

Connecting with Your Supporters

By Paula Cowan

Out of every 100 people who stop supporting a cross-cultural worker, 66% say it is because they think the missionary doesn't care about them.

It is not uncommon to hear from people who are faithful givers to the missionaries' cause, that they have stopped giving since they have not heard anything from them in a year or more. Or, if the workers have written at all, it was only when they were in financial need.

Keeping in good contact with your supporters is an integral part of your job description as a missionary. It's not optional. It's not a tacked-on afterthought to be done when you have the time. It is not a distraction.

When gratitude is not expressed, it is not really gratitude, at least not in the perception of the giver.

Remember the story of the ten lepers where only one came back to thank the Master? Be one of the 10% who come back to say, "Thank you." Jesus gave him high praise and more space in Scripture than the other nine combined.

Most of your supporters are barraged by requests for financial support. They are constantly being wooed away from supporting you to something else. Showing your gratitude and keeping them in touch with your work is essential. If they do drop you to send their support elsewhere, let it be at the direction of the Lord and not because you disappeared off their radar screen.

Because mass-produced newsletters are quite low on the list of effective ways to communicate, try to hand write your supporters as much as possible. Visits in person, phone calls, and small group meetings are far more effective; but since most of us can't do those things very often, the next most effective way to communicate is by a personal, handwritten note.

For those of you with a smaller number of supporters, try writing to them every time you receive a gift from them. If you can't do that, then try rotating through your list thanking half of your donors one month and the other half the next month, or even every three months.

One wonderful thing that missionary moms can do to help in the work, when they are raising little ones and not able to get out into active work as much as they would like, is to write supporters and increase prayer support for their ministry.

We often use busyness as a reason not to contact supporters regularly. If busyness always keeps you from contacting your supporters, then you are simply too busy. Put down the optional reading, turn off that TV set and write!

Every month our busy supporters have to find an envelope, a stamp, a pen, and their checkbook to get their gift in the mail. We can do the same for them.

Some helpful hints

Say "thank you." Keep it simple, not effusive.

Try to tell your donor what you spent the money on if possible. (For example: We used your \$100 gift to get our visas renewed.)

Connect the expenditure to people to whom you minister or at least how it moved your work forward, if possible. Help your supporters “feel” that they are helping reach the world for Christ.

If you keep up with this task and don’t let it slide, then small notes with a “thank you,” a bit of news, and a prayer request or two is sufficient.

Keep a small stash of letter-writing supplies in all the rooms where you are likely to be sitting – beside your bed, desk, or favorite chair.

Pre-address and stamp envelopes all at one time.

Pick a scheduled time to write for a half hour a day, half-day a week, or a day a month. Whatever suits your lifestyle the best.

Keep stationery in your car or purse or in a Ziploc bag to use while waiting for your children or an appointment.

Picture postcards are great for short “thank you” notes to your donors giving them an idea of the country in which you are serving at the same time.

Supporters love hearing from the husband. Keep some masculine stationery or good plain paper available.

Further Ideas

You might write your next three month’s prayer requests or schedule of ministry events on a small piece of stationery and then make copies to slip into the note you are sending.

If someone needs to stop supporting you, then continue to write to them occasionally. You don’t want the friendship to be based on whether they give to you or not.

If someone only gives once a year, or sporadically, be sure and keep them up on news of your work and your prayer requests throughout the year as well.

If you possible can, send your donors a small gift for Christmas. An item that is made in your host country or a pictorial book or magazine of the country would be great and reminds the support of you and your location. And it reminds us that giving is not a one-way street.

You may tire of saying “thanks,” but your supporters won’t tire of hearing it.

You could write out the first note to a friend or someone who is easy for you to write to, and then copy most of it onto your next note, being sure to personalize at least a line or two of it.

Especially with first time gifts, send an immediate “thank you,” because first time donors are especially anxious to learn that you received the gift and that it does work to send donations to you. One donor here in North America has suggested a turn-around time of 24 hours to say “thank you” when it is a first time gift, or perhaps even an especially large gift from a regular donor.

Anyone who supports you once is likely to do so again, even if some time passes between donations, if you keep in touch with them.

For most organizations, quite a bit of time passes between the sending of the gift, receipt by the mission, and when the field missionary knows the gift was sent and who sent it. Write your donors

as soon as you can after you know of their gift, or sometimes it can be months from the time your donor mails the check to your mission till they hear back from you.

Some thoughts on using email

Email is a wonderful tool when used properly, and wisely.

Be sure and check with each donor to see if email is an acceptable way for that person to receive your news and prayer requests. Some are delighted to do anything that will save you money for postage. If you use email, make sure that you also occasionally send a handwritten note, too.

For most of the younger generation there will probably be no problem with doing all of your correspondence on email. But donors who are 40 years old and older still have wonderful memories of receiving actual handwritten mail. So few people write personal letters anymore that you can really stand out in your donor's mind by sending them.

Don't cut yourself off from mom-wired people.

If you do choose to contact your wired supporters through a mass-produced email, then keep it even shorter than a printed letter – well under a printed page. Stick to one subject, one event, a story of one person.

Short and frequent is the key to email. Just don't be too frequent. Once a week is okay if your content is good, interesting, and short. Once every two weeks is probably about right. During a true crisis, you might send a daily prayer update if security considerations permit, but don't overdo crisis requests or supporters begin to marginalize your emails.

Use email to personalize correspondence, so that you pull out some special donors from the mass electronic mailing and add a personal sentence or two to each of their emails and send them individually. Use the computer's quick editing features as a tool to personalize and individualize correspondence, not just to mass mail more easily.

Use the "blind copy" bcc feature to hide addresses when you send an email to more than one person. That wipes all the addresses off the top of the emails your donors receive, so it looks individualized, more like it is being sent to only one person. At least all the other names and addresses of people getting the email doesn't show up. That makes far less clutter at the top of your letter, and also is a courtesy to everyone on the list by not giving out their email address.

We have a special privilege. We can take the hand of a supporter and with our other hand link him or her with a person who also needs Christ. Until they hopefully meet in heaven, you are the person who gets to connect them. Serve and minister to both ends of that human and kingdom linkage.