

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fund Raising for Campus Ministry

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COMMUNICATING YOUR CAUSE

“I don’t always say what I mean, but I say something like it.”
attributed to Eugene Ormandy

Think about it for a minute. How do you communicate the core of your ministry? How do you highlight its creativity, its faithfulness, its struggles and triumphs? How do you go about helping “the best kept secret in the church” be more known and affirmed by those around you?

Some of us, I’m afraid, do something analogous to dropping fliers from an airplane, hoping that they land in an eagerly awaiting hand, to be read and digested gleefully. At least the roar of the plane might get some attention. Some of us are not that dramatic. We may quietly and infrequently send a rather plain newsletter with faint pictures and words in an eight-point font, almost daring the recipient to read the copy. Others may put a lot of flash and dash into our publications, only to stop short of asking anyone to respond or react to what we have presented so boldly.

Think with me for a bit about how we communicate our story to those who care and those who are able to respond with support and understanding.

Joseph Barbato, writing in *Contributions*¹, offers these general suggestions:

- Know your readers and what you want to communicate to them. He suggests having an advisory group to read through your publications prior to printing. Have them read it from the perspective of the person to whom you will send it. Ask them if your message matched their interests.
- Never forget that readers don’t subscribe to your publications. Our newsletters are not like *Time* or *Road and Track* that they read avidly because it fulfills a need for knowledge or adventure. They do us a favor by opening our publications. So when they do, they should find something as interesting and challenging as the rags to which they subscribe. You may not be offering high adventure, but your stories should engage them and involve them in your ministry where hearts are changed and lives are saved.
- Get professional help. Barbato suggests that you spend some money on professional writers. That will probably not be possible for most of us. But you might have a

¹ Joseph Barbato, “What’s This For?” *Contributions*, November-December, 2003, p. 4

university communications class do a design project for you. Find a volunteer who has done similar work for other organizations. Take a class in graphic design or computer publications. Be a collector of good quality publications that you come across and file them for future reference.

- Make good use of photographers and designers. Have them show you how to take creative photos that go beyond students in a food line or a smiling line-up at a retreat. An unusually creative photo catches a lot of attention. Now that digital cameras are readily available, you can take several shots of a particular scene and use the best.
- Do the unusual and useful. Print photos or articles that readers might be surprised to see, such as the university president eating pizza with your students or a student leader who happens to be your peer ministry. Excerpt an article from the college newspaper that points to an issue you're addressing, such as binge drinking. Highlight recent programs on topics like faith and science or inter-faith dialogue and point them to Web sites where they can find the full text.
- Be judicious about columns. "From the pastor" gets a ten on the dull scale almost every time (with some very notable exceptions among our folks). The newsletter should not be a soapbox for the staff, but a place where readers can learn more about the ministry and be drawn in closer through stories and pictures.
- Do a critique of each issue. This would be true for every piece of communications you send out from Web site to newspaper ads, from solicitation letters to newsletters. Evaluation helps you keep "on message."

Several months ago the Division for Higher Education and Schools was treated to a "Communications Audit." It was led by an outside consultant and coordinated through the ELCA Department for Communication. It was a painful, yet helpful process. Each unit was asked to bring samples of everything we had in print and online. The consultant gently fed back the results. No surprise to us, we were told that our favorite medium for communication was print. We were urged to greatly expand our thinking about how people can come to know our ministries beyond the tired and true ways of brochures and newsletters. We learned that our key messages should be found on all of our publications, including mission and vision statements and our goals. We were encouraged to think about "outcomes" for our communications. What do we want to have happen as a result of our story or our program report? Who is our audience and how are we trying to move them? We were asked to look over all of our communications tools to see if they fit together well enough to tell the whole story. Can a newsletter say it all? Do we ever contradict ourselves from one piece to another?

So having experienced this myself let me urge you to consider a communications audit for your ministry. Gather a diverse group of your constituents, among them journalists and media specialists, and ask them help you design a holistic communications plan. Set up some timelines. Work on expanding your budget to accommodate new resources. Find some volunteers to help in the writing and production. Spend some good energy over the next year working on the ideas that come from the audit. Then evaluate again. I think you will be amazed at how this process will energize your work of interpretation and communication.

Another exercise you might do with your board and your advisory group is to develop a communications grid. On the vertical axis you would list your various audiences—those whom you want to understand and support your ministry. The list would include: students, parents, faculty and staff, alums and friends, bishops and synods, congregations, ecumenical colleagues, area merchants, and community “movers and shakers.” On the horizontal axis list the widest possible variety of communication tools: newsletters, brochures, videos, newspapers, Web sites, email, telephone, displays, luncheon meetings, workshops, reports, general letters, and personal conversation. Then on the grid, place a check mark in the box that indicates which tool(s) best communicates to that particular audience. It will become quickly apparent that some tools are poor communicators to certain audiences. Email is better than a brochure for reaching students. A phone call or a conversation with a bishop might work miracles. Faculty and staff might be drawn to a workshop. Alums might visit a Web site easier than reading a newsletter. Make some decisions about how to expand your communications using new tools. You might even save some money in the long run if you think it through carefully.

Finally, let me encourage you to share your creative communications with each other. Don't be shy. Ask your colleagues for (gentle) evaluation. Let them see your good ideas. You might help them in the process. As a ministry of the church, we might learn how to communicate in stronger, clearer ways the fruits of the work we have been called to do.