the changing socio-economic realities of their members. In many cases, Samoan churches continue to prioritise financial contributions while insufficiently addressing the growing economic strain experienced by families.

This tension has contributed to feelings of alienation among church members, particularly those who are unable to meet financial and social expectations. As a result, some Samoans are shifting toward

denominations such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) and the Assemblies of God (AOG), which are perceived to require lower financial contributions and offer more flexible forms of community engagement (Thornton *et al.* 2010). Other Samoans, particularly in urban contexts such as Apia, are distancing themselves not only from church obligations but also from wider kinship responsibilities, seeking greater independence from traditional structures.

These findings suggest that church giving cannot be separated from broader questions of belonging, obligation, and economic survival. When participation in church life becomes closely tied to financial capacity, those who are unable to give may experience exclusion, shame, or withdrawal from both church and community life.

Declining Membership in the MCS

This broader pattern is also reflected within the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS). In 2001, the MCS accounted for approximately 15% of the national population, but by 2021 this had declined to 12% (Samoa Bureau of Statistics 2022). While population growth complicates the interpretation of these figures, the decline nonetheless raises important questions about participation and belonging in the church.

More striking, however, is the relationship between membership trends and financial giving. Even as membership fluctuates and, in some cases, declines, financial contributions to the church continue to remain strong or even increase. This creates a significant tension: a church that is financially sustained, yet relationally strained. This tension invites deeper reflection. If, as Wright (2019), Pouono (2021), and Tiatia (1998) suggest, practices of giving can place considerable pressure on individuals and families, then declining participation may not simply be a matter of changing preferences or modern influences. It may also reflect the lived experience of those who find the expectations of church life increasingly difficult to sustain.

In this sense, the question is not only why membership is declining, but also how the theology and practice of giving shape the conditions of belonging within the church. To address this, it becomes necessary to return to a more fundamental question: who are we as a people, and how should giving be understood within our relational world? It is at this point that the Samoan concept of Fa'atoetoemuliola becomes an important lens for rethinking the meaning and practice of giving.

Fa'atoetoemuliola

Fa'atoetoemuliola is a Samoan term derived from the *ola*, a traditional fishing basket woven from tender coconut leaves. The term itself can be broken down to clarify its meaning. Fa'atoetoe refers to the act of saving or setting aside a portion of the catch, while muli refers to the bottom of the *ola* basket. In this sense, Fa'atoetoemuliola literally refers to what is intentionally left or preserved at the bottom of the basket. Yet, as a cultural concept, it carries meanings that extend far beyond its literal sense and offers an important way of rethinking giving, sharing, and responsibility within Samoan relational life.

Like many Samoan concepts, Fa'atoetoemuliola does not have a single fixed interpretation. Mosese Ma'ilo understands the concept through the image of a master fisherman who pours out his catch for the village (20018a). In this reading, the term evokes generosity, provision, and sacrificial sharing. Ma'ilo's work itself may also be understood as an act of such sharing, offering knowledge gained abroad back to the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS) as a communal gift.

At the same time, alternative interpretations exist. Aisoli Iuli, for example, interprets Fa'atoetoemuliola as referring to "leftovers," that is, what remains after the main distribution has taken place (2021). However, Samoan philosophy reminds us that "e talalasi Samoa"—there is no single telling, but 'many

tellings’ of a multifaceted story (Lavea 2023). Rather than resolving these interpretations into a single meaning, I approach them as part of a wider interpretive tradition.

