# FREQUENTLY ASKED STEWARDSHIP QUESTIONS

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Pastors and ministry leaders often struggle with the fundraising expectations of their role. And let's be honest, most of us as clergy, church or ministry volunteers weren't trained to be development professionals.

In this article, we are answering the most frequently asked questions that churches have about stewardship and fundraising. These are the most common questions I get as I work with pastors, leaders and ministries.

We'll first get down to basics answering some fundamental questions ministry leaders have about stewardship and fundraising. I've been fortunate to work with churches and ministries across the country (and globally) for many decades, and all of them came to me with common questions that we'll unpack here.

FAQ

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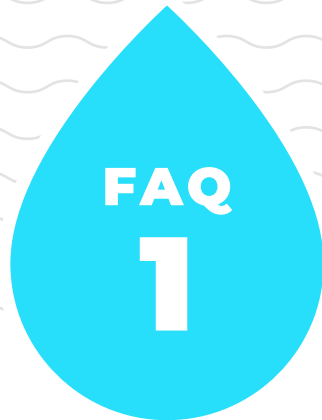
# What kind of donor database do I need?

There are lots of wonderful tools and database systems out there.

At the end of the day, the system you're using to record donor gifts and other information about your members needs to be functional, secure, and user-friendly for the staff charged with using it. Obviously, a system (or savvy staff) that can provide you reporting on lapsed or expired donors, fundraising totals and trends, or other analytics can be really useful.

A word about recurring giving: Churches and ministries who can encourage their givers to make their contributions on an automatic payment system build a stronger stewardship program. Recurring, automatic giving options are easier and less hassle for most donors. That method of giving provides the church with reliable, consistent donation revenue. Especially during times of disruption - whether it's summer vacation seasons or a pandemic - donors who have a recurring gift to the church don't have to worry about dropping anything in the offering plate or mailing a check. Their pledge or intended tithe is automatically deducted from their bank account or charged to their card on whatever frequency basis they choose. These platforms can help you streamline your donor data and often integrate directly with your database.

Regardless of your software system, the critical piece of your process is ensuring you have staff managing gift entry, address changes and acknowledgments/receipting. Even back when we were using paper files and folders for donors, the most important factor was staff who were committed to accuracy and quality control in our data.

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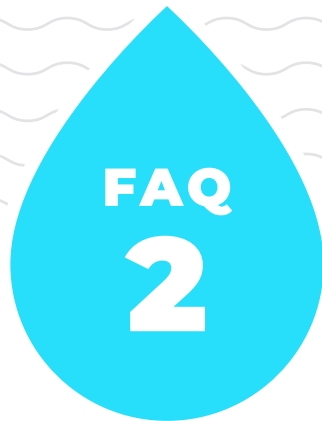
# How often should we be asking our donors to give?

Unlike most nonprofits and charities who have to carefully map out their asks of givers and balance those against donor opts out or donor fatigue, the church has a weekly opportunity to build relationships and make its case to givers.

This doesn't mean you should be hitting donors over the head every week. But do not let your annual stewardship campaign be the only time you talk about the impact of donor gifts. Your stewardship campaign should be a natural outgrowth of the messaging your donors and tithers get from you regularly - in services, in communications and in acknowledgments.

Outside of your annual stewardship campaign, there will be projects or capital campaigns where you're inviting donors to give beyond their standard pledge or tithe. **Those should be timed and planned carefully:** You will want plenty of opportunity to build trust and make the case for the project to donors. You'll also need to launch a special campaign in such a way that doesn't compete with your stewardship giving campaign.

It's critically important that donors understand the church is asking for a gift above and beyond their current level of giving - not supplanting their pledge to the annual operating funds of the church with a gift to a special project. All of that comes back to the fundamental importance of ongoing messaging and acknowledgment of the impact givers have on your congregation and its ministries.

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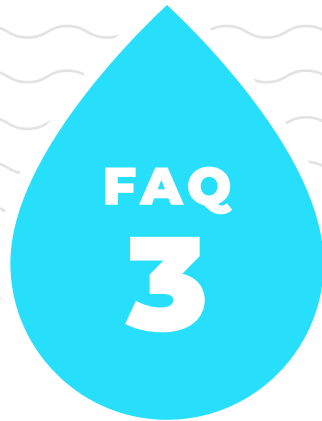
How often should we be sending thank yous to givers?

Church givers often share with me their disappointment that their gifts are rarely thanked or acknowledged by the pastor or church staff.

Unfortunately, we have lots of work to do on this front in making our donors feel their value and their importance in our work. Too often, we're taking them for granted.

We strongly recommend churches build a plan for thanking donors based on their giving frequency, history and platform. That sounds complicated, but it doesn't need to be. It can be as straightforward as something like this:

1. **First-time donor:** Donors who make a first-time gift are mailed a personalized letter or handwritten thank you within 48 hours of the gift.

2. **Regular donor pledge or tithe gifts:** Pledge or tithe commitment card are acknowledged with a thank you letter within 48 hours of the pledge commitment. Ongoing gifts on the pledge are acknowledged with a thank you letter with a summary of giving impact quarterly.

3. **Automatic/recurring donors:** Initial recurring, automatic gift commitments are acknowledged with a thank you letter within 48 hours. Ongoing gifts are acknowledged with a thank you letter with a summary of giving impact quarterly.

4. **One-time donations/special gifts:** Additional gifts are always acknowledged with a thank you letter or phone call.

5. **All donors:** receive an annual summary of giving for receipting purposes with a thank you and statement of giving impact.

