

A silhouette of a person wearing a puffy jacket, standing on a dark mountain peak with their arms raised towards a cloudy sky at sunset or sunrise. The scene is partially obscured by a vertical blue bar on the right side of the image.

5 Steps
**TO CREATING A
CULTURE OF
GRATITUDE AND
GIVER
APPRECIATION**



Gratitude is essential to any culture. This is especially true when inviting people to participate in God's work by practicing generosity in many forms. Appreciation is the intentional act of expressing gratitude.

This resource guides church leaders seeking to create a healthy gratitude culture and develop a year-round gratitude plan. Before we get to the strategies, let's explore:

- Gratitude is God's Idea
- Nonprofit Impact on Church Giving Trends
- Why People Give and Stop Giving

Authors Note: We use the term "giver" to help you understand how these concepts, ideas, and appreciation strategies apply not only to financial giving but also to givers who share their time, wisdom, and experience in bringing God's plans for your church to life.

Gratitude is God's Idea

Gratitude is the central theme of the Bible. Paul's advice to some early Christians in Turkey is clear and compelling:

And always be thankful. -Colossians 3:15

Paul was in jail when he wrote this. He doesn't say, "When things are good, be thankful." He is in a small, hot, crowded cell living off bread and water and says, "And always be thankful."

Gratitude is one of the great virtues in life and the parent of many others. It frees us from the chains of entitlement and helps us not to take things for granted. Gratitude is a response to God's goodness and grace showered upon us, as well as the kindness and generosity of others. Even on the evening before his death, Jesus was grateful:

Jesus picked up a cup of wine and gave thanks to God. -Matthew 26:27

Practicing gratitude restores us to God's image. It also sets churches up for success in making disciples and funding ministry.



horizons
STEWARDSHIP

Nonprofit Impact on Church Giving Trends

Over the decades, Horizons has partnered with more than 10,000 churches. We have been blessed to witness countless hearts and lives changed forever through the power of gratitude, reflected in the actions of sharing and receiving gratitude and appreciation. We have also witnessed the absence of this powerful agent of change in churches, where, either through a lack of understanding, indifference, or misplaced priorities, they failed to practice even the simplest acts of gratitude and appreciation.

Current trends in the giving landscape for American churches are not encouraging. Giving USA recently shared that over the past four decades (1983-2023), giving to religious organizations has declined from 63% of total charitable giving to 24%.

American households report that 67% of their giving is spiritually motivated, but only about one-third goes to local church ministry funding.

Givers increasingly no longer see giving to their church as their top priority; instead, they see their church as simply one of many giving options.

The number of nonprofit organizations increased by 27% since 2012. Churches now compete with a growing number of nonprofits in a pool of giving that has remained stagnant at approximately 2% of disposable household income for the last 40 years. As new nonprofits emerge and existing nonprofits expand, the competition for philanthropic dollars will only become more challenging.

Why Are Givers Shifting Giving Away from Their Churches?

Our nonprofit friends are becoming increasingly successful at making the case to the church's most capable givers that they are better stewards of God's resources. How are they doing this?

- Communicating a clear and compelling vision with measurable outcomes.
- Consistently sharing stories of a single life that was changed and making a strong and specific connection with supporters of how their past and future investments have and will create more stories of transformation. This is often accomplished within the context of a personalized giver appreciation communication.



horizons
STEWARDSHIP

- Leaders build authentic relationships with supporters, listening carefully to their spiritually motivated dreams and desires and connecting what God is stirring in their hearts to opportunities to invest in that transformation through the nonprofits mission.
- Clear calls to action that are both time bound and specific in what is being asked.
- By measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of their development and missional systems, they can share specific outcomes related to giver investments that are supported by trustworthy data points and key performance indicators.
- Understanding the importance of integrity and transparency to supporters, they share financial and impact reports openly.
- The icing on the cake is the high value thriving nonprofits place on giver appreciation to ensure that each supporter regularly sees how their investment is making a difference. When a supporter takes an action of interest or change in investment, thriving nonprofits have systems in place to make a timely and customized response.

Some Good News!

I encourage you to take seriously the disturbing trends in church giving, which also includes volunteering that has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels, but don't get stuck here.

