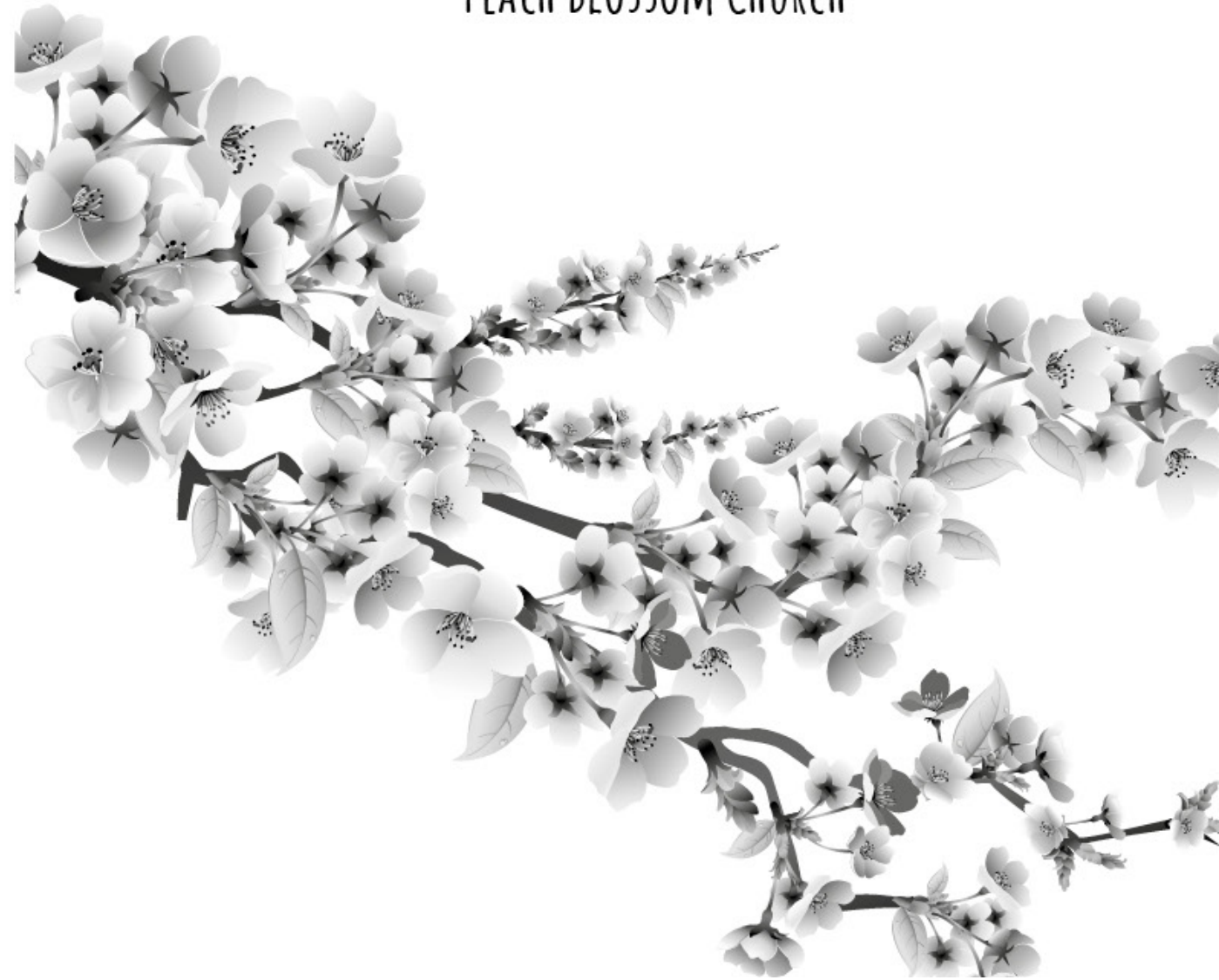


# *Growing a generous church*

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF  
PEACH BLOSSOM CHURCH



**GROWING A GENEROUS CHURCH:  
A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF PEACH BLOSSOM CHURCH**

Copyright © 2021 by Lori Guenther Reesor

All rights reserved. Printed in Canada. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

This book is a work of creative non-fiction. Names, characters, places, events and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Trademarks: This book identifies product names and service know to be trademarks, registered trademarks, or service marks of their respective holders. They are used throughout this book in an editorial fashion only. Lori Guenther Reesor has not been paid or received any incentives to mention them.

Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible® (NASB), Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. [www.Lockman.org](http://www.Lockman.org)

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com) The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

For information contact:

**Lori Guenther Reesor, [www.lgreesor.com](http://www.lgreesor.com)**

Cover and complete book design by John VanDuzer, [www.wishart.net](http://www.wishart.net)

Chapter illustrations by Shelley Szczucki, [www.thecharmingplace.blogspot.com](http://www.thecharmingplace.blogspot.com)

Edited by Susan Fish, [www.storywell.ca](http://www.storywell.ca)

ISBN: 978-1-7775150-0-3 (pbk.)

First Edition: April, 2021

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Table of Contents*

Learning the spiritual discipline of giving .....	ix
Peach Blossom takes a leap of faith .....	1
<i>June:</i> Pastor Kim arrives at Peach Blossom.....	11
<i>July:</i> The First Big Hearts Breakfast Club.....	19
Three things our church can be thankful for, even in tough times .....	25
<i>August:</i> How we learn about giving.....	29
<i>September:</i> Do not be afraid little flock.....	43
Keith the theologian: It's all God's stuff .....	55
<i>October:</i> Tithing, gratitude and other surprises.....	69
The Gratitude Gap: It doesn't cost more to be grateful....	86
<i>November:</i> Stewardship Team Gets Rolling.....	101
Giving and hard times .....	109
<i>December:</i> Hallelujah.....	121
<i>January:</i> Giving to the church.....	131
Joyce jumps in: Finding a youth pastor .....	141
<i>February:</i> Who can afford to give? Debt and demographics.....	151
What difference would a bequest make? .....	157
<i>March:</i> Dying Well.....	165
<i>April:</i> Church budgets — black holes or daffodils? .....	179
Annual General Meeting (AGM) becomes Amazing Grace Moments.....	185
<i>May:</i> An Orchard Imagining .....	191
<i>June:</i> Gratitude.....	199
Epilogue: Generosity tends God's beautiful creation.....	203
Discussion Questions.....	205



LEARNING  
THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE  
OF GIVING

— — — —

*Note to readers*

*This book was written in the summer of 2020 when a post-COVID-19 world was difficult to envision. The post-pandemic church might look different than how I've imagined the future of Peach Blossom Church. Will there be potlucks? When will congregations sing together? Thankfully, the spiritual discipline of giving doesn't change. I trust this book remains useful even as much remains uncertain.*

CHURCH PEOPLE can be scared—petrified really—to talk about money. Often people just want their church to have more money, but generosity is a discipleship question, not a budget question. More money for the church is merely a nice by-product of generous discipleship. As a consultant, I help churches grow more generous disciples of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

One of my favourite sayings is: “Jesus talks about money; we can too.” Christians worship a generous God whose gifts to us are new every morning. Christians give in grateful response to God’s gifts of grace: life, creation, salvation, time, talent, energy and, yes, money. Learning to give is another opportunity to sing God’s praises.

My objective for this book is to help churches nurture the spiritual discipline of generosity. A spiritual discipline means something Christians practise doing. Christians can learn how to give just like we learn how to pray. Transformation is possible for big churches, small churches, young churches

---

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to the Rev. Karl Travis for expressing this idea so perfectly.

and old churches. The Holy Spirit is not done with us yet, and I am grateful for that.

### *What's in this book*

Imagine a church where it feels safe to talk about money. You could bring your troubles—debts, job losses—and share your joys such as inheritances and new jobs. You could talk about your giving.

Peach Blossom Church<sup>2</sup> is such a place. While Peach Blossom is fictional, it is based on churches and donors I've met. You may wonder if it is too good to be true but I've heard stories that are flat-out miraculous.



### *Learning the economics of generosity changed my life*

One translation of 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, “God loves a hilarious giver” (translation by Tom Yoder Neufeld.)