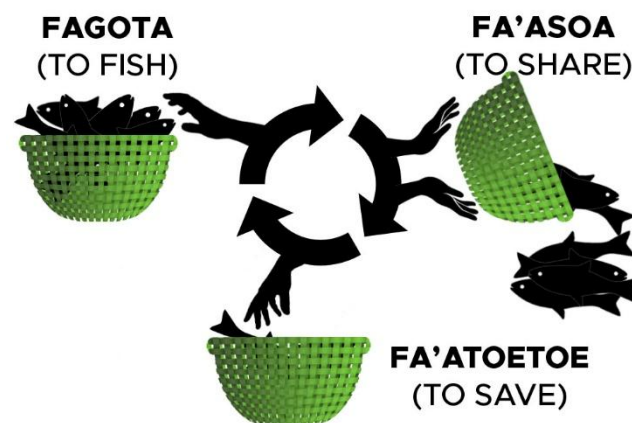
One of the legendary stories associated with the term comes from the village of Samata and concerns a couple and their three children: the twin brothers Mataitai and Mataiuta, and their sister Sina. One day the parents went fishing, and upon their return, Sina was waiting by the shore. As custom required, Sina performed the fa’asoa a le taliuta (the sharing of the receiver), receiving and distributing the catch brought back from the sea. Yet the mother instructed her, “Aua nei galo se Fa’atoetoemuliola aua Mataitai ma Mataiuta—Do not forget to save a Fa’atoetoemuliola for Mataitai and Mataiuta” (Galuluefaatasi 2023).

This proverb is significant. Galuluefaatasi asks, would a parent really save mere “leftovers” for their own children? His answer is no. However, when understood in light of the structure of the ola basket, where the first catch is placed at the bottom and later catches are layered above, what lies at the bottom is not what is least valuable, but what has been intentionally preserved. In this sense, Fa’atoetoemuliola does not refer to what is discarded, but to what is set aside with care for those who must also live (Galuluefaatasi 2023).

This distinction is crucial for the present study. While some Christian interpretations of giving glorify the act of giving everything away, Fa’atoetoemuliola offers a different theological imagination. It suggests that faithful sharing does not require the total depletion of the giver, but rather a relational wisdom that ensures life is sustained beyond the immediate act of generosity. Giving, in this framework, is not simply about sacrifice for its own sake, but about sharing in a way that preserves dignity, responsibility, and the wellbeing of those bound together in relationship.

Fa’atoetoemuliola Hermeneutics

Fa’atoetoemuliola may be understood not only as a concept, but as a process consisting of three interrelated phases: Fagota (to fish), Fa’asoa (to share), and Fa’atoetoe (to set aside or preserve). These phases are rooted in Samoan fishing practices, where emphasis is placed on venturing out to gather what is available, distributing it within the community, and intentionally preserving a portion for those who must also live. Together, they form a relational pattern of life that resists both accumulation for its own sake and total self-depletion.



Fagota (to fish)

Fagota refers to the act of going out to fish. More than simply catching fish, it involves movement, attentiveness, labour, and relationship with the sea as a source of life. In this sense, Fagota may be understood

not merely as an act of extraction, but as a relational engagement with what sustains life. The fish are not produced by the fisher, but encountered, received, and gathered within the limits of one's environment.

This phase may also be understood theologically through the concept of *itulagi* (horizon) As Upolu Vaai writes:

Our *itulagi* forms our lifeworld conditioned by our contexts, education, faith, culture, or traditions, to name a few. Therefore, every perspective is limited, or every theology is partial, because it is always constructed from one's particular *itulagi*. The task of theology is to weave these diverse *itulagi* to create a theological mat for maturing our faith into relationships. (Vaai, cited in Havea 2021, 16)

In the spirit of Vaai's reflection, Fagota may be understood as the gathering of what is encountered from within one's own *itulagi*. Just as a fisher cannot gather everything in the sea, no theology can contain every story, every perspective, or every truth. What is gathered is always partial, shaped by location, relationship, and experience. This is important for the present study because it frames the reading of Mark 12:41–44 not as a universal or final interpretation, but as one emerging from a particular Samoan *itulagi*. The *ola* basket, in this sense, becomes a fitting metaphor for theological work itself: it can hold what is gathered, but it cannot hold everything.

Literature Review of Mark 12:41–44

The interpretation of Mark 12:41–44, focusing on the generous act of the poor widow, has been subject to diverse perspectives. In traditional readings, the widow's gift is celebrated as an extraordinary example of sacrificial giving, highlighting her deep devotion and selflessness. Early church figures such as Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine praised the widow's generosity as a testament to the true spirit of giving, commending her act as surpassing that of the wealthy. This interpretation presents her as a model of faith, whose offering is seen as spiritually valuable due to its self-sacrificial nature and her humility, as she gives all she has out of devotion (Oden and Hall 1998, 176–180).