Both [Horizons](#) and [The Unstuck Group](#) research indicates that many churches are thriving. How are they doing it? The same way thriving nonprofits are. At Horizons we describe this as an [integrated funding strategy](#). The big difference between the church and most nonprofits is our call to make disciples who transform the world. The more effectively we accomplish our mission, the more resources (human and financial) your church will have to drive your missional goals. Givers who are actively engaged in small groups and serving give three and a half times as much as those who only attend church one or two times per month.

A Pastor's Confession

Craig Finnestad is the co-author of this resource. In 2005, he planted The Waters Edge Church Omaha, Nebraska. In his own words he shares a story of a simple act of appreciation that completely changed how he engages with his givers.

"Over a decade ago, I received four \$100 bills as a Christmas gift from someone in our church: one each for me, my wife, and both boys. The four of us talked about what to do with the money. We had



horizons
STEWARDSHIP

some good options and decided to give it to a nonprofit our church partners with. We went online and sent \$400 to them.

A few days later, my youngest son met me at the door with a little handwritten card. He was so proud. He wanted me to read it:

Dear Finnestad family –

Thank you for your generous gift for the Hope Center for Kids. It comes at the perfect time. You are helping us offer the hope of Jesus to Kids in north Omaha. I am grateful for each of you!

-Ty Schenzel

The Hope Center is a large nonprofit. It was cool that the CEO would take a few minutes to acknowledge a small gift personally. Then I thought that the church I lead has hundreds of families who give sacrificially, and I don't thank them. At that moment, I was convinced that being grateful for givers wasn't enough. I had to start sharing and expressing gratitude and appreciation to the church's givers—many of whom give more than \$400."

The Holy Spirit used the powerful impact of a simple act of appreciation to inspire a commitment to leading a culture of gratitude at The Waters Edge.

Has it made a difference? See for yourself. In each of the last twelve years, financial giving has increased by at least 10%. While that fact alone places The Waters Edge in a very small percentage of churches that have sustained 12 consecutive years of double-digit increases in giving, *Craig and his team accomplished this while conducting four consecutive capital campaigns!* Their church leaders credit this growth in generosity, in part, to their commitment to creating a culture of gratitude and appreciation.

Why People Give and Stop Giving

Why people give and stop giving to churches and nonprofits has remained consistent over the past 30 years:

- Belief in the demonstrated ability to change lives in a way that aligns with the giver's desires



horizons
STEWARDSHIP

- Relationship with and regard for leadership
- Trust in the fiscal efficiency and stability of the organization

Loss of trust in an organization's ability to effectively and efficiently fulfill its mission is easy to understand.

What may surprise you is that most high-capacity givers say their reason for stopping or shifting their giving is a loss of relationship or connection with the organization. It is not because they lost trust, but rather relationship and connection.

Vital churches and nonprofits understand giver appreciation is foundational to developing and deepening relationships with givers.

If you are struggling with the need to regularly express appreciation for financial giving, consider this thought. You would probably not be surprised to learn that a common reason people reduce or quit *servicing* is because they feel their effort goes unnoticed and unappreciated. Those serving in your ministries would not say they are *servicing* so they can be appreciated, but they probably would say that not feeling appreciated is discouraging and feel it demonstrates a lack of feeling valued by those who lead them.

Now, substitute giving for the word serving in the sentences above and see if it lands differently with you. Giver appreciation is simply building up people through relational encouragement.

As a church leader, you can create a culture of gratitude by showing genuine appreciation. However, without developing a systematic approach to expressing gratitude, other priorities will likely crowd out this critical investment in those who make your church's ministry possible.

Community and Discipleship

The relational impact of generosity goes beyond just leaders. When people give, they emotionally connect to a community of like-minded individuals who share common values and passions.

Authentic gratitude goes beyond delight for a gift and the impact it will have on your ministry. Undergirding authentic gratitude is the celebration of spiritual benefits to our givers as they join God in what God is doing through your church. If our primary gratitude is for the gift, it



horizons
STEWARDSHIP

becomes a form of idolatry in which you risk sending your givers the message you value what you can get more than what they are receiving.

Generosity is a spiritual practice in which we begin to trust in God's provision and abundance, prioritize God's Kingdom over material possessions, and embrace our role as stewards of God's blessings.

Gratitude opens our hearts to the Holy Spirit's work of helping us become more like our generous creator so that we can love God and others more deeply.