Once upon a time, a donor gave money to Conrad Grebel University College. This gift provided a travel bursary to send a math student to volunteer as an English teaching assistant in Egypt. (Yes, sending a math student to teach English in Egypt. It must have been a hilarious giver!)

I was that math student. A minor in Peace and Conflict Studies was the link that matched me up with Mennonite Central Committee volunteers serving at an elementary school in Upper Egypt.

Those four months in Egypt were pivotal in my life. Yes, some kids improved their English but as is always the case in the economics of generosity, I received much more than I gave. Not only did I receive the travel bursary, but I experienced Egyptian hospitality. Their generosity was overwhelming, out of all proportion to their limited means.

I wasn't yet a true believer in the economics of generosity, though: for my final work term, I went for the best-paying job I could find, programming computers in a big accounting company. But when they offered me a position when I graduated, I declined: it was no longer good fit for what I wanted to do.

Instead, I sought out a position with a non-profit and began working as a computer programmer with World Vision Canada. I soon switched to marketing analysis. (Did I mention I was a statistics major?) World Vision Canada began my real education. I've been working with churches and charities ever since.

I married a fellow math student who works faithfully in the corporate world. In our first married year, we made a gift to Conrad Grebel University College to “pay back” the generosity I received—and we've continued returning the favour for decades. Now our kids have benefited from the Grebel community. I also benefited when I returned to Grebel years later for my Master of Theological Studies degree, where I learned to shine a theological light on fundraising.

I'm thankful to Abundance Canada (previously Mennonite Foundation of Canada) for sponsoring my Doctor of Ministry research on how and why Canadian Christians donate money. My research took me on what I called my Church Basement Tour from British Columbia to

---

<sup>2</sup>I thank Abundance Canada for creating the church name Peach Blossom to use in workshops. I grew up in the fruit belt of Niagara region and think Peach Blossom is a lovely name for a church.

Ontario. With permission, I recorded and transcribed these conversations. I'm especially grateful for those generous folks sharing their stories with me, stories I now share with you. Learning the economics of generosity, where we always receive more than we give, has changed my life.

### *More than money*

Generosity is about more than money. A wise donor once told me: "I think of my giving more than just in dollars...what am I giving to the community?" Another donor commented, "For some people budget is tight, but instead they volunteer more." Many generous volunteers are also donors while many generous donors also volunteer.

While recognizing this, I talk primarily about financial giving in this book because I think churches need help getting past the fear factor in talking about finances. Taboos against talking about money in our North American culture make it easier not to talk about giving. Silence and secrecy around giving in church offers money more power than it deserves.

Generosity makes our hearts grow bigger:<sup>3</sup> it strengthens our individual discipleship, builds community through congregational giving, and promotes unity when congregations share resources. It takes learning and practice. All of us are called to be good stewards of everything God has entrusted to us—time, energy, relationships and every kind of asset.

Fundraising is the ministry of helping believers become the joyful stewards God has created us to be. When believers talk about their giving, their generosity becomes testimony and helps nurture generosity in others. Learning to give changes people's lives. Jesus said that where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also (Matthew 6:21, Luke 12:34).

Moving our treasure through giving shifts our hearts toward God. And that is why I wrote this book.




---

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Jeavons and Rebekah Burch Basinger, *Growing Givers' Hearts: Treating Fundraising as Ministry* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000).



PEACH BLOSSOM  
TAKES A LEAP OF FAITH



IN RETROSPECT, January 2020 was the perfect time to close a church. Appleseed Church's last worship service was labeled a celebration of faithfulness but mostly it felt sad. It was a bleak Sunday afternoon. Organizers blamed the low attendance on the threat of freezing rain. People at Peach Blossom Church were worried, wondering—*are we next? Is our church a couple of funerals away from disaster?*

Peach Blossom and Appleseed churches belonged to the National Orchard Church. "Bear much fruit" is their vision statement. But now the Orchard had just lost a tree.

It was only six weeks until Pastor Gerry's retirement—for real this time. Pastor Gerry had already retired when he started half-time at Peach Blossom Church. But now his wife was in failing health, and Pastor Gerry needed to take care of her.