Addison Wright offers a divergent perspective, viewing the widow's act as a lament rather than a model of piety, an interpretation that has sparked considerable debate (Wright 1982, 256). Wright suggests that the widow's offering should be understood as a product of the religious system's failure rather than as an act of virtue. According to Wright, her decision to give everything she has can be seen as a tragic consequence of misguided teachings by the scribes, who have instilled in her a distorted sense of duty. This critical view positions the religious authorities as exploitative, leading vulnerable people like the widow to actions that exacerbate their own suffering rather than empowering them (Wright 1982, 256).

Further challenging the traditional perspective, Joy Parker (2015) critiques the institutional context that praises the widow's sacrificial giving. Parker argues that interpreting her act as virtuous can unwittingly endorse a religious system that places the burden of financial support on the most disadvantaged. In Parker's view, this passage reflects an unjust system that expects the poor to support its existence, thus ignoring their own needs. Parker suggests that the story of the widow underscores the consequences of a religious institution that prioritises ideological principles over genuine compassion and practical support for the vulnerable (Parker 2015, 10).

Elizabeth Malbon challenges Wright's critical interpretation, offering a reading that places the widow among a broader group of exemplary women in Mark's Gospel. Malbon asserts that the widow's act of giving is consistent with the character and faith shown by other women in the Gospel, such as the woman who anoints Jesus and the woman with a haemorrhage. Her "gospel women" narrative frames the widow not as a victim of institutional exploitation but as a figure of piety and devotion, thereby reaffirming the classic view of the widow as a heroine of faith rather than as someone misled or exploited (Malbon 1991, 589–604).

The story of the widow's offering in Mark's Gospel invites both praise and criticism, revealing contrasting perspectives on the nature of sacrifice and the responsibilities of religious institutions. While traditional interpretations view her act as exemplary, scholars like Wright and Parker maintain that the widow's gift highlights the failures of the religious establishment, questioning whether the widow's giving reflects devotion or exploitation. Malbon's perspective, however, revisits the classic interpretation, positioning the widow as part of a broader narrative of pious and courageous women in Mark's Gospel, each demonstrating selfless faith in different ways. Together, these interpretations underscore the theological and ethical complexities embedded within the widow's story and offer diverse insights into its implications for teachings on generosity and institutional accountability.

What we can gather from this brief literature review are two main interpretations of the widow's offering in Mark 12:41–44. The traditional view, supported by early church figures and scholars like Malbon (1991), sees the widow as a model of sacrificial faith and devotion, praising her for giving all she had out of love for God. In contrast, critics like Wright (1982) and Parker (2015) argue that her act reflects the failings of a religious system that exploits the poor, portraying her not as a heroine but as a victim of institutional injustice. I offer an alter(native) view from my own *itulagi* which seeks neither to praise the widow nor to view her as a victim of an unjust institution.

Fa'asoa (to share)

Within Samoan fishing practices, there are at least two common ways of distributing the catch: *fa'asoa tuafoe* and *fa'asoa a le taliuta*. *Fa'asoa tuafoe* refers to the distribution of fish while still at sea, where the catch is apportioned among the fishermen by using the oars. This distribution is not for private possession, but to ensure that no one returns to shore empty-handed. By contrast, *fa'asoa a le taliuta* refers to the distribution that takes place on land, where the full catch is poured out onto a mat, sorted, and then distributed by the village men.

The distinction between these two practices is important. In *fa'asoa tuafoe*, the fish are not poured out or sorted into categories of greater or lesser value. They are shared directly from the *ola* basket as gifts from the moana (ocean), without being ranked as superior or inferior (Tauiliili 2009, 116). This practice suggests a mode of distribution grounded not in competition or hierarchy but in relational sufficiency and communal care.

In this regard, it is important to note that *fa'asoa* in Samoa is not best understood simply as “giving.” To speak only of “giving” can imply a one-directional movement from one individual to another, often centred in the generosity or sacrifice of the giver. *Fa'asoa*, however, is more accurately understood as sharing within a community of relationships. Its emphasis is not on individual ownership or heroic generosity, but on communal participation, reception, and mutual belonging.