Capital campaign or special project gifts will trigger other types of thank yous and acknowledgments.

This is just a sample of the kind of process your church could consider if you don't already have structures in place to trigger donor thank yous. And there is nothing more valuable to a donor than a handwritten thank you from the pastor or an occasional call/phone message that is simply a thank you, with no other agenda.

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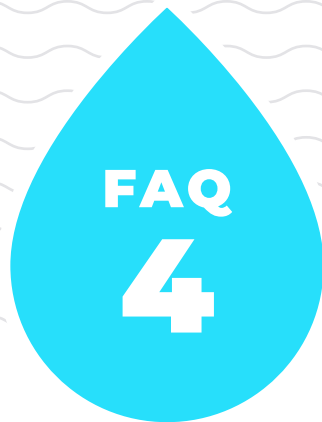
How important is an online giving option? Most of our givers still send checks.

While you may always have givers who want to mail or drop a physical check in the offering plate, many donors find it easier to set up a recurring weekly or monthly donation.

This secure, automatic process is easier and less work for the donor, and it's a more consistent, reliable stream of donation revenue for the church.

Ministries whose donors are giving through an automatic recurring giving platform have a stronger stewardship program. Those donors often give more, and more frequently, than those who chose to give one-time gifts via check or mail. The time and cost savings for both the church and the donor can be significant. Look for ways to outline the benefits of moving tithes and pledges to an automatic monthly or recurring giving platform in your regular communications and also in your annual stewardship campaign materials. But once you do, don't put your acknowledgments on auto-pilot: be sure you're thanking your recurring donors often.
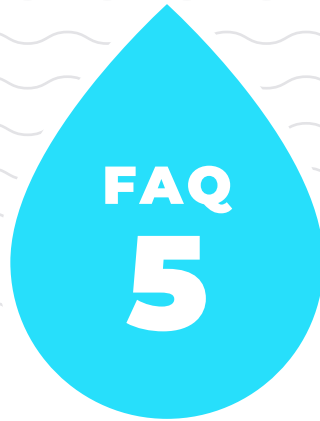
Can anyone learn to work with donors?

As I mentioned, sometimes the most effective fundraisers are frontline program staff.

Most staff can - and I'd argue *should* - learn to work with and steward donors. I'm not simply talking about who is making "an ask" of a major donor...we're looking at this work holistically, as a ministry. Remember that 80 percent of our time with our givers should be spent on relationship and trust-building.

In order to create a church culture conducive to relational donor work, we have to get "over the hump" of thinking about this as a new kind of formula for success. It's about loving the people who support the church's mission, believing they're happier and healthier when they're giving, and inspiring them to step up to the fullness of their potential as supporters.

Program and ministry staff do not need to see a move toward relationship with donors as a departure from their purpose. It is an extension, a new facet, of their purpose. Who is better to inspire givers about the future of your children's ministry expansion project than your children's ministry director? Who knows those families and their individual passions better than that person or his/her staff?

Donors need ministry just as surely as Sunday school attendees or recovering alcoholics. Those donors need the care and attention of a friend more than our church needs their money. But as they receive ministry from a person who is passionate about a certain mission in the church, it is appropriate that their giving will flow toward the mission.

To develop a new culture in your church, you must begin with the most basic fundamentals, training and leading your staff from the ground up. It may even feel a bit infantile at first, but you have to start with the basic question, *Why are we here?*, and build from there.

A pilot leaving New York City and heading for London will totally miss the British Isles if his heading is *one degree off.* To arrive at the destination of a healthy culture, start right. In creating a healthy new culture within our churches and ministry organizations, we must ensure that the entire team is on the same page at the same time working toward the same goals. They need to see their roles as integrated and overlapping. They must not persist as a number of teams, each doing its own thing, but rather as one team, with each member contributing to the success of the whole. Team play wins games. The church wins, and — of at least equal importance, if not more — our givers win.

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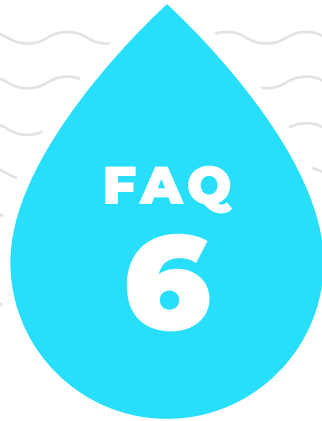
Should the head pastor always be the one to make 'the ask'?

Churches and ministry organizations are often stuck on who should make "the ask" of a donor.

It's something I get consistent questions about, and I understand that there's some thinking that this step requires a kind of special training. While there are donor-centered best practices and methods for presenting and making an ask, this moment is simply another step in the relationship you've built with your giver.

An ask should not come as a huge surprise to the giver, but rather as a natural extension of your ongoing conversations. The staff or key volunteers most connected to the giver should have a role in it. Does the head pastor need to be the one to make the ask? It depends on the donor. Most often, we find the weight and importance of a major gift should involve the lead pastor even if he or she isn't the asker. In the rare times that isn't the case, the lead pastor should connect with, thank and steward the giver regardless of the outcome of the ask.

Pastors, your staff's involvement in this entire process - from cultivation to an ask - is critical. Our greatest impact with donors will be seen in their long-term retention. The difference between the donor who gives a one-time gift and the donor who engages for a lifetime really boils down to personal relationships — and the systems and staff that drive, connect, organize, and maintain those relationships.

TIMOTHY L. SMITH

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