



First Fruits
Ministries

Ideas on Beginning a “Kingdom Giving Group” As Presented by First Fruits Ministry

It’s not a new idea, but read with caution! It can be infectious.

First Fruits Ministry began in 1997 as a direct result of our founder reading Proverbs 3:9-10. We are very much enamored with the basic concept that it represents, a concept I like to call a **Kingdom Giving Group**. It is a basic idea that has been repeated numerous times across the country in recent years. As an introduction to the concept, please read the following article taken from [Life@Work](#) in May/June 2000. The term “giving circle” is used here for what I have begun to call a Kingdom Giving Group:

Krue Brock is a 31-year-old Georgia resident who, along with his close-knit group of friends, could serve as the poster boy for the emerging trends that are transforming the world of philanthropic giving and that promise to revolutionize the way people will share their resources throughout the 21st century.

Like most GenXers, Brock places a premium on friendships and community, and those core values play an important role in how he gives.

About five years ago, he and nearly a dozen of the people he went to high school with in Chattanooga, Tenn. Formed a giving circle---a small informal and flexible means for group members to share their lives with each other and their wealth with people who need it.

“I feel like I’ve been given about 12 friendships I need to be focused on in my life.” Brock said. “I feel a responsibility to grow old with these people.

“We were all trying to figure out ways to stimulate and stir the relationships on a day-to-day basis, and we thought it would be a great idea to put some of our money together into a common pool and set some criteria for the way we would give it. We thought this would be a good way to be a part of something together and to have some accountability for our giving.”

The 12 couples involved in the giving circle represent a wide range of occupations. The group includes three businessmen, a doctor, a veterinarian, a schoolteacher, a college professor, an artist, a filmmaker and two pastors.

The circle members don't have the same income levels, but that doesn't matter. Each couple is required to chip in at least 1 percent of its annual income, and most contribute much more.

Disbursements from the fund are handled in a relaxed and low-key manner. If three of the couples agree that a project should be funded, the circle gives whatever is needed, up to \$1,000. For grants of more than \$1,000, five couples must support the grant.

"The focus of giving areas is wide open as long as our people believe in it," said Brock. The groups' 1999 giving proves his point.

Last year (1999) the circle, which was established under the auspices of the Chattanooga Community Foundation, gave money to a U.S. seminary student, provided aid to survivors of hurricanes in Honduras, funded a ropes course at a local camp, bought a computer for a friend living in Kazakhstan, made a payment to another friend who works with single moms in Saint Louis, sent kids on spring break trips to Appalachia, underwrote programs for student leadership, sent a check to a small school in California, funded ministering in inner cities and on college campuses, and made donations to Habitat for Humanity, Teen Challenge and Chattanooga's Urban Art Institute.

While earlier generations of givers seemed largely content to do most of their giving at arm's length by writing checks to large organizations that were trusted to carry out the donor's wishes, today's givers place a premium on supporting work with which they feel a sense of personal involvement and connectedness.

"One of the criteria we use is that we have to have some relationship with the work we are supporting," said Brock. "It's not just a cause at-large. We want to give to something that fits with us. We don't just throw money out there. We try to be a part of what they are doing. It's easy to throw money out there, but it's hard to really be part of people's lives."

And in their giving, the circle members care more about impact and immediacy than plaudits or write-offs.

"We don't want to restrict our giving to (non-profits)," said Brock. "If there is a widow in the neighborhood who needs a sewer line put in, we are going to do that whether it's through a (non-profit) or not. A lot of people tell us that we shouldn't do that because it's not tax-deductible, but we're not trying to create tax deductions as much as we are trying to be good givers."

The Chattanooga giving circle, which is just one of hundreds of such groups springing up in neighborhoods, at workplaces and on college campuses throughout the country, demonstrates that philanthropy, with its deep roots in America's faith-based communities, is alive and well.

I hope that gets your attention, clearly showing the possibilities that Kingdom Giving Groups can create. They are obviously limitless. Although we had nothing other than God's direction to base the structure and goals for First Fruits Ministry, not a bad approach actually, it was encouraging when we read of other groups, in other parts of the country, successfully doing the same things. It is our prayer that our example and that of others will challenge new groups to spring up for Kingdom expansion.