Culture in any organization is critical. This is especially true in the church. A growing culture of gratitude and expressions of appreciation will improve any church. Paul modeled gratitude and consistently worked toward developing a culture of gratitude:

I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly. –Ephesians 1:16

Churches with healthy gratitude cultures go beyond what is considered normal. They are radically grateful to God and others. They understand and embrace that it is human nature to want to be appreciated, so they value other people's humanity by frequently thanking them in meaningful ways. Cultivating a culture of gratitude is essential for a vibrant church.

Five Steps to a Year-Round Appreciation Strategy

Naturalists invented field guides in the 19th century to help people identify and learn about plants, animals, and other natural phenomena in the field. Researchers, explorers, and naturalists used these guides to document and categorize different species they encountered during fieldwork.

Horizons partners with hundreds of churches every year. We constantly learn best practices from our partners and explore new methods to help churches fund more ministry and make more disciples. We have created the following guide to help pastors and church leaders create a gratitude culture. This practical resource helps churches develop a practical strategy ensuring that gratitude is expressed promptly and meaningfully. The plan encompasses three key components:



horizons
STEWARDSHIP

- **Acknowledge Gifts Timely and Creatively:** Recognize contributions, large or small, to value givers and demonstrate that every gift is important.
- **Celebrate Milestones:** Honor significant moments and achievements in givers' lives.
- **Tell Stories of Impact:** Share stories of impact to develop continued support.
- **Develop a Year-Round Gratitude Plan:** Express gratitude during the different seasons of the year for various forms of giving, including serving, leadership, inviting, and financial giving.
- **Taking Your Next Steps:** Implementing a strategic and systematic gratitude plan will increase community, deepen discipleship, and inspire ongoing generosity in your church.

Step One: Acknowledge Gifts Timely and Creatively

There are many ways to recognize givers. Gratitude can and should be creative, varied, and timely.

Timely Acknowledgment

The best time to thank a recent giver is shortly after the gift. Sending immediate acknowledgments can be time-consuming. To streamline this process, systems can be implemented to ensure prompt recognition of contributions. Many church management software programs can be set up for automation to help churches be successful in recognizing, for example, first-time, second- and third-time givers, as well as those who have fulfilled or met a specific percentage of an estimate of giving or commitment, givers who have grown a certain percent or amount in a period, those who gave to special projects or lapsed givers who have re-engaged. Fast responses of gratitude enhance the church's credibility and trust and show givers that the impact their gift will make is appreciated and they are personally valued.

Responses within 48-72 hours have the most impact in reinforcing the action you are responding to. Waiting just two weeks greatly diminishes the impact.

Creative Gratitude

Gary Chapman is the author of *The Five Languages of Love*. Gratitude is a form of love. This book teaches that appreciation looks different for different people. Many people are multilingual—they enjoy receiving various forms of love and appreciation. Leaders must choose the most appropriate way to express gratitude based on their relationship with the giver, the



gift's significance, and preferred communication method.

Personalize your follow-up. A thank you that is not personalized is much less impactful than demonstrating that you noticed and care enough to spend an extra minute or two. Using Chapman's *Five Languages of Love*, here are some ways to express gratitude to givers (we are omitting physical touch—although many people like hugs!):

1. Speaking Words of Affirmation

This is the easiest and most common way to thank givers. The more specific the words, the better. Short is good for the recipient and more sustainable for the writer. Three or four sentences are all that are needed. Share your gratitude and write how the gift will make an impact. Here are some ways words of affirmation can be expressed:

- Phone call
- Handwritten note
- Letter with a personal signature
- Email
- Video
- Text message
- Social media message

2. Giving Gifts

The most meaningful gifts are simple and specific to the giver or server. They can include anything from a book to baked goods, a framed photo of a church event, or fresh-grown vegetables.

3. Spending Quality Time

Ministry is incarnational. Spending time with people is what Jesus did. A healthy relationship between the leader and the giver is critical. Context is vital here. Gatherings of financial and ministry leaders are very effective. Lunches, meeting for coffee, playing golf, hiking, and praying together are all examples of spending quality time with givers.

4. Acts of Service



horizons
STEWARDSHIP

Jesus didn't come to be served but to serve. Do something for the giver. For example, if they are on a team at the church, complete a task for them or invite them to serve with you in the community. Serving together is an excellent way to build a relationship.

