

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fund Raising for Campus Ministry

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February, 2003

KEEPING HOPE ALIVE

It may be time for some encouraging thoughts. It's February. The middle of winter. Lent is at our doorsteps, Easter seems far away. War is also lurking in the shadows. The Challenger disaster occupies our prayers. The financial health of our nation and of our churches is weak. I think it's time for some thoughts about fund raising that help us to lift our sights and our souls.

Fund raising a process that seems, at times, larger than life. It requires broad visions, exquisite planning, deep motivation and profound patience. It is not for the faint-hearted or for those who want fast results and quick fixes. Instant gratification is seldom the experience of seasoned fund raisers. Yet those seasoned veterans, who model all of the above virtues for us, will be the first to say that all of this stuff about visions, planning, motivation and patience pays off. No question about it. And what makes them "seasoned" may simply be that they have ridden out the storms of tragic times and weathered the assaults of financial downturns and church politics that wear so heavily on our collective consciences as development persons.

I was encouraged recently by an article titled, "Keep Driving Toward the Light," by Kay Sprinkel Grace.¹ She acknowledges that most of us in the fund raising business have had our patience, fortitude and confidence tested in the past few years. We have learned how to work with a new generation of donors who have sharp expectations for our performance. We have had to tell our stories in ways that engender confidence in our programs and ensure their investments. She suggests that a good word for the New Year might be "resolute." Instead of making resolutions about planning more thoroughly, communicating better and telling our stories more vividly, we ought to think about that word "resolute," which calls forth, in my mind, things like determination, focus, pacing and a mature sense of what can be accomplished and what cannot.

Here are 10 things that Grace urges us to be resolute about:

1. **Think abundance, not scarcity.** It's easy in times like these, she says, to fall into the trap of thinking "poor me" as an organization, when balance sheets remind us of me erosion of income or assets. Instead, we should spend time thinking about all that has been accomplished over the years and the donors who have cheerfully supported our programs. Maybe this is just the right time to write a non-ask thank you note to your donors and let them know how much you value them and their past support. Resist the temptation to drag out the tin cup and become "charity." We put the cup away years ago, keep it hidden now. Appreciate the abundance you have and abundance will follow.

¹ *Contributions*, January-February 2003, 1ff.

2. **Subvert mediocrity.** People who have led great missions were intolerant of mediocrity. They inspired others with their vision and their determination. This is not a time to settle for second best or ill-planned programs. It is, rather, a time to think way beyond the boundaries for new ways of getting things done—new partnerships, staffing shifts, board renewal, funding collaborations. Focus on your true mission with all of the excellence you can muster.
3. **Position yourself for the charitable investment** (but don't call yourself a charity). A charity is an organization that is needy, investments are made in healthy organizations with a future and with clear goals. So, check your mailings and publicity to be sure that you are not begging or presenting yourself as a "sinking ship." You may get a few dollars that way, but long-term gifts come only as an investment in the future.
4. **Build partnerships, not silos.** Donors are encouraged by knowing that you "play well with others." Diminishing resources make a larger impact when organizations work together. In campus ministry, for example, much of the work we do ecumenically serves as an example of collaborative planning and ministry. Silos are built out of a fear of competition and turf anxiety- I still remember calling a donor several years ago to thank her for a rather large contribution. She interrupted me "in mid-sentence to say that someone from another Lutheran organization was at her door and could she call me back. Resources are maximized and agendas broadened when we build solid, creative partnerships.
5. **Keep your investors informed.** Even during tough times, donors want to know what's happening. They don't want to be shielded from your "bad news." After all, they have chosen to invest with your organization and they will ride the crest with you. Informed investors will keep investing, as long as they are assured that you are still focused and carefully managing their contributions. If you have bad news to communicate, do so forthrightly, without hand wringing or whining. State the problem and what you intend to do about it. Ask for their ideas. Thank them for hanging in there with you.
6. **Do something new.** In difficult times, sometimes new energy can come from doing a new thing or taking an old program in a different direction. This is a good way to involve donors and board members in creative -thinking together. Focus or visioning groups can -help generate ideas. -Even a twist like redesigning your logo or changing your promotional colors can indicate new thinking. Instead of a sit-down board meeting, do something physical together. Habitat for Humanity gets great board coalescence by building a house together. What could you do to instill a new sense of purpose and adventure?
7. **Combat fear.** Fear drives much of what happens today. Fear makes us reactive instead of proactive. It shuts us down and drives us inward. Think about the fear of budget cuts and how you are tempted to respond when you hear the news. Instead, Grace says, talk about your success, your vision, how you have changed lives or made a difference. Master these success stories. Make people aware of how important relationships and community are in these times. Fear ices our hearts; positive stories warm them.
8. **Keep your confidence up.** Although this may simply sound like positive thinking, there is a real way in which we can have confidence in ourselves and our mission—confidence that we're doing the right thing, making a difference in people's lives, being faithful to our calling, being good stewards, etc. Donor confidence will be in direct proportion to our own confidence.