The closing of Appleseed gave urgency to Pastor Gerry's vision—he had encouraged Peach Blossom to call a new pastor who was focused on generosity. People at Peach Blossom liked Pastor Gerry so much that they had not fallen out of their chairs laughing when he suggested it.

From a financial perspective, Peach Blossom lacked the

cash flow to hire a full-time pastor. Business owner Keith said, “If we want to scale up, spiritually speaking, I say we take a risk.” Retired teacher Eunice did not understand what this meant, but after a spirited discussion, Peach Blossom took a leap of faith. They had enough money to pay a full-time pastor for one year, by including building reserve funds in the budget and assuming that there were no surprises with the building.

After the meeting, the church board put out an unusual job description, specifying that Peach Blossom was looking for a pastor to “help us talk about money and nurture generosity. Training provided.” Peach Blossom would send their new pastor to a week of stewardship training. They also arranged for Andrew the stewardship consultant from the National Orchard Church to assist the new pastor during the first year.



PASTOR GERRY began wrapping up his time at Peach Blossom. In his last weeks, long-time member George Alton was in hospital. He had not attended the church meeting about hiring a pastor, but he was still paying attention. Pastor Gerry was able to visit him several times. They prayed together: for George and his family, and for Peach Blossom. Pastor Gerry performed Mr. Alton’s funeral on a bright Tuesday morning—Valentine’s Day—during his last week at Peach Blossom.

The day after the funeral, Pastor Gerry was in the church office getting ready for his last Sunday.

He found Peggy, the church administrative assistant, and

asked her to add six extra words to the bulletin this week and every week: “Remember the church in your will.” He had read about doing this years before but his conversations with George had made him remember it.

“Do you think that a bequest would have saved Appleseed?” Peggy asked.

“Hard to say,” said Pastor Gerry. “Attendance had been dwindling. People were older. Giving was down. They did not face their financial situation openly. When their rental income dried up, that was the last straw.”

“Why add this to the bulletin now?” Peggy asked. “You won’t be here.”

“It’s a gift for the new pastor, seeds for the future of Peach Blossom. I only wish I’d been bolder earlier.”

“Trust that the seeds will grow,” said Peggy.

“I’ve been thinking about my farewell sermon at Peach Blossom,” said Pastor Gerry. “I chose a text from 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 about giving. I’ve struggled to preach on money in all my years of ministry.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“With the closing of Appleseed heavy on our hearts, I know many are wondering whether we could be next. I want Peach Blossom to call a full-time pastor to focus on generosity.”

“So that we can keep the doors open?” asked Peggy, who was never afraid to get straight to the point.

“Absolutely not. I want us to be generous because we love Jesus. Generosity is part of discipleship. More money for the church is a nice by-product.”

“I think your sermon is already started,” Peggy said with a laugh. “Keep going.”

“The Bible says that God loves a cheerful giver. Our giving is a thank-you note to God, a love letter even. When we think of our giving that way, the cheerful part comes more easily.”

“It’s hard to be cheerful and afraid at the same time,” remarked Peggy. “Maybe that’s why we whistle in the dark.”

Pastor Gerry laughed: “Cheerful givers whistle. It’s hard to be silently cheerful. We give in response to a generous God. Jesus is our role model who gave sacrificially, gave us everything. That’s good news!”

“Worth whistling about,” said Peggy.

“Thanks for your help, Peggy,” Pastor Gerry said. “I feel braver already.”

Pastor Gerry also gave Peggy a prayer to put in the bulletin for his last Sunday.



ON SUNDAY MORNING, Pastor Gerry began his final sermon. “Friends, I want to talk about generosity,” he said. “Let’s start with Scripture where Paul describes the giving of the church in Macedonia in 2 Corinthians 8:2-4 (NIV):

*In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people.*

“I’ve met generous people who have lived through hard

times. War and famine, true scarcity. Some of you here at Peach Blossom know what I mean. Generosity is about the size of your heart, not the size of your wallet. Paul is reminding the church in Corinth that their fellow believers in Macedonia gave generously to Paul’s collection to support believers in Jerusalem. We’re all in this together, Paul says, and it’s a privilege to share in this service to the Lord’s people.

