

Eternal Impact: Unlocking the Potential of Gratitude

BY: Cheryl Ayrault -Simmons

As we usher in the New Year, it's that delightful season when we dust off our strategic plans, perhaps chuckling at last year's resolutions that didn't quite make it past January. Reflecting on our past endeavors—some triumphant, others that seemed like divinely inspired lessons in humility—we find ourselves grateful for the opportunity to refine our approaches. In His infinite grace, God grants us the chance to infuse our plans with renewed vigor, continuing our mission with a spirit of excellence and gratitude.

As Proverbs 16:3 reminds us, *“Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.”*

As I reflect on the strategic plans for the nonprofits I serve and the board seats I hold, I am continually reminded of the importance of integrating gratitude into every aspect of our mission. In reviewing the latest policies and insights gained over recent years—particularly since the disruptions of COVID—one truth remains clear: people need to feel deeply appreciated, valued, and embraced as part of the family. By acknowledging the invaluable contributions of our donors and partners through intentional, faith-filled gratitude, we not only honor their generosity but also strengthen the relational foundations that propel our shared mission forward. This alignment of gratitude and strategy is where transformational impact truly begins.

As Mother Teresa wisely stated, *“Joy is prayer; joy is strength, joy is love. God loves a cheerful giver.”* By expressing heartfelt appreciation, we not only honor our donors but also inspire a shared dedication to effecting meaningful change across generations.

When donors feel genuinely appreciated, they are more inclined to increase their support, both in frequency and amount.

Research underscores the significance of donor appreciation in enhancing retention rates. Notably, only 20% of first-time donors make a subsequent donation. However, once a donor contributes a second time and a real communication schedule with gratitude takes place, the likelihood of continued support escalates to 60%.

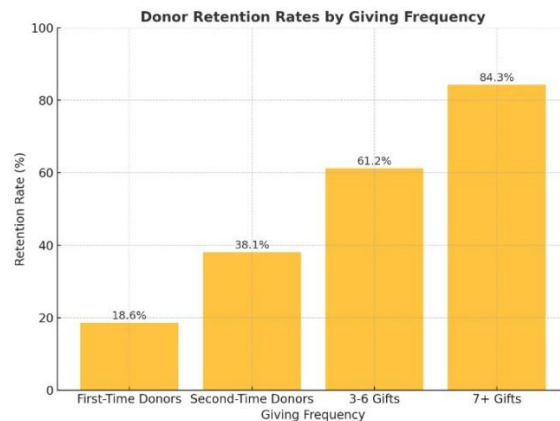
Furthermore, the impact of gratitude is evident in donor retention statistics. Here is a graph illustrating donor retention rates based on giving frequency. It highlights how retention significantly increases with subsequent gifts with gratitude communication:

- First-Time Donors: 18.6%
- Second Time Donors: 38.1%
- 3-6 Gifts: 61.2%
- 7+ Gifts: 84.3%

This visual underscore the importance of fostering gratitude and connection to encourage repeated giving and build long-term donor relationships.

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In the context of Christian stewardship, the Apostle Paul exemplifies the importance of expressing gratitude. He sets a powerful example in his letters to the early church, where he regularly expressed heartfelt thanks for the generosity of believers. In Philippians 1:3-5 (NIV), Paul writes:

“I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.”

Paul’s gratitude was more than polite acknowledgment; it was deeply rooted in his understanding of the spiritual significance of partnership. He recognized that the faithful giving of others reflected their obedience to God and their commitment to advancing the gospel.

The act of giving is not merely transactional; it is transformational. In 2 Corinthians 9:7 (NIV), Paul reminds us:

“Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (Does this sound familiar?)

This verse underscores the spiritual nature of giving. When donors and partners contribute to ministry, they participate in an act of worship, aligning their hearts with God’s purposes. Their cheerful giving not only blesses the ministry but also deepens their own spiritual journey.

The partnership between donors and ministry staff is more than financial—it is a shared journey of spiritual growth and discovery. When donors see the fruits of their giving and staff witness their generosity, both experience the profound joy of participating in God’s redemptive work.

For donors, giving is an opportunity to actively engage in the Great Commission. It enables them to see beyond the temporal and focus on eternal rewards. For ministry staff, witnessing the generosity of others is a humbling and faith-strengthening experience, reminding us that God always provides through His people.

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As both groups witness the kingdom impact of their partnership, they grow together in their faith. This shared journey fosters a deeper understanding of God's heart for the lost and a stronger commitment to His mission.

