

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fund Raising for Campus Ministry

Office of Lutheran Campus Ministry Advancement
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St. Paul, MN 55108

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“Tell and Show”

Telling the story of campus ministry is something we should be good at and all be able to do with a fair amount of enthusiasm and panache. Campus ministry is about stories. We live inside stories every day. We help students tell their stories and encourage them see how these experiences have formed and shaped who they are. We help them see how the Jesus story informs and guides their own stories. And when we are asked to share with the wider church something of our ministry on campus, most often we begin by telling a story about how someone has come to faith, survived a crisis, or made a life-decision because of how that person rubbed up against a gospel of grace. We tell life-saving stories. That’s the kind of business we’re in.

The problem is that we often remove our storyteller’s hat when we attempt to talk about campus ministry. We become boring, prosaic, unimaginative, and disengaging. We may even resort to facts and figures to validate the vital work that we do in the center of people’s lives, because some bean counter has asked us how many were at worship last Sunday. And while those quantitative elements are important at some point, what people really want to know is how campus ministry has changed hearts and saved lives, if even on small, daily basis.

Joseph Barbato¹ urges us to “show, don’t tell.” He wants us to draw the picture in such a vivid way that the hearer will remember both its core message and its emotional impact. He writes, “Too often, nonprofits simply *tell* prospective donors what they do. We save lives, we educate tomorrow’s business leaders, we shelter the homeless, and so on. As if doing good in and of itself were enough to warrant a hefty donation. In fact, the best way to motivate supporters is to *show* them what you do. That way, an abstraction like saving lives takes on concrete meaning. Not only will readers or viewers see your programs in action; they will see themselves and their neighbors in the people you serve.”²

A couple years ago I attended a fund raising seminar that made an impression on me. The leader of the event, Terry Axelrod,³ told of a very successful campaign that helped raise funds for a struggling elementary school in the Seattle area. They could have taken the usual approach of sending out appeal letters or visiting prospective donors. But the need was so

¹ Author of *How to Write Knockout Proposals*.

² *Contributions*, September-October, 2004, p. 7

³ Axelrod Consulting Services, 1301 Spring Street, Seattle, WA 98104

dire and the case so compelling, they decided to launch the campaign by bringing people into the school to meet the children and see the needs first-hand. It worked marvelously. Raising funds from that point on became “nudging the inevitable.” Once the stories were heard directly from the students and the needs for books and uniforms and building repairs became obvious, asking for the support was little more than a gentle, but consistent, nudge. Fund raising is a “contact sport,” Axelrod says. You have to get your donors in contact with the actual people and needs you want them to support. They have to see the gap between the vision and the reality close up. So visitors became volunteers. And observers became enthusiasts. And hearers became storytellers. Sounds rather biblical, doesn’t it?

What we do pretty well in campus ministry is provide solid, grace-filled ministry to students and others within the university context. What we struggle with, however, is bringing that same ministry alive among those who are at some distance physically or chronologically. They haven’t been around lately to see and experience the good things that we do. So we have to try to bring our ministry alive and make it real. We have to find ways to invite them in so that they can walk around in our place, see the need, sense the mission, and meet those who have been served by our work. We have to give abstractions concrete meaning. We have to get them closer so that we can “nudge the inevitable.”

Here are some ideas that will help you do the “show and tell” of your ministry in effective ways.

- Share the story vividly and creatively. Invite your hearers into the story. Let them see the details and feel the emotion of it. Don’t leave it to their imagination; fill in the important details for them. For example, rather than saying that Bible study provides a time to examine faith, tell them about how one particular Bible study made a difference with one particular student. What text were you studying? Where were you? What were the issues? What was going on with the group that night that made this particular study so poignant?

One of our campus ministries holds a Bible study at the campus laundromat, so that students can wash clothes, grab a bite to eat, and discuss scripture together at the same time. Picture the scene with its noise and smells, the tense exhaustion of the students, and the faces of the onlookers. What’s at stake here? Why is the church bothering to be here at this time and place?

I know that I’m preaching to the choir here. We do this pretty well in campus ministry. Give it your good attention. Start an anecdote file. Stories are a way into the heart of the ministry. They crash the gate. No self-respecting realtor could sell a house by getting the buyers to only admire the outside. Prospective buyers want to get in the door, look around, get a feel for the place, and maybe even talk with the current owners. For those who can’t experience your campus ministry first-hand, tell a story that will help them feel like they’ve been there. Newsletters and case statements may only speak in vague generalities. A well-told story is like introducing them to someone face to face.

- Use compelling details. If a person cannot walk through your ministry center, help them to see what it looks like. Picture for them the size of the rooms, the feel of the lounge, the special sense of the worship space. Describe the nimble minds of the

students in a study group. Help them see how fresh paint and new carpet would enliven the space. Share with them the experiences and reactions of students who went on the mission trip.

- Use quality photographs. There are the obvious photos we all have in our files. The long lines of students queued up for the Sunday night supper—all with their backs to the camera. Or the group shot from 50 yards away. Or the staged shot of people “having fun.” Unless you are able to afford a professional photographer, be sure that you have on hand a good digital camera and somebody who knows how to use it to capture the revealing moment that really shows something going on. Shy Lutherans don’t make very good photographers or subjects. But a bold person with a quick camera and a good eye should be able to capture a few intriguing, quality photos. If your potential donors can’t be in the room with you, a striking photograph will open door alongside a good story.
- Give some thought to why you send newsletters. Twenty years ago they were the primary way to get “news” into the hands of readers. But they’re expensive to print and mail, and by the time we get them into the hands of our friends and supporters the news is more akin to history than it is a compelling invitation. If you were to spend equal time working on a creative Web site, where you could post as many full-color photos as you like and as many pages of information as you like, complete with video clips and hotlinks, wouldn’t that accomplish more than a dated piece of paper. And at less cost. Then you could send to each person on your data base a card or email inviting them to visit your Web site. Once there they could encounter your story in vivid color, with fresh updates, and the possibility of engaging you in a chat room or sending an email response. Maybe they could even pledge or contribute online. True, some people just can’t be drug into the 21st Century. And if you know who those people are, maybe a newsletter of sorts still works. You might not be ready just yet to make the e-move, but think about it.
- Take students with you when you lead forums or make presentations. Again, this is a no-brainer; it’s something we instinctively know and do pretty well. I encourage you, however, to think about the roles you ask students to play. They are more than window dressing; they have something vital to say. People want to hear directly from them, up close and personal. If they are physically present, but have little opportunity to interact, you may as well take a cardboard cutout. Turn them loose. Their insight and enthusiasm will inspire people more than you might expect.
- Give them something to remember. If you drive by a pasture filled only with Holsteins, you probably won’t remember a single one. But if there’s a giraffe in the pasture, you will notice it. In fact, you will probably skid to a stop, get out, and take a picture to remember it. You might even be curious enough to stop down the road and ask the farmer why he has a giraffe in among the cows. And he might say, “Let me tell you a story about that giraffe.” That’s what you want people to do with your ministry. You want them to hear the story in such a way that they are fascinated by it and remember it. And tell others about it.

Your ministry is filled with stories. Tell them well.