“Their generosity resulted from overflowing joy and extreme poverty. It sounds like an odd combination—joy and poverty. But you may remember that it was only a few weeks ago that we heard from our dear friend Monsengwo from the Democratic Republic of Congo.”

Pastor Gerry saw people smiling as they remembered their friend.

“Monsengwo brings joy to our hearts with his deep and generous faith. His joy comes from God, not from his circumstances.

“We know generous people who are poor. We know generous people who live with chronic illness. They are glad to be able to share; they embrace the ‘privilege of sharing’ just as in this passage. Generosity does not depend on our circumstances.

“I encourage you, my dear friends at Peach Blossom, to continue in generosity, even during wilderness times when the way forward seems unclear.

“In 2 Corinthians 9:7 (NASB), Paul writes: ‘Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.’ Now someone has reminded me that God also accept gifts from grumpy givers. That’s true but God would like us to give from the heart.



“I encourage you to keep giving to Peach Blossom, to the National Orchard Church and to other causes that build up the Kingdom of God.”

Pastor Gerry paused, ruffled his notes and took a big breath.

“Do we give because of what’s in it for us? While TV preachers might promise that having the right faith will make us healthy and wealthy, that is not how we understand generosity here at Peach Blossom. We give in grateful obedience to our loving God, our God who has given us everything we need. I’ll say that again. We give in grateful obedience to our loving God, our God who has given us everything we need.”

Pastor Gerry closed his sermon with the prayer printed in the bulletin:

*Loving God, in the midst of hard times and in the midst of good times, we are grateful for joyful generosity. Thank you for Peach Blossom Church. Thank you for your generosity to us and for the privilege of sharing in service. Amen.*



THREE WEEKS after Pastor Gerry left, Peach Blossom—like churches around the world—was sideswiped by the pandemic. What saved Peach Blossom? Audrey learned video conferencing at the tender age of 78 and taught her peers. Worship continued. The Wednesday Night Bible Study flourished online. Faithful prayer warriors propelled the church forward. Peach Blossom relied on guest preachers

preaching remotely from their homes, but eventually decided to hire an interim pastor recommended through the National Orchard Church.

Knowing Peach Blossom’s goal to focus on generosity, Pastor Joel preached through the book of Acts in his sermons.

Months later, when Peach Blossom resumed worship in their building, things were different. The Board included two thank-you letters in the newsletter, one they wrote as though from the actual front door of the church, and the other from the back door.

*Thank you from the front door*

Welcome back! Thank you for all who come to worship here. We have missed you after months without seeing you. It is different now with masks and social distancing. Some people come early on Sunday to set up sound and video equipment. People we have never met are worshiping with us too. Other people come during the week to practice music, prepare the sanctuary—vacuuming, hanging banners, arranging candles and flowers. The front door sees it all.

Our doors have been bleached more often in the past few weeks than ever before. The building is cleaner than ever. Some things do not change, though. We are grateful for people who arrive early and sit at the front. We recognize people who come in at the last minute and sit at the back. We appreciate the middle people—what a gap there would be without you! We thank God that Peach Blossom is able to gather to worship, and that worship continued even when people could not gather in the building. It’s an ongoing miracle.

The front door sees it all. Thank you for all the gifts you bring to Peach Blossom—time, talent and treasure.

*Thank you from the back door*

The back door really gets to see what goes on at Peach Blossom. I am proud of you all for adapting. Where boxes of food for the food bank used to get carried out the back door and loaded into the backs of vehicles, now online donations go straight to the food bank. I am glad Peach Blossom is still helping our neighbours. I do miss potlucks and all the wonderful smells of delicious food.

There's been considerable repair work done at Peach Blossom. Thank you to people who are carrying tools in through the back door. Library books still got borrowed. Cheques got dropped off. (I also saw people borrow hymn books from Peach Blossom and take them home, but your secret is safe with me.)

I missed the Bible study group and the children's playgroup. I know it was hard for the AA group without this space. I even missed the committee meetings. Peach Blossom is still running smoothly but I have missed you.

People still talk in the parking lot but without the hugs. People cry. When you are surrounded by people who genuinely care, you cry more. The back door knows.

Thank you for all the gifts you bring to Peach Blossom—time, talent and treasure.