This does not mean that the individual is dissolved into the collective, nor that communal sharing is free from personal labour or sacrifice. To frame the issue as a choice between the individual and the community imposes a false binary that does not adequately reflect relational worldviews. As Manulani Meyer observes, there is “individual transformation through collective excellence, collective transformation through individual excellence” (Meyer 2008). The person and the community are therefore not opposing categories, but mutually constitutive dimensions of life.

Read in this way, *Fa'asoa* does not deny the significance of individual effort or cost. Rather, it situates such effort within a relational economy in which the individual is sustained through the collective, and the collective is likewise sustained through the contribution of persons. The fisherman's act of distribution may involve sacrifice, but it is not a theology of self-erasure. It is an act of participation in a network of reciprocal

life where giving, receiving, and preserving remain bound together. In this sense, Fa'asoa provides an important corrective to individualistic understandings of Christian giving. It suggests that what matters is not only what one gives, but how resources circulate within a relational world so that life is sustained among the community as a whole.

Relational Beings

This understanding of sharing is inseparable from the Samoan understanding of personhood. In Samoa, the concept of tagata (person) transcends individualism and instead reflects a communal identity deeply rooted in collective existence (Vaai 2014). A person is not first imagined as an isolated self who then enters into relationships, but as one who is already constituted by relationships with land, sea, sky, ancestors, family, and community.

This relational worldview is embedded within the Samoan language itself. As Vaai notes (2019), terms for human life are deeply intertwined with the natural world. Soil ('ele'ele), land (fanua), roots (a'a), stones (fatu), and even the placenta are linguistically and symbolically connected to human identity, genealogy, and belonging. These interconnections point to a holistic understanding of existence in which life is not compartmentalised into separate spheres but held together in a living web of relations. Vaai writes:

Pacific people are born into a multi-dimensional flow of life, enhanced and protected by relationships. We do not create relationships. Rather, we continue relationships. And through us, relationships flow. We are relational beings who are 'more' than the assumed individualised self. Because we are 'more' we are formed in relationality, and through this mystery we deliberately recondition and reconfigure the world around us. (2017, 27)

Within this worldview, giving is not simply an individual act of transfer, but part of the ongoing flow of life between persons and communities. As Vaai argues (2001), Samoan society has traditionally valued reciprocity, interdependence, and faaaloalo (respect/honour), where the dignity of others is upheld through relational acts of support. Practices such as *osi-aiga* during family *fa'alavelave* reflect this ethos, where what matters is not only the material item given, but the presence, participation, and honour embodied in the act.

Vaai (2001) also notes that the growing influence of monetary systems has increasingly reshaped Samoan understandings of giving, at times marginalising the older emphasis on presence, reciprocity, and communal support. This shift is significant for the present study. If giving becomes reduced to measurable contributions or financial sacrifice alone, it risks losing its relational depth. Fa'asoa, by contrast, reminds us that the heart of Samoan sharing lies not in the amount given, but in the sustaining of life, dignity, and relationship.

Relational Sharing

The Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS) holds its annual offering in the month of November, a timing that carries significance beyond institutional scheduling. In the Samoan traditional calendar, November is known as *Taumafa mua*, meaning "the first of plenty" or "the first fruits." The significance of this month lies in its association with the first signs of abundance emerging from the natural world. In this sense, the choice of November for the annual offering is not arbitrary but resonates deeply with a Samoan ecological and cultural understanding of abundance. As Penehuro Lefale points out (2003, 11), November is a season marked by the abundance of fish and the much-anticipated *palolo*. This abundance is not limited to the sea alone. The land also yields fruits and vegetation, while the sky contributes through the season of *lupe* (the pigeon), all of which together signal a time of plenty.

November, therefore, represents a moment when the land, sea, and sky each participate in the offering of life. This ecological interrelatedness helps illuminate why November became the month of annual offering in the MCS. Rather than being merely a church-imposed fundraising period, it may also be understood as a time that aligns with a pre-existing Samoan rhythm of ecological offering. The land, sea, and sky are already giving from their abundance; the church's annual offering therefore takes place within a wider cosmic movement of sharing.

