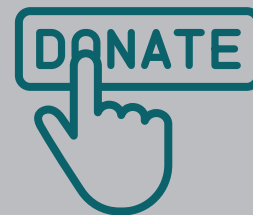




PASTOR'S GUIDE

WHAT YOUR GIVERS WANT TO KNOW

(...and likely won't ask)



Your church's donors have questions and more than likely, they won't ask them of you.

Pastors, in this article, we'll give you a peek inside the minds of your givers to better understand their typically internal or unspoken questions. Do you know what they're asking? Do you know how to answer? Church leaders who can anticipate and effectively answer these questions will have more effective and rewarding stewardship programs.

Your church's top givers are often generous to other organizations and charities. Those nonprofit causes can scarcely afford to take donors at any level for "granted." Thus they often do a better job than the church of (1) valuing donors, (2) anticipating and answering their questions, and (3) demonstrating the impact of their giving.

Where those charities struggle - and where the church has all the advantage - is building connection, community and deep meaning among their donor bases. Our tithers and givers have a spiritual commitment and faith-based calling to our church that undergirds their passion and their generosity. So understanding the God-filled community, trust and relationships we already enjoy with these givers, let's step into the donor's mind to be sure we can keep them engaged and excited by answering their questions.





#1.

Givers are asking questions about your mission, goals and objectives.

Because each congregation and church campus is unique, the mission, partnerships and goals are also specific to that church. It's important that your leadership and your frontline staff can articulate those missional aspects and distinctions that make your church different. Donors are looking for ways your goals and mission intersects with their faith and passion. What impact are you really making? What sets your ministries apart or makes them different from others?

Pastors, remember that givers - and especially long-time members - will rarely ask you these questions.

So you as a pastor need to look for ways to answer those questions in a variety of ways. The end result? You're arming your congregants with the very reasons others might seek out your church so they can be more effective ambassadors, all the while you're stoking the fires of their continued passion for your mission.



#2.

Givers are asking questions about your accomplishments as a ministry.

Again, don't assume even long-time members remember the success stories of your church and your prior track record. Seek ways to share those stories and how your church has come together missionally in the past - celebrate and remember those accomplishments.

Major donors especially are wary of organizations - and yes, churches! - who have "mission-drift" and whose goals and priorities seem to shift often. Not staying on your intended mission for a period of time doesn't inspire donors to give long-term or major gifts.

We often see this when there's a revolving door of leadership or in pastors/leaders with a strong entrepreneurial bent, who seize on new projects or passions as they strike a chord. This doesn't mean the church can't evolve and re-tool its goals, but each new warp of the church's mission may mean a re-building of the donor base. No one wants to be paying on a pledge for the once-needed, hot project that isn't the center of attention anymore. This is something pastors should pay close attention to during any transitions.

Sharing and maintaining a strong record of on-mission accomplishments can help assure givers of your long-term congregational health.



#3.

Givers are asking questions of money and accountability.

It's important to be as transparent as possible with your givers about the financial planning and financial health of your church. Donors who feel confident in how funds are being allocated and spent will be more likely to renew and upgrade their giving as their trust grows.

How much money does the church really need? How do you spend what I give? How do you make budgetary and financial decisions? Does the church have any endowment or investments and how are they managed?

Pastors, again, don't wait for congregants to ask for that information. This is an area where they will wonder but are unlikely to ask. And don't wait for pledge or stewardship campaigns so offer that transparency. Find ways to communicate the impact of their giving on your day-to-day budget and how those decisions are made. It's a great way to highlight the important work of your key staff and your board or finance committee volunteers.

For those preparing for or engaged in a campaign or fundraising project, those answers become even more critical to securing donor commitments. Givers want to know the missional reasons for the project or campaign. What's the plan? Have you thought it all through? Does it make sense to be spending the amount of money you're talking about on this project? Again, transparency about your budget and plans are critical to donor trust and support. Be clear about the financial plan and, for example, if you are incurring debt, anticipate and answer givers' questions.



#4.

Givers are asking who else is on the team.

Most donors don't want to be the single funder on a project - they want to know the church has a base of support and donors at many levels who can come together. More than that, a church relying on a single or small group of major donors is also not a healthy long-term strategy.

While preserving donor privacy, you can easily find ways to share the broad support of givers so others know they are part of a team working together to advance the kingdom work in your congregation. Look for opportunities to highlight donors and volunteers at various levels, and allow them to share their stories.

When you can assume your givers have these questions, you can answer them before they're asked. Know that most donors will want and appreciate the information you're offering, and that act will strengthen the bonds of trust and commitment with the church.

At the end of the day, givers want to know that their gift matters. It's critical to show them in various ways year-round how they make what your church does possible.