These principles of stewardship have also been evident in my own ministry experience. I have had the opportunity to witness countless lives transformed by the gospel, both on and off the mission field. Time and again, I have seen how the generosity of faithful partners creates opportunities for people to encounter Christ in ways they never imagined.

One particularly moving aspect of this journey has been witnessing individuals and couples come to Christ during vision trips. These trips are designed to help donors see the transformative impact of their generosity firsthand—whether through Hope Center projects, education initiatives, or other vital humanitarian efforts. These moments of partnership highlight the truth of Proverbs 11:25, *“A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.”* Often, some of these donors are not yet believers; their initial motivation for giving stems from a heartfelt desire to address human needs and alleviate suffering.

Yet, as they witness the tangible fruits of their generosity, many of these individuals experience something unexpected: a spiritual awakening. Gratitude fills the air as they meet the very people their giving has blessed individuals whose physical needs are met but who also radiate the joy of knowing Christ. In these encounters, we see the essence of transformational giving: a partnership that not only meets material needs but also brings the life-changing power of the Gospel. Through their journey, donors come face-to-face with the love and power of God at work, aligning with 2 Corinthians 9:11,



“You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.”

I'll never forget the trip of one special couple who visited an orphanage their gift had funded. Initially, their focus was on seeing the infrastructure their generosity had made possible. However, what they encountered was far more profound: the deep gratitude and heartfelt testimonies of villagers who had prayed for years for such a blessing. In this sacred moment, the couple came to understand the eternal impact of their partnership. They began asking deeper questions about the God who hears and answers prayers.

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By the end of the trip, this couple experienced the ultimate transformation. They realized that the same God who cared for that village was also pursuing their hearts. On the final day of the trip, the couple publicly declared their faith and were baptized by the pastor and his wife of the very orphanage they had supported. This moment of gratitude, partnership, and spiritual transformation encapsulated the essence of what it means to walk in obedience to God's call to serve.

These stories remind us of the profound truth found in Isaiah 55:11, *"So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."* Every act of transformational giving is an invitation to witness the Kingdom of God at work, touching lives with the power of His love and grace.

These moments remind us that every act of giving is a sacred opportunity for God to move—not only in the lives of the beneficiaries but also in the hearts of the givers. As Jesus reminds us in Acts 20:35, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive."* The tangible humanitarian impact of generosity is undeniable, but it often serves as a divine bridge to something even greater: a profound encounter with the living God.



One last moving story I have witnessed came from a remote village that had long suffered from the absence of clean water. For years, the villagers prayed, feeling as though their cries went unheard. Then, through the faithful generosity of donors, clean water finally arrived, changing not only their physical circumstances but also their spiritual perspective.

A man from the village, with tears streaming down his face, shared his story with me. "We thought we were the forgotten people," he said. "But when this water came, we knew God had heard us. He cared for us, and He sent you and the donors to bring what we needed." In that moment, the essence of transformational giving came alive. The gratitude of the beneficiaries became a testament to God's faithfulness, and the donors' partnership in this mission became a living reflection of Isaiah 41:17, *"The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the Lord will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them."*

This story captures the heart of faith-based generosity: God uses the physical gifts of His people to reveal His spiritual provision. Such moments remind us that giving is far more than meeting needs—it is participating in God's redemptive work, where both giver and recipient encounter His love, care, and divine purpose. Through these acts of partnership, we become vessels for His grace, bearing witness to His promises fulfilled and His compassion poured out on the world.

This moment revealed the true depth of what partnership in ministry accomplishes. Through the generosity of donors, God is showing people around the world that they are seen, loved, and remembered. This is the Kingdom in action.

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Gratitude is a powerful tool in strengthening relationships and inspiring continued generosity. Expressing appreciation to donors and partners is not just a courtesy—it is a biblical principle. Proverbs 11:25 (NIV) says:

“A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.”

When ministries take time to refresh and encourage their supporters through sincere thanks, they foster a culture of mutual blessing. Whether through personalized letters, public recognition, or meaningful tokens of gratitude, these gestures reflect the heart of Christ.

Here are a few spiritually enriching and creative ways we can honor donors and partners:

1. Special Acknowledgement

- **Personalized Communications from Leadership**

Handwritten letters or calls from senior leaders can convey sincere appreciation, highlighting the specific impact of a donor’s contributions.