This theological insight is made explicit in a 2015 annual offering sermon preached by Reverend Iose Semi, who described November as a season in which all of creation participates in a collective act of giving. The sea gifts its fish and palolo, the land gifts its fruits and vegetation, and the sky gifts its birds. In this way, the annual offering is framed not simply as a human obligation, but as participation in a relational cycle of abundance already initiated by creation itself. Seen through this lens, the significance of November is that it situates the church's act of offering within a Samoan cosmological logic of first abundance and relational sharing. The question, then, is not merely how much one ought to give, but how one responds as part of a world in which giving has already begun through the life-giving abundance of the land, sea, and sky.

Fa'atoetoe: An Alternative

Within Samoan fishing practice, after the catch has been distributed to the village, a portion is intentionally set aside for the family who remained at home praying for the safety of the fishing expedition. This preserved portion is the Fa'atoetoemuliola. Traditionally, the fisherman does not eat from his own catch but distributes it for the village while also ensuring that there is a portion left for the household. In this way, the fisherman's act is not one of self-erasure, but of relational circulation: the blessings of the village flow toward the fisherman, and through him toward his family.

This practice offers an important theological alternative to interpretations of giving that glorify total depletion. In Fa'atoetoemuliola, faithful sharing does not mean giving until nothing remains but participating in a cycle of provision in which life continues to flow through relationships. What is set aside is not selfish withholding but a necessary act of care for those who are also bound into the relational economy of the gift.

This alternative resonates with several theological reflections on giving within Samoan and biblical contexts. Mosese Ma'ilo (2018), Upolu Vaai (2001), and David Malick (2019) each engage, in different ways, with the theme of sacrificial giving. Ma'ilo, in his discussion of Tautua Lotu, describes service to the church as sacred, embodied, and deeply interwoven with the Samoan matai (chiefly) system. Acts such as preparing food, contributing financially, and supporting church projects reflect a profound entanglement of the fa'aSāmoa (Samoan way) and Christian theology. Yet Ma'ilo also acknowledges that this sacred service has increasingly become commercialised, blurring the line between spiritual devotion and economic expectation.

Vaai (2001) critiques how the theology of giving in the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS), once grounded in Christ's sacrificial example, has shifted under missionary influence toward a more transactional and fear-based model. In response, he proposes a theology of *responsible giving*, one that emphasises voluntary, sustainable generosity grounded in faith, dignity, and each person's capacity.

Malick (2019), in contrast, reads the widow's offering in Mark 12:41–44 as an example of true discipleship, arguing that her act represents wholehearted and total devotion to God. While this reading highlights the depth of the widow's faith, the present study suggests that such interpretations must be held in tension with relational frameworks of sharing that do not equate faithfulness with self-depletion. Fa'atoetoe, in this sense, offers an alternative lens: not the rejection of sacrifice, but a refusal to imagine faithful giving as the destruction of one's own capacity to live and sustain others.

Reading the Widow through Fa'asoa

From a Pasifika perspective, and particularly within Samoan relational thought, the widow's offering may be read through the concept of fa'asoa. As argued earlier, fa'asoa is often mistranslated as "giving," when it is more accurately understood as sharing within a community of relationships. Yet even this requires further nuance. The root word soa suggests equality, and fa'asoa may therefore be taken to imply the act of making things equal through distribution. However, when applied uncritically, such a notion risks reducing sharing to the equal distribution of resources, regardless of context or need.

In lived Samoan experience, equality alone is insufficient for sustaining relational life. To distribute equally between the vulnerable and the secure does not necessarily produce justice; rather, it can reproduce imbalance by failing to account for difference in capacity, responsibility, and need. For this reason, the concept of fa'asoasoa becomes crucial. Fa'asoasoa extends beyond sharing as equal distribution and points to a form of relational discernment in which resources are rationed, prioritised, and directed toward those who need them most. It reflects not a perfect system but a relational ethic grounded in equity rather than sameness.

