THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fund Raising for Campus Ministry

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BUILDING YOUR DONOR BASE
Friend Raising and Fund Raising

As I move about the country and talk with campus ministry staff and board members, I frequently hear the same question stated in a variety of ways. “How can we get more people to give to our campus ministry?” “How can we grow our mailing list?” “My predecessor didn’t leave any records behind, how can we find our ‘lost’ alums?” “There just aren’t that many Lutherans in these parts, how do we expand on the few we have?” “We have a lot of people on our mailing list, but not many of them give. What can we do?”

These kinds of questions are all reflections of a significant issue for campus ministry fund raising. They address the problem of maintaining accurate, viable lists of supporters to whom we can go for sustaining gifts (annual fund) or larger contributions during a special campaign. The issue is this: how can we develop and maintain a circle of friends of the ministry who will become donors consistently and at critical times?

Let’s begin with several observations. First, not every name on a list will be a contributor. They may like to receive your newsletter, but your ministry isn’t among the top causes to which they give. They have other interests and commitments at this point. Which is to say that part of your work in fund raising is to get their attention and make the case for why your ministry *should* be among the ones they fund. Don’t despair. They are on your mailing list and haven’t returned your mail—yet. They read your newsletter like someone quickly paging through the morning paper with coffee cup in hand. They will stop to read an article when it catches their attention. Until then, they will just be on your list. In the meantime, think about what you might do to make them put down the coffee cup and pay attention.

Second, people need a reason to give and those reasons vary from person to person. Some will give because it’s a family tradition to give to causes. Some will give because of faith concerns—they do so in response to God’s graciousness in their lives and they want to help others. Some will give as a civic duty or because it’s good for business. Some will do so because the ministry you represent has touched their lives. What you are trying to do in your communication with them, by mail, phone or in person, is give them a reason to give to your ministry. What makes your ministry concerns urgent and relevant for these potential donors? What are their interests? What is the payoff for them?

Third, fund raising is not about money; it's about building relationships. At its best, fund raising is friend raising. If you have received a gift, but you have not deepened your relationship with the giver, you have some relational work to do. Did you thank the donor promptly and sincerely? Did you make them feel that their gift was important? Through this gift exchange, did you connect the wishes of the giver with the central purpose of your ministry? There is a lot of talk in development circles these days about "stewardship of the donor." It means that we need to see beyond the gift to the person who gave it and find ways to build an ongoing relationship with the donor that is mutually rewarding.

Now, on to the concern for building a database of friends and supporters. Regardless of how many names you have in your files, you are always looking for more. Where do you find them and how do you incorporate them into your gift planning process?

We think too narrowly, at times, about who might qualify as a potential donor. In campus ministry circles we think about student alums, first and foremost. That's problematic, especially for those ministries with scant records or fewer participants. Alums are probably the best potential donors, since they know our ministries best and have been involved at some level during their time on campus. But they may slip away from us too easily through address changes or lack of contact. An alum who has been out of the loop for many years is not a very good prospect, unless you go to a lot of effort to re-involve them in the ministry. Also, as people move on in life, their interests change. They may find new loyalties. They not even be Lutheran any more. Keep your alums on your database, for sure. But know that unless you keep in touch with them they may simply become distant observers.

It might be helpful to think about developing and expanding your supporters using the image of concentric circles. At the center would be those who know you and love you best. This would include current and past board members, some alums, and faculty and staff with whom you have had frequent contact. The next ring might be leaders and pastoral staff of local Lutheran congregations. Another ring would include parents of students and other Lutherans in general. Still another ring might include friends of current donors, ecumenical partners, area businesses and philanthropic individuals in the greater community. Who knows and cares that you and your ministry exist (often called "stakeholders")? Or who might potentially care if they were given information or invited to see your ministry in action? Again, reasons will vary.

Some will care because you are a Lutheran ministry with a gospel identity. Some will care because you are attending to the needs of vulnerable students. Some will like it that you are engaging faith and learning. Others will be likely to support the work you do to open the wider world to students through servant trips and volunteering. A point I am making is this: anyone can become a supporter of your ministry if they know what you're doing and come to care about it. It's about raising friends and inviting them into your vision for ministry, rather than raising funds from a list of names that don't know you and don't care.

I encourage you to think creatively about who you might add to the outer circle of your constituents. Some prospects might be.

- People who live nearby
- People who are new to the university
- People who work at the university as support staff
- People who give to similar causes
- People who volunteer for similar organizations
- People attend events or respond to invitations
- People of influence or leaders in the community

- People who are your suppliers or work for them
- People who are interested in lectures or attend campus events
- People who live out of town, but have local connections

Another way to think about developing your constituency base, rather than in concentric circles, is to plot out a grid. Along the vertical axis will be the expected response. It will begin with a low of returning a card or attending an event. A middle level might include volunteering or serving on a board and making some kind of entry-level gift. A high response would be giving a gift of some significance and close involvement with the ministry. On the horizontal axis would be the ways in which you and your ministry respond to the individual. A low-end response would be an occasional mailing or invitation. A middle level response might be a phone conversation, a lunch meeting, or some kind of personal appreciation for gifts given. A high level response would be public recognition of a gift, more consistent personal interaction and ongoing involvement with the ministry at decision-making points, such as an invitation to serve on your board or chair a major event.

A higher expected response from potential donors means a higher level of interaction and relationship building on the part of the ministry. A low level contact, such as an occasional newsletter, will not be enough to sustain a relationship with a person from whom you expect a high level response. A telephone call might nudge a gift, but probably not a significant one. Before potential donors will give significantly to your ministry, they must know of you, love what you do and be involved at some important point in participation or decision-making.

Henry Russo, in his classic text on fund raising, quotes the wisdom of Paul Wisdom.

> Prospects must learn a good deal about the institution, its programs, and its people before they will support it. They need to know what it is, why it's important, its quality, what it will do for them and for others, and why the institution needs their support. Conversely, the fundraiser also needs to know a great deal about prospects in order to maximize chances of success. . . . A recent national survey of senior development professionals and consultants suggests that an average of nine separate cultivation activities should take place before a major solicitation. The cultivation can take place in a variety of ways and settings. . . .The nature and style of these events depends on the ongoing research that determines the interests of the prospect, what he or she might or might not attend, what might entice an interest and what would not. All of these events are designed to develop a good person-to-person relationship that ultimately will bring success.1

It is certainly some kind of "ultimate success" that drives most of our fund raising and friend raising efforts. We want to successfully raise enough money to keep our doors open and our programs running. From time to time we need those larger gifts that will provide for new or renovated facilities. I encourage you to think about success when you seek to broaden your base of support or deepen the relationships you have with your real and potential givers. Make those persons more than a name on a mailing list or a signature on a check. Invite them to make a connection with your ministry that is enhancing for both you and them. Develop the friendship as you pursue the funding.

1 P.E. Wisdom**,** *The President and Fund Raising* (Washington DC: ACE/Macmillan, 1989), quoted in Henry A. Russo and Associates, *Achieving Excellence in Fund Raising* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991), pp. 178-180.