

# Cultivating Adventist Giving: But We're Different, Right?

By Michael J. Brown, Independent Consultant

***“Giving is a transferable habit that happens to be cultivated in religious settings”***

~ Jonathan Hill, Calvin College Sociology Professor

The Seventh-day Adventist church is a unique group of people. The Spirit of Prophecy is unique. The Sanctuary Message is unique. The Third Angel's Message is also unique. According to publication *Faith Communities Today*<sup>1</sup>, Adventists have been characterized as one of the most philanthropic groups in North America. So it is no surprise that when contemplating the applicability of philanthropic best practices, some may say: “That's fine for secular organizations or for other religious organizations, but you know ... we're different.”

Well, you may be surprised to learn that the *Connected To Give*<sup>2</sup> survey found no statistical difference in giving based on religious affiliation. In other words, we are more similar than different in how and why we give. These conclusions have major implications for the philanthropy segment at large and in your local congregation. Here are some important points to consider when cultivating giving:

1. People with differing religious affiliations, whether in faith or denomination, have been shown to give at similar rates and for similar reasons.
2. Research shows there are three dimensions that influence giving decisions: organizational purpose, religiosity of organizational identity, and one's self-perceptions about being religious or spiritual.
3. Secular giving motivations parallel religious motivations, even across differing religious affiliations of U.S. and Canadian donors.

Historically, the philanthropy sector was broken down into two macro areas. The first, and largest, was the religious segment. It was defined as religious congregations focusing solely on spiritual development. The other segment was the secular segment. It was thought to handle everything else, including health and human services, education, and so on. This sharp split inadvertently understated the magnitude of the impact of religious sector giving. Donations to church affiliated ministries like food pantries or health and wellness centers were not counted as part of the religious segment. Since they fulfilled broader “nonreligious” needs, the donations were rolled into the secular segment.

Fortunately the *Connected To Give*<sup>2</sup> study recognized the broader breadth of program support attributable to religious nonprofits. The finding of this nationally representative survey of 5,000 participants was startling. Of the total individual contributions to U.S. philanthropy, 73% are in the religious segment. That total is composed of Congregations, which receive 41% of U.S. philanthropy donations, and Religiously Identified Organizations (RIOs) which receive 32% of U.S. philanthropy donations. Non-religiously Identified Organizations (NRIOs) receive the remaining 23% of U.S. philanthropy contributions.

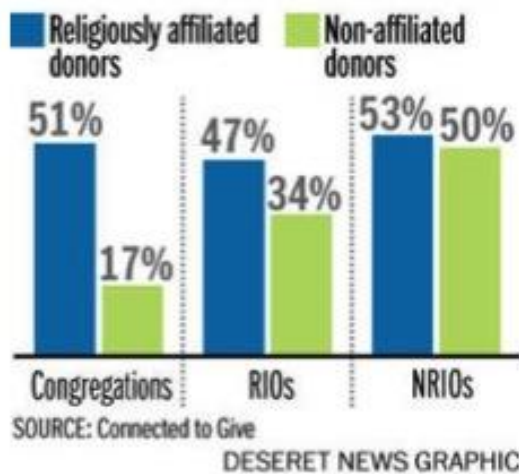
Even more interesting is who gives to Congregations, RIOs, and NRIOs:

## Religious and secular giving

### DISTRIBUTION OF GIVING



### PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO GIVE TO ALL TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS



From the Deseret News<sup>3</sup> graphic above, we see that Religiously Affiliated Donors lead giving in Congregation, RIO, and NRIO contributions. We also see that Non-affiliated donors participate significantly in both Congregation and RIO giving. An important take-away from the above is that Religiously Affiliated Donors tend to lead in donation rates across the board. Moreover, *Connected to Give*<sup>2</sup> also shows that Religiously Affiliated Donors tend to lead in median donation dollar amounts as well. *The main implication for your church is that cultivating a culture of generosity in your local congregation also spurs the generosity needed to fuel the growth of RIOs and NRIOs with mission projects synergistic with Christian community service values.* It is also an excellent reminder that many of your members are likely supporting, and will continue to support, multiple charities in addition to your local congregation and its other nonprofit ministries.

By the way, it is also noteworthy that giving rates among Protestant denominations, Catholics, Jews, and the myriad of other religious affiliations were about the same. A *Chronicle of Philanthropy*<sup>4</sup> article states that about half of all members of each faith group contribute to their religious congregation. The only exception is for Jews, for which thirty-seven percent contribute.