As noted earlier, there are two forms of fa'asoa: fa'asoa tuafoe, the sharing of the giver, and fa'asoa a le taliuta, the sharing of the receiver. These categories may help illuminate the widow's offering in a fresh way. The phrase "poor widow" (πτωχή χήρα) carries connotations of dependence and vulnerability, and in some contexts may evoke the posture of one who is publicly reliant on the support of others. If this is the case, then what the widow places into the treasury may be understood not simply as a private act of sacrificial giving, but also as the sharing of one who has herself lived by receiving. In this sense, her offering may be read through the logic of fa'asoa a le taliuta, the sharing of the receiver.

This reading is significant because it shifts the focus away from heroic individual sacrifice and toward relational participation. The widow does not stand outside the economy of receiving and sharing, but within it. Her act is not necessarily best understood as the isolated giving away of everything, but as participation in a wider social and theological circulation of life.

This dynamic is not unfamiliar within the Methodist Church of Samoa. Like Samoa more broadly, the MCS is deeply sustained through relational networks of support, including remittances from family members overseas. Church members in Samoa often rely on assistance from relatives abroad in order to meet church obligations, including offerings. In one sense, this reflects fa'asoa a le taliuta, the sharing of the receiver. Yet those same relatives overseas also contribute offerings within their own congregations, reflecting fa'asoa tuafoe, the sharing of the giver. Giving, therefore, is rarely a simple or isolated act. It is relational, layered, and often circulates across households, churches, and national boundaries.

This does not mean that the MCS does not itself share outwardly. The church contributes to the wider life of the nation through education, including primary, secondary, and theological educational institutions, and through initiatives such as the Women's Fellowship annual donation to the blood donation society. The more pressing question remains theological: How should the widow's offering be preached and understood within a relational economy of sharing?

Too often, the widow's offering is preached as a model of how easily she gave "all she had to live on" for God, and how difficult it is for contemporary Christians to do the same. Yet such sermons often rely on weak exegesis and overlook the actual economic value of what she gave. Craig Keener (1993, 165) notes that the widow's two lepta amounted to only a tiny fraction of a day's wage, while James Edwards (2002, 375) similarly observes that they were the smallest coins in circulation and would scarcely have purchased a simple meal. This does not negate the seriousness of her offering, but it does complicate overly romantic readings of total heroic sacrifice.

Rather than reducing the widow to either a victim of exploitation or a pure icon of self-emptying devotion, her act may be more helpfully understood through a relational lens. What she shares is materially small, yet relationally significant. In this sense, the widow's act may be read not simply as giving from absolute nothingness, but as a form of sharing that emerges from relational abundance—an abundance not measured by surplus wealth but by participation, dignity, commitment, and presence. Read through fa'asoa and fa'atoetoe, the widow's offering does not call the church to glorify depletion. Rather, it invites a rethinking of faithful sharing as that which circulates life without destroying the capacity to continue living, belonging, and caring for others.

Conclusion

The use of the widow's offering as a model for "giving all" in the life of the church must be approached with far greater theological and pastoral care. Within the context of the Methodist Church of Samoa, where giving is deeply intertwined with faith, service, honour, and communal obligation, Mark 12:41–44 cannot be read naively or abstractly. When interpreted uncritically, the passage can reinforce patterns of giving that burden those who are already vulnerable and risk turning faithful generosity into self-depleting sacrifice.

This article has argued that Fa'atoetoemuliola offers a Samoan relational alternative for reading both the widow's offering and the practice of giving in the church. Rather than framing faithful giving as the surrender of all that one has, Fa'atoetoemuliola understands giving through the logic of communal sharing, relational responsibility, and the intentional preservation of life. What matters is not simply how much is offered, but whether the act of offering continues to sustain the giver, the household, and the wider community.

Read in this way, the widow need not be reduced either to an idealised model of heroic sacrifice or to a passive victim of institutional exploitation. Instead, her offering becomes a site for asking what kind of theology of giving the church wishes to uphold. If giving is to remain a life-giving expression of faith within Samoan and wider Pasifika contexts, then it must be shaped not by the glorification of depletion, but by practices of sharing that leave room for dignity, relationship, and the continuation of life.

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