First Fruits meets monthly with seven board members. We bring proposals for needs around the world that come to our attention by various means. Many of the people and groups we support are involved in short-term missions, others are on one to three years “adventures”. We have elected to fund these “long-term” items on an annual basis, giving us the possibility an annual review. We also fund one-time items and participate in numerous literature and capital items as we feel the Holy Spirit directs us. Each board member is financially participating in what takes place and each couple/business represented has their own “formula” for their funding. Like the other group, each funds at least one percent of annual income.

Search God’s Word and other mission minded authors.

One thing that particularly challenged my thinking on giving was a set of quotes from John Piper’s book, “Let the Nations be Glad”. The third chapter is entitled *The Supremacy of God in Missions through Suffering*. Through it he emphasizes the importance Jesus placed not only on our willingness to suffer, but our actual *need* to do so for the kingdom. In a culture so saturated with “stuff”, his writing is a graphic reminder of our indulgence.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then *in his joy* he goes and sells *all that he has* and buys that field.” Matthew 13:44

We measure the worth of a hidden treasure by what we will gladly sell to buy it. If we will sell all, then we measure the worth as supreme. If we will not, what we have is treasured more. The extent of our sacrifice and the extent our joy displays the worth we place on the treasure of God. If we in First Fruits Ministry can communicate the joy and excitement there is in giving back to God what is God’s, the world can be changed.

Jesus tells his disciples in John 15:20: “*Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.*” The call to suffer with Christ is not a call to bear our sins the way he bore them but to love the way he loved. We do not earn our forgiveness by suffering like Jesus. We are freed to love like Jesus because our sins are forgiven. Because he suffered *for* us, we can suffer *like* him. Peter says in 1 Peter, “*To this (way of suffering) you have been called.*”

Suffering with Christ is not strange; it is your calling, your vocation.

In Philippians 1:29 Paul describes suffering as a gift of God: “*It has been given to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake.*” Twice Peter spoke of suffering as being God’s will: “*It is better to suffer doing right, if that should be God’s will, than for doing wrong....Let those who suffer according to God’s will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator*” (1Peter 3:17;4:19).

Piper lists six reasons, with multiple examples to prove each point, that God appoints suffering for his servants.

So exactly why do we discuss suffering along with giving? In fact giving can be a most glorious experience. It all comes down to attitude and mind-set. In fact to be able to serve as a sender or mobilizer for world missions we must first be willing to go when and wherever God would send us. It is only when we are willing to go ourselves that we are fit to serve as senders. And such it is with suffering. Only when we are willing to suffer loss of all we have are we fit to give all to him.

Several alarming statements are made concerning our finances and our wealth. "The Minneapolis Star Tribune carried an article on Friday, May 3, 1991 that showed how the richer we are, the smaller the percentage of our income we give to the church and its mission. The poorest fifth of the church gives 3.4% of their income to the church and the richest fifth gives 1.6%--half as much as the poorer church members."

It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said (Matthew 19:23). Apparently it is also hard for rich people to help others enter. Jesus said as much in the parable of the soils. "*The cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things enter in and choke the word and it proves unfruitful.*" Mark 4:19. In other words, our delight in *riches* and *other things*, i.e. "stuff", results in us being *unfruitful*. Wow! That's a heavy load.

So, should we not be grateful to God for the abundance he has bestowed on us by his grace? Even though it is true we should thankfully enjoy what we have, there is a relentless call in the Bible not to accumulate more and more things, but to give more and more, and to be deprived of things if love demands it. The verse our ministry was founded upon says this:

"Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of your crops. Then your barns will be filled to overflowing and your vats brim over with new wine." Proverbs 3:9-10.

Please note that there is nothing wrong with our barns being filled to overflowing. But, unlike the foolish man we read about in Luke 12:18-19:

"This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods."

We don't necessarily need to build bigger barns when ours are filled, we might consider utilizing that overflow for others, i.e. a Kingdom Giving Group.

It will be very hard to bring the nations to love God from a lifestyle that communicates a love of things. God ordains in the lives of his messengers that sufferings sever our bondage to the world. When joy and love survive this severing, we are fit to say to the nations with authenticity and power:

Hope in God.

Questions that can lead to decision and direction.

An increase in salary does not have to be accompanied by a reciprocal increase in lifestyle. God is calling us to be conduits of his grace, not cul-de-sacs. One of our great dangers today is thinking that the conduit should be lined with gold. It shouldn't. Copper will do. No matter how grateful we are, gold will not make the world think that our God is good; it will make people think that our God is gold. That is no honor to the supremacy of his worth.