Many Hands Make Lighter Work

To foster a culture of appreciation within your church, it's essential to encourage everyone to express gratitude, whether among themselves or toward those who contribute. Leadership, staff, and volunteers can all contribute to a culture of gratitude.

Church Example #1: 365 Thank You Notes

A church staff sets a goal to write 365 thank-you notes over the next 12 months, which is just seven notes per week. They begin every staff meeting with a story of transformation. At the end of the meeting, everyone writes a note to someone they noticed doing something they want to see repeated. Sometimes they pass the notes around so the entire team can sign them. Once in place, they plan to expand this practice to church leadership meetings to deepen and accelerate their cultural shift.

Church Example #2: Pulled Pork and Potato Salad

A pastor enjoys smoking meat. Every summer, he hosts a gathering for the church's giving leaders. The purpose of the gathering is to appreciate their significant investment in the church. The invitation is clear that the pastor will not ask for money or more time. The agenda is thanking the givers, sharing stories of impact, seeking feedback from those most invested in the church, and casting a vision of what is coming up in the next season of ministry for the church. Givers look forward to this event; some have even asked, months in advance, when it will be so they can plan their schedules accordingly and not miss it.

Step Two: Celebrate Milestones

People regularly celebrate milestones, such as birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, and accomplishments. The church should, too! Milestones in the church provide excellent opportunities for pastors and leaders to express gratitude.



Recognize Significant Events

Celebrating milestones acknowledges individuals' generosity and reinforces the connection between the church and its members. Establishing a system for tracking and recognizing these milestones is critical for success. Many ways exist to honor givers. Practicing gratitude is contextual, based on the church and the giver. Some givers enjoy public recognition, while others prefer to receive it privately. The following is a short list of possible milestones to consider recognizing:

- Giving a first-time donation
- Volunteering for the first time
- Signing up for recurring giving
- Completing an Estimate of Giving for the first time
- Fulfilling a commitment
- Completing 100 hours of service
- Making a major gift
- Returning a Donor Declaration Sheet for a legacy gift
- Having a birthday

Celebrating milestones in givers' lives increases the emotional satisfaction of both the giver and the receiver of the appreciation. The celebration also strengthens the recipient's connection to the church's mission and boosts trust and transparency by communicating that the congregation cares.

Church Example #3: Lunch with the First-Time Givers

The church has an automated trigger to inform the pastor of all first-time givers. The pastor calls within a few days and invites the giver to come to the church and join them for lunch. They are clear that the only agenda item is to get to know each other. The pastor hears their first impressions of the church, learns some of their stories, and thanks them for the impact their giving will make. Many of the newer people at the church report this lunch is one of the main reasons they are active in the church's life and support the church's ministry and missions.



Step Three 3: Tell Stories of Impact

Jesus told stories. Stories are powerful and communicate in ways that a list of facts never could. Stories communicate impact—one of the primary reasons people give. Stories are an opportunity to thank givers. Sharing gratitude at the end of a story is an ideal way to thank the giver for their generosity.

Impact happens in many ways:

- A new friendship is created
- A hurting person in the community is served
- A new believer is baptized
- Somebody experiences freedom through recovery
- People grow closer to Jesus
- A relationship is restored
- A new giver discovers the joys of generosity

Share stories as often as possible in as many ways as possible.

- Include a story in the church's weekly email
- Have a section on the church website for video testimonies
- Create an annual report with stories of people the church has blessed, both inside and outside the church
- Tell a story during before the offering in worship
- Share a story of impact in a letter attached to quarterly giving statements
- Start staff and committee meetings with a story
- Have an anniversary service or annual meeting highlighting the church's impact in the past year
- Integrate stories of transformation into sermons

At the end of each story, connect giving to impact and generosity to spiritual growth as you share gratitude to those who make your ministry and missions possible.



horizons
STEWARDSHIP

Church Example #4: Any Given Sunday

The worship planning team meets every Tuesday to plan worship for the coming Sunday. One of the items they always discuss is what stories they will tell during upcoming offering talks. They work from a year-round calendar but are flexible if a compelling story emerges. They focus on stories of a single life that was impacted in their mission field, a church member's life that was changed, an experience of someone impacted by serving in a church or church partner ministry, a person who was blessed by the practice of generosity (giver or receiver).