9. **Be patient, but persistent.** Patience is that word I mentioned early on in this article. We need to be patient with those things we cannot control, such as the economy, politics and misfortune. Our donors are feeling loss of control as well. We need to let them know that we are in this together and that we plan to be on campus for a long time, continuing to do what we have done for years—inviting persons more deeply into Jesus Christ and the community that bears his name. We don't adopt the corporate model of judging our mission one quarter at a time. We look backward, but we mostly look forward. We persist, with patience, to do that to which we are called. Scripture says, "We do not lose heart." Maybe this is a good time to go to contributors who haven't sent a gift in a while and find out what you can do to re-earn their confidence. Let them know of your patient persistence.

10. **Keep driving toward the light.** In her article. Grace talks about her great-grandfather, a California rancher and pioneer, whose abiding philosophy was to "keep driving toward the light." To him this light meant hope. It meant invading the future and often cutting his own path. Light provides a focal point when the surrounding area seems shadowy. What is the hope of your ministry? What pulls you forward? What is the light that beckons you? How will your ministry be shaped and guided by the hope that is before you?

Now, if you're not ready to sign off yet, I want to add a few comments from another author in the same issues of Contributions. This writer is Maureen Robinson, who offers some priorities to keep in mind about governance in these times.² She says that "when times are good, those of us committed to strengthening board performance ... tend to view this fluidity (of board membership and participation) and its attendant whiff of chaos with good natured exasperation and just plug away at improvement when opportunities present themselves." In times like these, however, when things are "downright scary, the raggedly, difficult, complex nature of boards can look more troubling. After all, the boat is listing and only a handful of board members remember the emergency drill. (Sadly, a few may be complaining loudly that they didn't join the board to bail water.)" Here is Robinson's list of five priorities to keep in mind:

1. **Figure out what's wrong and what's critical.** You don't have to abandon your whole mission, but you can determine what is critical to keeping that mission alive and healthy. What has to be done in the next 18 months? Have everyone sign on to supporting those critical issues and be encouraged by your progress in just those areas.
2. **Pruning budgets with recovery in mind.** Out of the focus of what's critical will come some wisdom about how to best use the precious resources at hand. Check the balance between staff and program. Prepare for tough decisions and don't duck responsibility. But also have an eye toward the day when you can restore programs, so that what is prudent today doesn't incapacitate your organization tomorrow.
3. **Keep the board intact, but don't kid yourselves.** Robinson suggests that crisis times allow for board members to make new commitments to things like attending meetings regularly, working on new tasks, extending their own contributions. But she says it's also an OK time for some members to leave the board without guilt. Lean times are not expected to be "magical" times, but times of hard, focused work. Let those who are willing, roll up their sleeves, invite other new workers, and let the rest go—with appreciation.

² *Contributions*, January-February, 2003, Maureen Robinson, "Governance in an Imperfect Time." Pp. 12f.

4. **Communicating.** During tense/intense times communication is crucial. Set up an e-mail list. Have the chair send out meeting highlights and agendas. Staff can send periodic reports. When something wonderful happens, share it. These are little bright blips on the radar screen that are worthy of sharing with those in leadership. It keeps you together and facing the same direction.
5. **Supporting the executive director.** In our shop that probably means the campus pastor. In crunch times the board needs to put solid energy into staff support. Staff feel budget and program cuts personally. Their life-calling may be at stake. Boards may need to shoulder more responsibility for certain aspects of the ministry, such as fund raising or meeting preparation. A kindly word or a cup of coffee can make a tough day a better one.

Will all of this be enough to get us through tough times? Yes and no. These ideas, if taken to heart and woven into our planning and purpose, will help to carry us through these days. In the Christian community we know that our true help comes from a gracious God, who keeps us and our ministries afloat, not unlike Noah and his kin. Happy sailing!

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