

**FINDING**  
(AND KEEPING)



**MAJOR  
DONORS**

**FOR YOUR  
CHURCH**

**PASTOR'S GUIDE**



# Can you help us find major donors?

“Can you help us find major donors?”

It's the single most common question I get as I work with churches and ministries on their fundraising efforts. And it's almost always the first question people have when they reach out to us for consulting help.

And the answer I give is “Yes...but you probably already know them.”

The reality is that major donors are already in your congregation and on your donor rolls - it's a matter of identifying them. In this article, we're going to do a deep dive into who major donors are and how to find (and keep) them. We'll cover the different types of donors and styles, what patterns and behaviors can flag someone as a prospective major donor, and how to best cultivate and steward those givers.



# What is a Major Donor?

Let's begin with another common question I get as I come alongside ministries as a consultant: "What is a major donor?" The answer is a little different for every church or charitable organization.

For some, there is a group of donors who give \$25,000 or more a year who constitute that organization's "major donors." For others, it may be those who give \$1,000 or more a month. No matter the monetary level, major donors: (1) are the group of largest and most consistent givers to your church and (2) are those you rely on for the majority of your giving dollars. In some cases, you as pastor are the primary cultivator and relationship manager. In some larger churches, there are staff dedicated to helping cultivate and steward major donors.

Major donors most often begin by making smaller, consistent gifts. In all of my years of experience, it's rare for a donor unconnected to a ministry or church to walk in off the street and make a significant financial contribution. Pastors, remember that major donors are built over time - they often begin as volunteers or others highly engaged in a ministry area. They have a strong connection to the church and its mission, and most often, we see major donors sustain important key relationships in the church.



# Finding Major Donors

Churches almost always already know the major donors they're looking for: They're just waiting to be identified and asked! How do we as pastors identify those members of our congregations who are our future major donors? Here are some places to start:

## **Your established volunteer leaders.**

We most often see major donors emerge from service on boards, committees and other leadership roles within the church. Pay close attention to those moving into and out of those roles, and make a point of getting to know them, why they serve and their passions for ministry.

## **Your “yes” helpers.**

This is the subset of your helpful folks who aren't necessarily deacons or committee leaders but always show up when help is needed. You can count on them to be there when a plea for assistance goes out. They have a clear calling and engagement with the spiritual and service ministries of your church.

## **Your faithful attendees.**

The couples or families who never miss a Sunday. The musicians who are there to sing or play even on the snowiest days or those sparse high travel holiday weekends. It's few and far between for them to miss services. These folks are deeply engaged and committed to your congregation.

Not everyone in those groups will have the financial capacity to become a major donor, but you'll rarely find a major donor who doesn't come from one of those communities. It's just a matter of focusing on who they are. Chances are, you already know the folks who will be major donors to your church in the coming years. You (and they) just may not know it yet!

These are simple strategies that can help you hone in on your next set of prospective major donors. The take-away here - no matter how you accomplish it - is to assess your church's giving patterns and trends. Here are some important data points and questions to answer:

1. Who has been giving consistently for an extended period of time? Isolate the group of donors who have had a recurring monthly or annual gift to your congregation for a number of months and years. Review those names and donation habits.
2. Who has consistently increased their giving over time? If you have someone who's moved from being a \$50 a week donor to a \$500 a month donor, that is an excellent indicator of someone ripe for becoming a major donor - and additional conversation about the impact of their giving.
3. Who has made significant one-time gifts? Someone who's stepped up to pay for a piece of equipment or fund a youth who couldn't otherwise join a mission trip or summer church camp may be waiting to be asked to fund other projects.

Through our firm's partnership with ACST, we can assist churches and ministries with a data analysis of their donor base and giving patterns. Called a Donor Performance Index (DPI), this comprehensive assessment of your church's giving and givers can give you tremendous insight about what is working - and what is not - in your stewardship program. We'd highly recommend organizations experience a DPI assessment, especially if you are considering a capital campaign in the near future.

But even without the robustness of a full DPI, your own review of your donation and giving patterns can help you identify a set of prospects who deserve additional attention. What is their story and their connection to your church? What motivates their investments in your ministry?

Pastors, spending time to learn more about these givers will help you understand how to best make an ask of them in the future, when the right project or opportunity meets their passions as a donor.

A magnifying glass icon with a dark blue handle and a circular lens. The lens is positioned over the letter 'H' in the title.