Before the offering time, the 1 to 2-minute story is shared, followed by a pastor or announcer thanking those who made the story possible with their generosity and explaining the various ways those moved can give and serve. Worshiper surveys reveal the offering talks have become a highlight of the service.

Step Four: Develop a Year-Round Gratitude Plan

A healthy gratitude culture isn't created in a day. It is created daily. Authentic and immediate gratitude should be shared year-round. Every day is a new opportunity to express gratitude and say "Thank you." Giver appreciation can't just be something that happens seasonally or when schedules are less busy—a planned, intentional approach is critical.

Year-Round Engagement

Creating a calendar of activities is an essential first step. Include timelines, who is responsible for the task, and the people being thanked. Schedule events and activities to thank givers and foster consistent engagement. In addition to the weekly examples already shared:

- Host bi-annual giver gatherings
- Pastors and key staff meet weekly for coffee or lunch with ministry and financial leaders to deepen their relationships and express authentic appreciation
- Create a quarterly video summary of the impact the church has made, connecting giving to continued success, and include a clear call to action for the next steps people can take to grow their engagement
- Mail a birthday and Christmas card with a personalized note expressing gratitude for the recipient



You received a diagram of a sample year-round gratitude plan when downloading this guide. It provides a practical and comprehensive outline for building a healthy gratitude culture. Contextualize this guide for your ministry setting.

Make It Personal

Developing tailored appreciation initiatives for various segments helps the church be more specific and personal thanking givers. As you build your year-round strategy, the following are examples of possible giver groups:

- Financial leaders
- Recurring givers
- Planned givers
- Key volunteers who are generous givers of their time and talents
- Givers who are generous to missions
- New givers in the last year
- Givers who have significantly increased their giving

All gratitude is good. Personal gratitude is the best. Acknowledge the unique value of each giver's contribution to your church's mission and vision. Go beyond what is considered normal for extraordinary results.

- Visit givers in their homes or invite them to yours. Share progress updates and impact stories. Invite their feedback and give them space to share ideas.
- Send personalized thank-you notes, emails, or videos detailing how their contributions have made a difference.
- Find financial leaders before or after worship (or during the week) and personally thank them for their investment.

Church Example #5: Famous for a Day

Twelve times a year, the church staff chooses a volunteer of the month. They get a photo of the volunteer, and one of them writes a story about the person. Then, they post the picture and story on their social media channels. It is always a surprise to the recipient. This post typically has the highest engagement every month. The church staff thanks the volunteers in the post.



horizons
STEWARDSHIP

The celebrated volunteer receives additional gratitude and appreciation from everybody who comments on the post. The church finds the Volunteer of the Month a fun way of creating a culture of gratitude.

Step Five: Taking Your Next Steps

The pages of the final chapter of the field guide are blank and will be written by you and others in your church. Building a culture of gratitude requires time and intentional effort. Begin by developing a team. Look for staff, leaders, and servants who are grateful people. Look for people you enjoy collaborating with, and look for people who can share this work with you. Together, you can do more as a team than you could do separately as individuals.

Sending a thank-you note after a gift or a volunteer's service is a positive step, but it is no longer sufficient. Genuine gratitude is most impactful when it is consistent and heartfelt. Only then will you experience gratitude's effect on developing trust and building relationships.

Integrate your gratitude strategy at all levels of your church, including your integrated funding plan. Consistently encourage every leader and staff member to express gratitude, whether to give, volunteer, or colleague.

Creating and implementing a year-round gratitude plan to develop a healthy gratitude culture will provide the church with an environment that will allow it to excel in funding ministry and growing disciples.



horizons
STEWARDSHIP

About the Authors



Joe Park leads the Horizons Stewardship team of 40 Ministry Strategists, ICF-trained coaches, and support staff in their mission to help churches and faith-based nonprofits grow disciples and fund ministry. The Horizons team has guided the raising of over 10 billion dollars in annual, capital and planned giving. Joe is a former bank CEO who frequently speaks on subjects impacting generosity. His weekly blog is followed by over 45,000 church leaders.



