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# Myths of the CHRISTIAN DONOR

## Insights from Grey Matter Research

By Ron Sellers

IN THE WORLD OF MINISTRY FUNDRAISING, many assumptions are made about the perspectives and behavior of Christians, as though their charitable behavior is very different from non-Christians.

Christians do tend to behave differently than non-Christians in certain ways. For instance, Christians are more likely than others to pray, give money to a place of worship, have children, and be politically conservative.

In other areas, Christians and non-Christians are indistinguishable. Christians are just as likely as non-Christians to bank at a credit union, use social media, choose paper over plastic at the grocery store, and watch sports on television.

But when it comes to donor-supported organizations, are Christians really different from the rest of the population? Fundraisers commonly make a variety of assumptions about Christians:

- They are more likely to give than non-Christians
- They give more generously and sacrificially
- They believe in tithing (whether or not they actually practice it)
- They heavily favor Christian causes and organizations
- Churches and parachurch ministries compete for their contributions
- They want any charitable work to be done as a means of spiritually reaching non-Christians
- Because of a desire to reach areas where access to Christian teaching is less available than in the U.S., they emphasize giving internationally
- Because of Christian teachings about stewardship, they hold ministries and organizations to a particularly high standard of financial accountability



Having worked extensively with both Christian and secular nonprofit organizations, and having conducted substantial research of our own on these issues, Grey Matter Research peeked behind the curtain on these assumptions in our study *True or False: Myths of the Christian Donor*. Let's take a look at just two of these assumptions about Christians and giving, to find out whether or not they actually hold true.

**ASSUMPTION #1:**  
**CHRISTIANS ARE MORE LIKELY TO**  
**GIVE THAN NON-CHRISTIANS**

This is *sort of* true. Numerous studies have shown that Christians give more money away than do non-Christians. But the common rebuttal from secular sources is that giving to churches shouldn't count, because that giving is really in their own self-interest (like supporting your country club so you'll have nice facilities and programs to enjoy as a member).

Statistically, this argument is easy to dismiss. When we separate donations to houses of worship and donations to other kinds of donor-supported organizations, there are still substantial differences in giving between the religious and the non-religious.

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In a 2012 study of more than 1,000 American adults, Grey Matter Research found that people who read a sacred text (the Bible, Torah, Qur'an, etc.) at least once a month outside of worship services are 43 percent more likely to have financially supported a nonprofit organization — over and above any giving to a local place of worship.

Similarly, people who attend religious worship services once a month or more are 53 percent more likely than those who do not attend worship to have given to a nonprofit organization in the last year (again, over and above any gifts to a local place of worship).

So, yes, religious people are more likely to give money away than are non-religious Americans, even when we look beyond their financial support of their church or temple. The “sort of true” part comes when we start analyzing the data more carefully. It's not *Christianity* that is connected with higher levels of giving, but *religion*. People who are part of a non-Christian religion are just as likely as Christians to be donors.

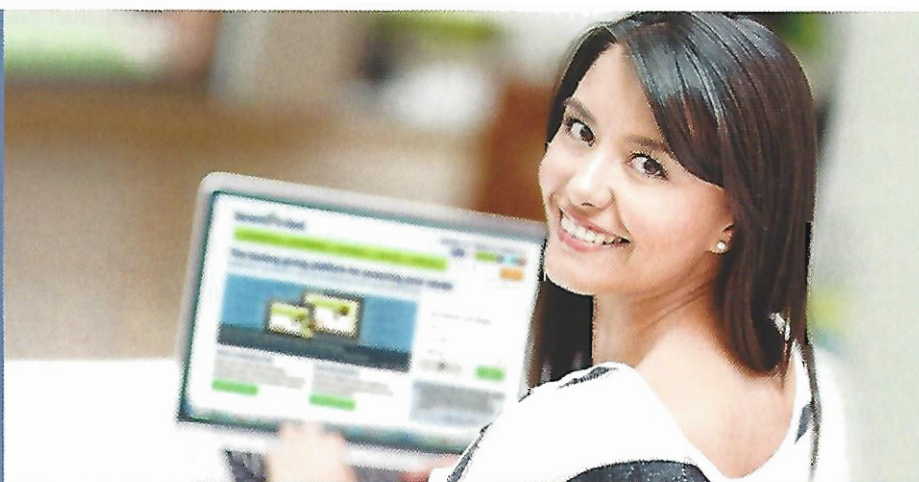
Further, we don't see differences within the broadly Christian community in the propensity to give. People who are born-again Christians are no more likely to be givers than are people who identify themselves as part of the Christian faith but who do not define themselves as born again. Evangelical

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Certainly Christians  
are supporting  
Christian  
organizations;  
that's why 12 of  
the 50 largest  
charitable  
organizations in  
the U.S.  
(as measured  
by *The NonProfit  
Times*) are  
distinctly Christian.

Christians are no more likely to be donors to nonprofits than are nonevangelical Christians. Protestants and Catholics show a statistically similar propensity to give to nonprofits.

The likelihood of being a nonprofit donor also has no correlation with how frequently people attend worship services; people who go only once in a typical month are just as likely to support a nonprofit as are people who are in their church multiple times per week.

So how generous are Christians as givers? They do give away a significantly higher proportion of their household income than do the nonreligious, and this is again true even when we exclude support of churches from the equation.

