

Choosing a Cause and Giving Well

Part 1: Choosing a Cause

Let's be honest – hundreds of books have been written on stewardship and charitable giving. This brief article isn't meant to compete with those books, but to supplement them with a simple set of criteria to help the average person make a few wise choices and get connected quickly with quality causes.

Passionate Connection

Frankly, I lose interest in a cause that I don't connect with. Media I see requesting money often feels manipulative, playing on my guilt. I'm told I must "hurry" to give because the world may end without my immediate involvement. If an appeal touches my heart, that's fine. If a request shames my conscience, I will find another place to give. What are **you** passionate about? Give to causes that resonate with who you are, and with your vision of how the future should look. I also believe in giving to causes with a long-term impact, rather than just immediate needs. But if you're not giving out of personal passion and connection, your giving will suffer.

Responsible Leadership

Get some information from the organization, such as an annual report or a program & expense pie chart, particularly if you intend to give more than once. How well do they use your donations? Many organizations spend 30-40% of their donations on fundraising. I don't like giving to a cause so that they can hire telemarketers. If they're irresponsible, you probably won't feel good about an ongoing investment. You might be surprised, but even the most efficient of the large-scale charities expend only 85-90% of donations on program expenses. I'm proud to work for a nonprofit which consistently spends less than 2% annually on administration.

Clear Communication

Do you hear the results – good and bad – of your investment? I appreciate regular and honest communication from the causes I support. I may not read every word of the weekly emails or the monthly newsletters – but at least I know they're keeping their commitment. Years ago, my wife and I sponsored a youth worker, giving monthly to an organization for her support – but we only heard from her once per year. (The organization asks their staff to report to donors monthly.) After multiple unsuccessful requests for more information, we gave advance notice that we'd be stopping our support. Bottom line: I'm delighted that you're trying and succeeding, and I'm satisfied when you try but fail, but I'm not okay with never hearing that you tried.

Developing Relationship

This is trickier, because not every cause is equipped for high-touch donor communication. I don't expect (nor want) development staff calling me on my birthday because I make an annual donation. But beyond causes that I'm passionate about, which are led well, and communicate clearly, I have a huge appreciation for organizations that make a personal connection. Our whole family benefits from sponsoring a boy in Malawi who is the same age as our kids. We exchange notes and send Christmas gifts and follow his school progress and see him grow. My wife and I love that people who partner with our work in ministry feel connected to us, know our ups and downs and even pray for us. And we work hard to make sure they know what's going on.

Giving can be very rewarding, and when you're giving to the right cause, you want to give more. If that resonates with you, you've hit your giving sweet-spot. If that isn't your experience, or you haven't started giving, it's time to find your passion in a well-led cause that communicates effectively, and ideally makes a relational connection with you. Of course, once you've found it, it's only fair to ask yourself a few questions to discover whether you're a good donor... See Part 2: Giving Well.