Craig Finnestad is a Senior Ministry Strategist at Horizons Stewardship. He leads annual and capital campaigns for churches all over the country. He lives in Omaha, Nebraska, where he is the Founding Pastor of The Water's Edge Church—one of the fastest-growing churches in the Midwest. He has earned the Executive Certificate in Religious Fundraising granted through the Lilly School of Philanthropy's Lake Institute on Faith and Giving.

About Horizons Stewardship

[Horizons Stewardship](#) helps church and faith-based nonprofit leaders grow disciples and fund ministry through a collaborative framework tailored to the church's unique culture and aligned with leadership's vision. We provide strategic planning, implementation coaching, organizational health consulting, communication strategies, technology, analytics, and integrated funding strategies to ensure your church lives into its full ministry potential and impact.

After over three decades of working with thousands of churches to raise over 10 billion dollars for ministry, Horizons has refined a deeply integrated, spiritually focused approach that consistently results in more ministry funding and effective disciple-making strategies.

Horizons' ministry team of International Coaching Federation (ICF) trained coaches are ready to help you discover a proven, effective process that will empower you to move forward with clarity and confidence. On average, churches that partner with Horizons experience a double-digit increase in giving within the first twelve months.

Year-Long Giver Appreciation Strategy

JANUARY

New Year Gratitude Kickoff

Theme

Renewed Beginnings and Commitments

Activity

Send personalized New Year cards to all givers, expressing gratitude for their past contributions and sharing the vision and goals for the upcoming year.

Communication

Launch a monthly newsletter or email highlighting life change and impact stories.

FEBRUARY

Celebrate Dedication and Community

Theme

Love and Appreciation

Activity

Hold a community brunch to honor generosity, sharing impactful stories of growth through giving.

Social Media

Share weekly "Dedication Notes" to givers, spotlighting different contributors and their impact.

MARCH

Spring into Action

Theme

Growth and Renewal

Activity

Organize a volunteer day where givers can engage directly with ministry projects, such as painting rooms or planting trees, to foster a hands-on connection.

Communication

Highlight spring initiatives funded by donations in the newsletter.

APRIL

Easter and Reflection

Theme

Renewal and Reflection

Activity

Send Easter-themed appreciation messages with a small token of appreciation, such as a bookmark or devotional guide.

Event

Host a reflection evening with testimonies on how donations have impacted lives.

MAY

Celebrate Milestones

Theme

Honoring Long-term Commitment

Activity

Recognize long-term givers and feature their stories in the newsletter.

Event

Host a Legacy Luncheon, inviting long-term givers to enjoy a meal together in a relaxed and celebratory atmosphere.

JUNE

Community Engagement Month

Theme

Active Participation

Activity

Launch a "Thank You" video series featuring staff and community members expressing gratitude.

Social Media

Share weekly updates on ongoing projects, inviting givers to engage with comments and shares.

JULY

Summer of Appreciation

Theme

Summertime Gratitude

Activity

Host a summer picnic for givers and their families, including games and activities highlighting ministry impact.

Communication

Mid-year impact report to givers, showcasing accomplishments and thanking them for their support.

AUGUST

Personal Touch Month

Theme

Personal Connections

Activity

Have staff and volunteers make personal phone calls to thank givers for their continued support.

Social Media

Share stories of individual givers and their reasons for supporting the church.

SEPTEMBER

Back to School and Service

Theme

Education and Service

Activity

Organize a school supply drive sponsored by givers, with updates on its success shared at a giver appreciation event.

Newsletter

Feature stories of ministry impact funded by donations.

OCTOBER

Harvest of Thanks

Theme

Bountiful Gratitude

Activity

Send harvest-themed thank-you packages with a letter detailing the year's progress and upcoming needs.

Event

Host an Autumn Festival celebrating generosity with fall-themed decor and activities. Hold it outdoors on church grounds or in a nearby park.

NOVEMBER

Thanksgiving Celebration

Theme

Giving Thanks

Activity

Create a gratitude wall in the church where community members can leave notes of thanks to givers.

Communication

Send a Thanksgiving message by letter or email highlighting key giver contributions and their impact.

DECEMBER

Year-End Reflection and Celebration

Theme

Year-End Reflections

Activity

Organize a holiday appreciation event, complete with testimonials, music, and a presentation of the year's achievements.

Communication

Send a year-end report and a heartfelt holiday card thanking givers for their essential role in the church's success.