So where do we go from here? Two phenomena in America are emerging together; one is the challenge to give our all to do our part in finishing the task of world missions, and the other is a huge baby boom bulge in the population reaching peak earning years and coming toward "retirement". That is many of you reading this article.

How will we as Christians in the Boomer generation respond to the typical American dream of retirement? Is it a Biblical dream? Where in the Bible do they see retirement? Did Moses retire? Did Peter or Paul retire? John? Do military officers retire in the middle of a war? These questions were asked by a man who ministered around the world writing nineteen books after he turned 70, Oswald Sanders.

First Fruits has taken numerous steps in its evolution.

If you have read to this point, you are probably one of a small minority, one who is truly interested in finding a means to contribute to the funding of expanding the Kingdom to all nations. You already recognize that you have been blessed. So, just as Abraham was instructed, beginning in Genesis 12 to be a blessing to all nations, you are instructed to bless others as well. The next question may be just how can you get started? We have put together some "points to ponder" that have helped us over the past six years as we saw First Fruits evolve from a seed to a Ministry that touches all major continents, has been a part in funding at least 54 individual ministries in 2003 alone, and in the past six years, well over 100 ministries.

Points to Ponder on a Kingdom Giving Group

- 1) **Someone must have a vision for the ministry to develop:** "Where there is no vision the people perish." Prov. 29:18. Someone, most likely you, must have a vision for such a group to have a chance of getting started. If God has given you the vision, He will see it through to completion.

- 2) **Seek others who are like-minded** in wanting to see "all nations" come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Some may not fully realize that consuming desire at first. Give them time, God will do the rest.

- 3) **Set up a couple of initial “discussion sessions”** to talk over what potential members would like to see develop from the group. Be sure everyone participates in these discussions. No lectures! Preferably no handouts. Start from ground zero and see where you can end up with God’s direction. Although a name and mission statement are important, of more importance will be fully understanding the desires of each member.
- 4) **Challenge the group** that develops out of the initial meetings to commit to a minimum of one year and to a minimum of 1% of their income. For someone with an annual income of \$40,000 that would be \$400, certainly doable for any of us.

For those with businesses and those with significantly larger financial bases, challenge them to look for innovative ways to create steady income streams for the ministry that would not depend on their “feelings” or “willingness” to give over the next year.

- a) A percentage of gross receipts may be a good starting place for some.
 - b) For others the creation of small business entities within the umbrella of their existing business may be a possibility, contributing all revenues from such businesses to the group. The business is presently doing without that income and would not miss it if it was generated and diverted to the ministry.
 - c) Others may see revenue streams within their business that could be designated to the ministry completely, trusting God for the return on that investment. For instance in one of the businesses represented in First Fruits we were able to contribute all revenues from “laser facility fees” since we had never collected those fees in the past and their availability created a “revenue stream” that could be diverted without negatively affecting the running of the practice in general.
 - d) Bonuses and other windfalls may well be designated for ministry since such funds are frequently unexpected and therefore unbudgeted and could be “done without”.
- 5) **Creation of a 501C3 Not for Profit Ministry** will allow you to work either as a private or public foundation and provide tax relief for your gifts. An important note here, you will be allowed to function as a “Public Foundation” initially and will be asked to show your status after three full years of being incorporated. The advantage of “Public” status is the larger deduction available to anyone donating to the Ministry, a full 50% tax write-off. For Private foundations it is 33%. We found that some charitable foundations cannot, by their bylaws, contribute to private foundations.

- 6) **Policies should be established** to give direction for funding various types of needs as they arise. Many requests will be very similar and a pattern will develop in how you deal with these requests. Having a set of guidelines, such as those noted in the Chattanooga example above, may be helpful. In First Fruits we utilize our mission statement frequently to see if a request seems to fit our interpretation of that statement:

*We will either go out for the sake of his Name,
or we will send and support such people who do,
and do so in a manner worthy of God.*

- 7) **And remember, lighten up!** It's only money and it was never really yours anyway. You can never out-give God.

Closing comments.

We pray this open paper has inspired you and encouraged you to examine your involvement in God's Kingdom work. And, God is at work! As Henry Blackaby teaches, God is waiting for us to come along beside Him and get in on what he is already doing. For you or your business, that may be starting a "giving group" that goes over and above your support of your local church. For more information, contact First Fruits founder, Lin Brister, at linbrister@hotmail.com.