Even so, the average Christian gives away less than 3 percent of his or her income, even when church giving is included with all other giving. Rarely do Christians actually practice anything close to tithing.

#### ASSUMPTION #2: CHRISTIANS FAVOR CHRISTIAN MINISTRIES

Certainly Christians are supporting Christian organizations; that's why 12 of the 50 largest charitable organizations in the U.S. (as measured by *The Non-Profit Times*) are distinctly Christian. But by no means are Christians supporting Christian ministries exclusively or even commonly.

For one thing, ministries often are not the organizations grabbing their attention. Grey Matter Research asked more than 1,000 Americans to name the first nonprofit organization, charity, or ministry that came to mind, other than a local church. Only 4 percent of all self-identified Christians named an organization that has, as its primary purpose, religious work such as evangelism, religious teaching, translating or distributing Bibles, etc. This included 6 percent of all Bible readers, 5 percent of those who attend a Christian church, 6 percent of born again Christians, and 7 percent of evangelicals.

Only 18 percent of all Americans thought first of any sort of religious organization, regardless of the type of work it does. The majority of this 18 percent is the 11 percent who named The Salvation Army. All other Christian organizations combined were thought of first by exactly 7 percent of all American adults, including 20 percent of all self-identified Christians, 25 percent of all Bible readers, 24 percent who regularly attend a Christian church, 25 percent of born-again Christians, and 48 percent of evangelicals.

Not only are Christians more likely to be strongly aware of secular organizations than of Christian ministries, but many show no preference for putting their money toward Christian ministries.



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A 2006 Grey Matter study found that among people who regularly attend a Protestant church, just 1 percent felt Christians should only support Christian causes or organizations, and 10 percent felt Christians should give preference to Christian ministries. A majority (55 percent) believed Christians are entirely free to support any type of cause or organization, religious or nonreligious. Not only that, but a majority had supported a cause or organization with no religious connection at all in the past year.

Where do these attitudes come from? A Grey Matter study among senior pastors of Protestant churches showed just 3 percent felt Christians should only support Christian causes and organizations, and 30 percent believed Christians should give preference to Christian organizations. Protestant ministers were just as likely as their congregants to have supported a cause or organization with no religious connection at all in the prior year.

In 2010, Grey Matter Research partnered with nonprofit specialist Russ Reid Company for a major study of donor behavior (*Heart of the Donor*). In that research, just 21 percent of donors who attend a Protestant church noted that they prefer to support nonprofits where religious beliefs are a major part of everything the organization does.

Even if we combine people who want to support organizations that have religion as a major focus and those who want to support organizations with some sort of religious background, the picture is not particularly favorable for ministries. Just 52 percent of donors who attend a Christian church favor religious organizations at all in their giving. The same is true for 56 percent of Bible readers, 48 percent of Protestants, and only 30 percent of Catholics.

Clearly, many Christians show no preference for supporting Christian organizations with their money, and some actually avoid supporting organizations with any religious connection at all. So the assumption that Christians want to support Christian ministries with their dollars is, for many Christians, nothing more than a myth.

Acting on actual knowledge rather than assumptions is critical in

communicating with current and potential donors, who often think, believe, and behave in ways you may not expect. It is the hope of Grey Matter Research that our research will assist in providing that understanding, and start some important conversations regarding what this means about things such as branding, donor acquisition, donor retention, messaging, and target marketing for ministry organizations. ●

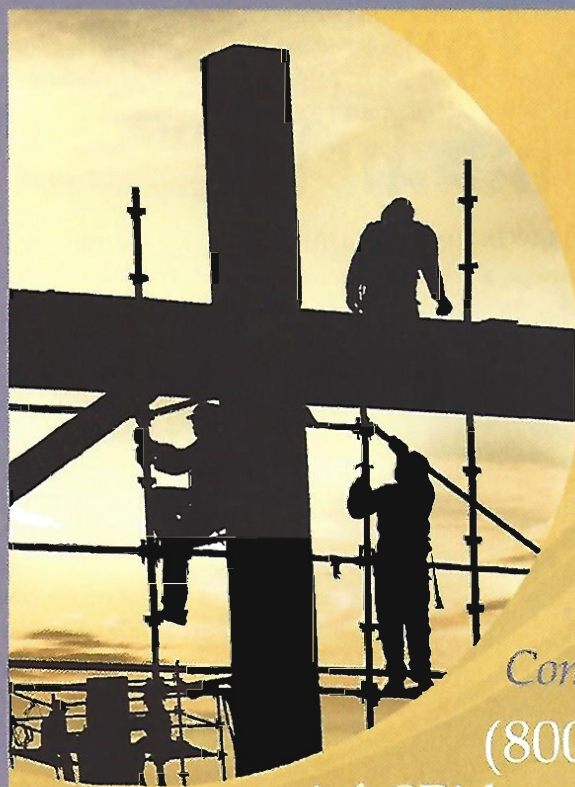
RON SELLERS is the grey matter behind Grey Matter Research in Phoenix. Grey Matter ([greymatterresearch.com](http://greymatterresearch.com)) is a consumer insights and market research firm specializing in work within the Christian community. E-mail ([ron@greymatterresearch.com](mailto:ron@greymatterresearch.com)) for more information or a full copy of the reports mentioned here (*Myths of the Christian Donor* and/or *Heart of the Donor*).



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