#5.

Givers are asking if your church can handle a sizable gift.

I know it might sound strange for someone who does fundraising for a living to tell pastors that there are gifts to walk away from, but there are times a church or ministry should decline a major gift.

One reason relates to how a church would handle a gift of a significant size. Donors are asking if your church can handle a major gift if they feel led to give you one. Will it help or might it actually hinder you? Can the organization use this kind of gift wisely, or is it the kind of gift that would ruin you?

One donor gave nearly a third of a million dollars to a ministry organization. After a rocky year, representatives from the organization returned and asked for another contribution. "I didn't mind giving last year," the donor explained, "to get that project underway. But now you're asking me to correct your mistakes. Speaking as a businessman, I think you should just shut the project down."

It was a tough spot. The organization came to us for counsel and guidance. We suggested that the donor might actually give again, if he could see that the ministry was turning things around. We helped the organization revise the components of the project that were in disarray. Then we returned to the donor. He gave immediately and generously. He saw a growing wisdom in the ministry's leaders.

Donors who might be led to give you a transformative gift need to know that it won't change your church's focus, mission and culture...if that is what has moved them to give. Too many times I see small organizations, churches or ministries who are blessed with an unexpected bequest gift or major contribution. Rather than sticking to their tried-and-true processes for budgeting and prioritizing their mission, they quickly lose focus, make poorly informed decisions and don't handle the contribution wisely.

The flipside of the donor's questions about the church's management is the intent and desires of the donor. A donor whose vision isn't aligned with where the church is going, whose gift is seeking to change that course or be used as leverage or control, is a gift you will need to decline.

Most often, I see a church or ministry considering a significant gift from a donor whose passion is a program not part of their core mission. There is a real cost to taking the gift - to focusing or implementing a program you aren't set up, staffed or called to be providing. Some of the toughest conversations I have had to have are with generous donors whose gifts really needed to be invested in another ministry or organization, not mine.

The best advice I can provide to pastors is to stay sharply focused on your calling and your ministry's mission. Doing so with authenticity will attract and retain givers with the same passions. Be transparent, honest and open about your church and your staff's capacity for new programs and ministry directions. The cost of spreading your mission and your staff too thin will be eroding support of members and givers. It's a challenging line to walk, but worth the discernment.



#6.

Givers are asking questions of assessment, evaluation and follow-up.

Pastors, the number one complaint I hear on the part of major donors is a ministry's failure to return with a report on the outcome of the investment the donor made in the organization. I call these the "Will you get back to me?" questions: Will you be reporting back to me on the progress of the project you've asked me to support? When will it be done? How will you get back to me? How can you assure me that your reports will be accurate?

Put yourself in the shoes of your faithful givers. How would answers to those questions "feel" to you? How would the church's neglecting follow-up "feel"? And what does that mean for you as pastor and for the church?

Assessment. Donors want to know how your priorities are set, how you make mission and ministry decisions, and how your budget and financial planning happens. How do you handle a program, facility or ministry that is no longer meeting its mission or goals? How do you assess the effectiveness of your ministry or its impact? What voice do your members have in that assessment? Be sure your loyal givers know how you determine projects, campaigns and priorities and how they can learn more.

Evaluation. Even though many of the benefits we offer our members are intangible, deeply meaningful and difficult to quantify, we can still evaluate and share the impact our church ministries are having. Occasional surveys or focus groups, or even just quotes and photos from those participating in our ministries can give us simple ways to ensure we know which programs are helping transform lives and how to showcase those stories to donors.

Followup. An important part of what gives a donor a sense of fulfillment is the accomplishment of the project. This is the biggest issue and yet often the hardest thing to get organizations to do consistently and with excellence. Again, this is an area where I see churches too often take their donors for granted.

A simple system of periodic follow-up goes a long way. Handwritten notes, emails, even a simple text message now and then can make givers feel valued. Calendaring those thank yous and followups in the course of the year can be a fun project, especially if you layer it with the outcomes of what you're gathering in your assessment and evaluations of your ministry efforts.

Unfortunately, churches have a poor track record of appropriately thanking donors. Putting a calendar and system of followup into place for your year-round stewardship is critical. If you are in a fundraiser for a project or a capital campaign, you'll need to schedule simple but frequent updates to donors. It's disheartening to be led to give to a project or fundraiser and then never hear the outcome.

More than anything, pastors, remember that donors want this information but are very unlikely to ask you for it. Encourage your staff to help incorporate transparency and answers into your rhythms of communication to address these questions.
Doing so will bolster the bonds of trust and the passion your givers have for your church.

- Timothy L. Smith



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 1-844-467-3256

 solutions@acst.com

 180 Dunbarton Dr, Florence, SC 29501