# How Do You Keep Major Donors

The key to retaining major donors is understanding donor types/ styles and how to best serve those funding your ministry. Here are some frameworks to consider as you begin conversations with those you've identified who might be major donor prospects to your church.

## **Relationship.**

How did this giver get connected to your church? What is their faith story and what keeps them involved or excites them the most about your ministry? It can be insightful to ask what other ministries or organizations he/she is supporting or involved with. This can help you better understand what projects and interests your giver has outside of your church.

## **Communication.**

Is this giver someone who is inspired by storytelling or personal social and spiritual interactions...but will never open an email or reply to a text? Or is this someone who will pore over every sentence of your mission/ministry newsletter? Is this someone who prolongs a meeting or who gets easily frustrated with derailed meeting agendas? Learn your givers' styles, communications preferences and how they process and best receive information.

## **Engagement.**

Is this a giver who likes to write a check for a need but is not likely to sign up to sort food pantry items? Or is this someone who won't write a check unless they've sorted in the pantry? Learn what inspires and drives your givers. Statistically, donors who have volunteered in a ministry give more and more often than those who haven't, so pay close attention to your volunteers across your church.

One of the misconceptions about fundraising is that acquiring new donors is tough. In my years of experience, I've found that retaining donors is actually tougher. But it doesn't have to be. The most frequent "gripe" I hear from donors - even cheerful ones - is that the church doesn't do a good job acknowledging them. Most church donors are rarely thanked for their faithful and ongoing giving. Changing that is key to retaining donors, especially major ones.



Here are three keys to major donor retention:

1. Thank early and often. Be sure your church is acknowledging gifts in a timely manner. There's nothing quite like a handwritten note, phone call or personal text from the pastor to a significant donor to let them know how much you appreciate their sacrificial giving.
2. Demonstrate impact. Your major donors MUST know the difference they are making. If they have supported a project, be sure you provide an update or report on the outcomes. Engage them in the life of your ministry and help them grasp how their ongoing support changes lives each day in your congregation. Use your communications vehicles and your staff and personal relationships to share those stories.
3. Personal relationships. Continue to invest in the lives of your donors. Pastoral relationships and interpersonal relationships across your congregation keep people connected in community. People give to causes, but they give passionately to people: keep that front and center in your stewardship program.

Those practices are good advice for any donor relationships, but they are critical to retaining major donors. Donors who stop giving to a ministry often do so because they were never thanked and didn't ever feel as though their contributions were "seen" or made a difference.

Understanding your donors' styles and what types of donors you have can help you shape your asks, your acknowledgments and even your broader stewardship campaigns to better meet them where they are. Thanks to our partnership with ACST, we are able to come alongside churches and help them assess their stewardship programs and even their staffing, volunteer needs or donor capacity. Please reach out if we can be of help to your congregation.

We hope you will discover the many prospective, potential major donors hiding in plain sight in your congregation. Enjoy getting to know them and how God might use them - and you - to further the kingdom.

-Timothy L. Smith

# Choosing the Right Ministry Partner

## **The know-how you need from experts you trust.**

ACS Technologies is the original pioneer of Church Management Software (ChMS). We are firmly dedicated to serving local churches all over North America by providing the best-in-class ministry software and service solutions that help you fulfill Christ's mission for your Church.

## **Tools and support to strengthen churches.**

We build great software, but we don't stop there. We have a "service-first" approach that truly sets us apart. With hundreds of dedicated support and consulting personnel, your staff can reach our team 24/7. We're in your corner to help you with the ministry challenges you face every day.

## **Ideas and solutions powered by integrity.**

Integrity is real for us, and it means consistently being faithful stewards by doing the right thing for church success. We have earned the trust of pastors, church staff, congregants, our employees, and colleagues for over 40 years.

## **A plan to meet your needs and move your ministry.**

We're not just interested in satisfied customers. We see ourselves as your real ministry partner and will work with you to make disciples that will last for an eternity. We're excited to talk about your goals, create a plan together, and set you up with the software, service, and resources you need.

## **We believe in YOU!**

ACS Technologies believes in the local church. Over 75% of our team has experience serving in their local churches. We know firsthand that serving the Church means serving people, and we take seriously our commitment to helping ministries like yours achieve their God-given mandate - to make disciples in their communities, states, and across the world.

## Let's Talk

We know the challenges of switching or implementing new technology and how that can be intimidating. But we also know the unbelievable changes that have happened within churches that have partnered with us for their ministry needs. Let's connect and see how we can assist you in the greatest thing you do - grow God's Kingdom.

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