So what are the key drivers in donor motivations? *Connected to Give*<sup>2</sup> identifies three dimensions that influence giving decisions: organizational purpose, religiosity of organizational identity, and one's self-perceptions about being religious or spiritual. Additionally, the report shows the importance of the following motivators by religious affiliation:

**Affiliated and non-affiliated Americans saying “extremely important” or “very important” to the following:**

	all donors	non-affiliated	Black Protestant	Evangelical Protestant	Jewish	Mainline Protestant	Roman Catholic
feeling that those who have more should help those with less	55%	51%	73%	56%	58%	46%	61%
a belief that my charitable giving will help make the world a better place	52%	44%	78%	54%	58%	51%	54%
the feeling that I am fortunate and want to give back to society	53%	41%	68%	55%	57%	50%	60%
a belief that my charitable giving can achieve change or bring about a desired impact	57%	55%	75%	57%	56%	58%	54%
a desire to meet critical needs in the community and support worthwhile causes	48%	41%	63%	47%	54%	46%	53%
a desire to support an organization that benefitted me or someone close to me	43%	38%	56%	40%	52%	43%	48%
a desire to live up to values instilled in me by my parents or grandparents	46%	34%	58%	50%	50%	38%	57%
a spontaneous reaction to help people in an immediate disaster, such as an earthquake or hurricane	43%	32%	55%	44%	48%	39%	47%
a desire to set an example for children, future generations, my community, or my social network	48%	42%	63%	50%	48%	46%	49%
a commitment to support the same causes or organizations on a regular basis	41%	33%	44%	45%	45%	38%	45%
a commitment to being [religious affiliation]	55%	n/a	74%	67%	45%	46%	49%
a belief that my giving will help improve [religious affiliation] life and the [religious affiliation] community*	46%	n/a	65%	50%	43%	38%	46%
the desire to leave a lasting legacy	26%	18%	47%	20%	29%	23%	32%
the understanding that giving is expected within my social network	22%	13%	35%	20%	27%	18%	27%
being asked to give by a friend or associate	23%	18%	33%	20%	27%	22%	29%
charitable giving can help me in my work life	21%	15%	45%	18%	24%	20%	23%

\* Respondents saw the term corresponding to their stated religious affiliation.

When developing your key messages(s) it is important to consider the above. It is also important to remember that *Connected to Give*<sup>2</sup> further shows that frequency in attending religious services positively correlates with donation support.

Interestingly a *New York Times*<sup>5</sup> article mentions that philanthropic psychologist—Jen Shang—suggests making conscious decisions about integrating a subset of these nine key adjectives into your philanthropic messaging as appropriate: kind, caring, compassionate, helpful, friendly, fair, hard-working, generous and honest. In effectively doing so, she has seen nonprofits see an average increase in giving of 10% by women. She further recommends additionally layering on language signaling: strong, responsible, and loyal qualities when messaging males. These findings have practical application as you transform your organization’s mission, values, and

cause into a compelling “case for support.” That case becomes a rallying point for your donors, your organization, and your messaging about your project or cause. It is an important key driver in how strongly your members feel compelled to support your local church ministries.

Although geographic differences are often important, research also shows that Canadian charitable giving mirrors that found in the United States. Like its neighbor to the north, the largest nonprofit segment in Canada is Religion. Both Canadian and U.S. donors have been found to behave in strikingly similar ways. The Charitable Giving by Canadians<sup>6</sup> report shows there is a strong positive correlation between age, religious activity/attendance, and volunteerism with level of donations. Donor motivations for giving also align well with those previously discussed in this article.

When cultivating a culture of giving, consider using a three-legged platform of mission, message, and method of communication. Create a compelling case for support. Allow members multiple ways to donate their time, influence, and financial support. Show your ministry partners how their valuable support is helping to change lives. Finally, thank donors as early and often as possible.

Remember, we really are more similar than we are different. So before you invite someone to partner in supporting your local ministry opportunities, ask yourself how you plan to incorporate the common motivational threads discussed above. Whether a church, foodbank, or any other flourishing charitable organization, the fundraising best practices remain fairly consistent within the North American philanthropic sector.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Hart, Dirk, J. “Insights Into Financial Giving.” Faith Communities Today (FACT). <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/all/themes/factzen4/files/Insightsintofinancialgiving.pdf> .

<sup>2</sup>McKittrick, Landeres, Ottoni-Wilhem, and Hayat: “Connected to Give: Faith Communities.” Los Angeles: Jumpstart 2013: pp. 16-17, 22.  
Available: <http://connectedtogive.org/reports/http://philanthropy.com/article/Religious-Americans-Give-More/143273/>

<sup>3</sup>Brown, Matthew, “Is Religious Affiliation The Driving Factor In Charitable Giving.” *Deseret News* online 8 Jan. 2014.  
Available: <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2014/05/engaging-adventist-millennials>

<sup>4</sup>Daniels, Alex, "Religious Americans Give More, New Study Finds." *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, online 25 Nov. 2013. Available: <http://philanthropy.com/article/Religious-Americans-Give-More/143273/>

<sup>5</sup>Wallis, David, "Getting Into a Benefactor's Head." *New York Times*, online 8 Nov. 2012. Available: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/giving/understanding-donor-behavior-to-increase-contributions.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/giving/understanding-donor-behavior-to-increase-contributions.html?_r=0)

<sup>6</sup>Turcotte, Martin, "Charitable Giving by Canadians." *Component of Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11-008-X (Canadian Social Trends)*, online 12 Apr. 2012. Available: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2012001/article/11637-eng.pdf>