2. Personalized Video Messages

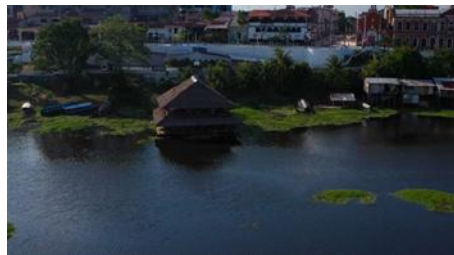
- **Tailored Expressions of Gratitude:** Develop personalized video messages featuring members of your organization expressing heartfelt appreciation. This personalized approach fosters a deeper connection, making donors feel uniquely valued and integral to your mission.

3. Donor Spotlights

- **Highlighting Supporter Stories:** Feature donor narratives in newsletters, on your website, or across social media platforms. Sharing their motivations and experiences not only acknowledges their generosity but also inspires others to engage with your cause.

4. Exclusive Access Opportunities

- **Behind-the-Scenes Experiences:** Offer donors exclusive access to events, such as behind-the-scenes tours, meetings with leadership, or previews of upcoming projects. These experiences deepen their connection to the organization and provide tangible insights into the impact of their support.



5. Donor Recognition Programs

- **Lifetime Giving Societies:** Establish tiered recognition societies that honor donors based on their cumulative giving. For example, some organizations recognize donors through societies such as a society for contributions of \$100,000 or more, and a second society for contributions between \$24,999 and \$99,999. These societies offer exclusive benefits and acknowledge the long-term commitment of donors.

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- Annual Giving Societies: Create programs that recognize donors for their annual contributions, encouraging consistent support. These societies can offer various benefits, such as special communications, event invitations, or public acknowledgment, fostering a sense of community and appreciation among donors.

6. Commemorative Gifts

- Customized Tokens of Appreciation: Present donors with personalized gifts, such as engraved plaques, commemorative books, or unique art pieces created by beneficiaries. These tokens serve as meaningful reminders of their impact and your gratitude.

7. Impact Reports

- Detailed Contribution Outcomes: Provide donors with comprehensive reports detailing how their contributions have been utilized. Highlight specific projects, success stories, or milestones achieved, reinforcing the tangible outcomes of their generosity.
- Specialized Publications: Include customized books or reports that delve deeper into the impact of their contributions, offering a more personalized and detailed account of how their support has facilitated change.

8. Donor Appreciation Events

- Exclusive Celebratory Gatherings: Host special events dedicated to appreciating donors, such as intimate receptions, annual galas, or virtual gatherings. These occasions offer opportunities for personal interaction, recognition, and the strengthening of relationships.
- Specialized Vision Trips: Organize invitation-only vision trips for donors who have contributed to specific projects or regions. These immersive experiences allow donors to witness firsthand the impact of their support, fostering a deeper connection to the mission and encouraging future engagement.



Stepping into the year ahead, may we be ever mindful of the holy work entrusted to us—the lives we are touching both on and off the mission field. In the spirit of Micah 6:8, “*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God,*” let us approach our donor engagement with intentionality and excellence, honoring the sacred partnerships that sustain our mission. Each act of gratitude strengthens the foundation upon which our collective impact is built, affirming the value of those who walk alongside us in this Kingdom work.

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We are not merely touching lives; we are changing generations. Henry Blackaby reminds us, “Find out where God is working and join Him.” Let us press forward with hearts full of faith, hands ready for service, and eyes fixed on the open doors He has provided. Together, through His provision and our shared dedication, we are sowing seeds that will yield an eternal harvest—one life, one generation at a time.

I would love to hear from you! If you’ve come across data, strategies, or innovative tactics that have been effective in enhancing donor engagement, please feel free to share. Together, we can continue to grow and inspire impactful generosity.

About the Author:



Cheryl resides in Virginia Beach, Virginia, where she and her family enjoy an active outdoor lifestyle year-round, from relaxing at the beach to traveling to the slopes. With a heart devoted to women, children, and families, Cheryl is passionate about seeing lives transformed through the power of God’s Word. As she often shares in her testimony, the Word of God and education have profoundly impacted her life, fueling her dedication to faith-based philanthropy and Kingdom-focused initiatives.

Cheryl has witnessed firsthand the transformative impact of these efforts, from mercy ministries on the field to evangelism and discipleship programs that bring hope and lasting change to communities. Her years of experience partnering with ministries and organizations have equipped her to create strategies that inspire generosity, touch generations, and advance God’s mission across the globe.