

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fund Raising for Campus Ministry

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Fund Raising as Ministry

I've been in this conversation several times in recent years. In the room are a group of people figuratively wearing their campus ministry hats. They are concerned about the downturn of dollars for the campus ministry they hold dear. They are here because they are realists and because they have been given some responsibility as staff or board members to DO something about funding. We've worked through the various steps of visioning, communication, setting up the annual fund, planning for major gifts, etc. etc. Then I see the look in their eyes, the question, the disconnect. Finally someone says it: "Why are we only talking about money; can't we just talk about Jesus!"

The first time I heard the comment/question/exclamation, I was a bit taken aback. Didn't anyone understand what I had just spent hours trying to explain? Weren't the connections obvious? Sure, I was using secular fund raising language and constructs, but couldn't they just provide the translation themselves? Now in these latter days, I have learned a couple of things.

One is that people don't automatically connect Jesus and his mission with the dollars to make it happen. Yet it's unmistakable if you read the New Testament. Jesus talked a lot more about money than he did about sex, for example. He challenged those with personal riches to give to the poor and stop hoarding it for themselves. He sent away a rich young ruler and praised the sacrificial gift of a woman with only two coins. Furthermore, Paul was continually admonishing, then thanking, his missional communities to/for their support for the ongoing work of the gospel. Paul was a visionary preacher, a skillful organizer, a tireless teacher, and an unapologetic fund raiser in the best sense of the term. He asked for support for widows and orphans. He also knew the needs of fledgling faith communities and was not reluctant to ask believers with means to support the work he was about in Jesus' name. I'm not telling you anything new; I'm just suggesting that we often miss the connections and could realistically assume that others do too. In your ministry as a fund raiser, be sure to help your folks make the connection.

The second thing I have learned from these conversations is that people tend to view their possessions as something they have earned and, therefore, hold on to them in a tight-fisted way that makes it seem that you are "after" their wealth, and maybe what defines them, if you suggest that parting with what they "own" is a grace rather than a gimmee. The NPR program I listened to on the way into work this morning centered on the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson. He warned against thinking that we can hold on to the earth, because in the end it's

the earth that holds us. Literally. We become so identified with what we own that it often becomes our identity. So when we are asked to share what we have, it's like lopping off part of who we are. If we only talk about sharing gifts, without talking about the blessing of being part of the community that bears Christ's name, we are simply practicing another kind of legalism, without offering an encounter with the one who by grace grants our true identity.

Third, I have come to realize that a lot of stewardship talk is more about management than it is about our life-response to the Good News. We refer quickly to Jesus' parable of the talents and lift up the way in which the good management skills of the ones who had the most got them even more. Here's what I have said on occasion: "From the Christian perspective, fund raising is essentially stewardship—gratitude for what God has done among us in Jesus Christ. It is our desire to manage carefully and responsibly the gifts that God has given us. Biblically speaking, the steward is the manager of the household. We assume that role when we are employed as staff or serve as members of boards and committees." True enough, I think, but it doesn't go far enough. We are not just managers of resources, we are disciples of the One God sent. And as Jesus-followers, we might just be called on to make tough decisions about those resources we call "our own" or "our ministry's own." Managers come and go, but disciples are in it for the long haul. Disciple-managers are not confused about priorities, about identity, or about ownership of resources. Steward-disciples know that inviting a gift is really an invitation to live in God's realm. It invites soul-searching. It offers new life.

What I am struggling to say in these pages has been said much more eloquently by Henri Nouwen.¹ In September 1992, he was asked to speak to the *Marguerite Bourgeois Family Service Foundation* about fund raising. It was an informal address that came from his heart, without benefit of manuscript. It was taped, however, and only recently transcribed into print in a booklet titled, "The Spirituality of Fund-Raising." He acknowledged that in his earlier years he saw fund raising as a "necessary but unpleasant activity to support spiritual things." Only as he worked through the relationship between ministry and money was he able to finally say, "Fund raising is first and foremost a form of ministry."

"Fund raising is as spiritual as giving a sermon, entering a time of prayer, visiting the sick, or feeding the hungry." Nouwen

Nouwen came to see that fund raising, as a gospel activity, includes proclamation, invitation, and conversion. It is proclaiming what we believe in such a way that others are drawn to our vision and given an opportunity to participate with us in this God-given mission. "Fund raising is always a call to conversion." People are called into a new, more spiritual relationship with their needs and their resources. They are invited to invest themselves through what God has given them—energy, time, prayers, and money—in the work that God calls us to. It invites those with money into a new relationship with their wealth. And it invites those who need money to lay aside the role of beggar to claim the rich inheritance of the new creation. The question is not how to get money; rather, it is a question about our relationship with money. If money touches our relationships with family members and others in the wider world, it also reaches into our own inner, spiritual life. Nouwen offers, "If our security is totally in God, then we are free to ask for money. Only when we are free from

¹ At this writing a copy of this booklet is available free by contacting the Henri Nouwen Society at www.HenriNouwen.org and following the links. Thanks to Jack Saarela for alerting me to this resource.

money can we ask freely for others to give it. This is the conversion to which fund raising as ministry calls us.”

The ministry of fund raising finds life in the realm of God’s abundance, where all gifts are overflowing—new freedom, new relationships, a new communion. That we might have new resources for doing ministry should not surprise us. We might come to expect it—or ask for it. “We are all gathered on the holy ground of God’s generous disposition toward us.” Here fund raising is grounded in prayer and undertaken in gratitude. Here the radical nature of fund raising becomes clear. While all sorts of people who raise funds might ask others to help the productivity and success of their organization, in the Christian community those goals are only the by-products of a deeper, creative energy—that of love planted and nurtured in the lives of people in and through our relationship with Jesus.

He concludes, “Fund raising is a very rich and beautiful activity. It is a confident, joyful, and hope-filled expression of ministry. In ministering to each other, each from the riches that he or she possesses, we work together for the full coming of God’s kingdom.”

Nouwen provides us with helpful thinking and good theology. May it inform your ministry as fund raisers as you prepare your annual fall appeal or consider conversation with a donor. Shared mission, shared vision, shared resources—all God’s gift and task. Invite others; it’s ministry.