

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fund Raising for Campus Ministry

October, 2006

“Making the Visit”

After all of the planning and strategizing, after all of the prospecting and database dabbling, after all of the case statement writing and the feasibility studying, it's finally time for the most important piece of fund raising—actually meeting with potential donors and inviting a gift for your ministry. For some of us this is the exciting stage, while for others it's like being a mouse at a convention of cats. While you may think you're foolish for setting up the visit in the first place, and you fear that you will never come out alive—let alone alive with an affirming gift for your ministry—let me assure you that virtually every visit you make will be encouraging, regardless of the size of the gift.

Many have been there before you, and many are there now while you're sitting around procrastinating and worrying about just how to make this visit. When you unwrap the negative feelings you may have about this experience, however, it may often mean that we are carrying old baggage about fund raising that expects manipulation and the hard knuckle “ask” to carry the day. First Monday readers know better.

Visiting with your supporters about a gift for your campus ministry is a wonderful opportunity for both you and the donor. It is a chance to talk enthusiastically about your ministry. More important, it is a time to listen carefully to the motivations and interests of the donor's heart. You are a bringer of good news, come to share with another person who cares about the joys and challenges of the ministry you both hold dear. You are a matchmaker, whose task at this visit is to make a match between the interests of the donor and the opportunities provided through your ministry. What could be more exciting and rewarding?

Jerry Panas, who I quote frequently, urges, “Your job is to involve people in programs of towering proportions . . . to make true believers from those who do not know the full story of your work . . . to make joyful investors out of those who in the past may have only been contributors.”¹ Obviously this means listening a whole lot more than talking, and explaining rather than selling. Later on Panas writes, “The fundraiser's job is to create a clear understanding

¹ Jerry Panas, *Finders Keepers*, (Bonus Books: Chicago, IL, 1999) p. 16

of the institution's distinct mission . . . and then help the donor feel a high level of urgency about providing the necessary funds to meet that mission."²

During this centennial year for campus ministry, personal contact with our supporters and donors is highly important. We have a ready-made opportunity to lean on the strength of the past, while we lift up the vision we hold for a new century. If ever there was a time to enlist "joyful investors," the centennial year is it!

To help you plan for making these important visits, here are some practical pointers about visiting prospective donors that I have gleaned from a variety of sources and workshops.

- If you don't know the prospective donor well, have a mutual acquaintance (such as a pastor, faculty member, or church member) make the appointment for you. You might also have this person write a letter of introduction for you or say that you will call soon. Then you follow up with the contact.
- If you know that the person has supported the ministry in the past, the call will be easier. You might say, "You have been very generous in your support of campus ministry in the past. Members of the board and I would like to meet with you to share some information about a significant new venture." (then be sure it's significant)
- If the person says that they are not interested in making a gift at this time, respond by saying, "We're more interested in telling you about our vision than we are in a gift right now. We would value your feedback on what we are proposing to accomplish."
- Meet in a neutral location if possible. It puts everyone on even ground. Inviting yourself to the donor's home may seem invasive, even though they might offer. Suggest a restaurant or coffee shop, or better yet the campus ministry center if they haven't been there for some time. Ask them about their favorite place for lunch—and YOU pick up the tab. Be as accommodating to their schedule and needs as possible.
- If you are uncomfortable meeting alone with a new contact, ask in advance if you might bring someone else with you, such as a board member or a knowledgeable student. But don't let it seem like you are ganging up on them.
- Take some pertinent information with you. Your case statement would be important to share, along with any vision documents and budget projections. Photos add variety to printed text. Don't overwhelm them; take only enough material to use during the meeting or leave behind for future reference.

² Panas, p. 19

- Prior to the visit, anticipate the questions or concerns that may be voiced. Prepare responses appropriately, but avoid wooden answers. You will want to be as conversational as possible.
- Once the meeting has begun, listen 80% and talk only 20%. Never argue; you're there to share information. If the donor asks a lot of probing questions they are not fighting you. They are trying to convince themselves that your vision is worthwhile. Restate any objections as a question. Ask them to say more about their concerns. See if there can be connecting points of agreement. In the business of listening, everything is important—words, body language and gesture, tone, stories. Listen with your eyes as well as with your ears.
- If you are tempted to counter the person's story with one of your own—stop! Don't say, "I know exactly what you mean." Ask them to tell you more. The purpose of the meeting is to find out what the person's own needs and interests are. Don't superimpose yours on the conversation.
- Although you both know that the purpose of the visit is to discuss a gift for the ministry, remember that the visit has not been a failure if you come away without a definite gift. See if you can set a date to meet again. Offer to provide more information if necessary. When donors make a larger gift, they have to "stop and think" about how they are going to make their commitment, where the funds will come from, consult their financial advisor, etc. If you can leave the meeting with an agreement to talk more at a specific date not too far in the future, the visit accomplished quite a lot.³
- The timing of the meeting is important. If you agreed to one hour, be sure that you're putting your coat on at minute fifty-nine. While listening is important, you will finally need some time to negotiate the gift you're seeking. Plan in your own mind the amount of time you will spend on small talk, how much time you will listen and respond, and how much time you will need to close. If things seem rushed, ask if you might extend the time or make another appointment. You want to be sure that the donor fully perceives the benefits of making a gift to the ministry you represent at this particular time.
- Be specific about the amount of the gift you are seeking. Before the appointment you and your development committee should have prepared a "chart of gifts." You should have some idea of where this particular donor fits into the chart. Knowing that, you might say, "To achieve our goal we need 10 leadership gifts of \$25,000. Can we count on you being among the ten?"

³ A prospective donor I worked with several years ago always talked over gift possibilities with his extended family at Thanksgiving time when they gathered each year in Naples, Florida. To press for a more immediate response would have offended the donor and probably would have lost the gift.

- Don't be afraid to ask high. If this is a major gift request, beyond the annual fund contribution, you can consider something between 10-20 times higher the annual amount if gifts have been consistent. This assumes that you have done your research and know something about the donor's capabilities and interests. People are usually flattered to be asked to give more than they think they can. When in doubt it's fine to say, "What are you able to consider?" Or even better, "What would bring you the most joy?"
- Relax. Be patient. Allow brief times of silence. Don't drive the conversation like Tim Russert on *Meet the Press*. Let the person finish their thought before responding.
- Once the gift has been identified, say "thank you" and leave. Be sure to send a note of appreciation within the next three days. If you have promised to send more information or a pledge card, be sure to do so promptly.

As you move through the centennial year, you will likely identify many individuals who you would like to visit. Enlist your board members and/or trained volunteers to help you with these important contacts. The centennial celebration that you will host this year provides a great opportunity to invite your special donors more deeply into your vision for the next century. Find a way to contact them and share your vision. Everyone will benefit from this focused visitation.