

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fundraising for Campus Ministry

September, 2007

Generosity Motivates Philanthropy

Last night I spent some time at a hearing for a new school bond/levy referendum that will call people to the polls in a few weeks. We live in a rather large school district in the Twin Cities, one that has to appeal to local residents for support on a predictable cycle. This year the target is \$42 million. The word on the street is that leadership is very anxious about it passing, especially given the downturn in the economy these days. I wondered what the emotional tone of the gathering would be.

I was pleasantly surprised. Sure, there were the expected comments about an administrative-heavy system, the cost of MAC vs PC computers, and the comparison of teachers' nine-month salaries to other professionals who are twelve-month. But no firestorms of emotion, no threats, not even much whining. What did impress me was the thoughtfulness of most of the responses and the overall tone of what I will call "responsive generosity" as these thoughts were expressed. One speaker lauded the value of the education her children receive. Another praised the school board for their fiscal accountability and openness to criticism. Still another identified himself as "childless," yet felt it was his responsibility to help fund the education of the children of others. And on it went, many voices expressing gratitude and the willingness to respond generously to the obvious need of the community.

The best kind of philanthropy is that which generously and willingly responds to the tangible needs of others out of a sense of gratitude and appreciation. Certainly that is a strong theme of our shared theologies across all religious lines. We laud a gracious and generous God, who in turn invites us to share what we have received with others in need. It's there from beginning to end in scripture. It pervades the life of the community of faith. It's the *mandate* of Holy Week. We love others and share with them because of the great love shown to us in Jesus Christ.

Yet, when we start talking about philanthropy, we often move quickly, too quickly, into a discussion of how we are going to "get" the gift and how we are going to segment, qualify, abstract, and even manipulate our database, so that we can be at the best "advantage" to extract a significant contribution. Conversely, good stewardship is about responsibly caring for the gifts God has given us and how to deploy them for the benefit of others.

A number of years ago I attended a conference where the speaker, James Gregory Lord, talked about the shifts that were happening in the fundraising world. Here are some of his thoughts, listed in two columns.

CONVENTIONAL FUNDRAISING

Problems attract donors
Focus on negative experience
Pessimistic/cynical
Focus on the needs of the organization
The “ask” as end in itself
Survive
Predatory
Focus on the donation
Organization wants to get something
Beg/outfox/coerce
Scarcity of resources

NEW FUNDRAISING

Vision attracts donors
Focus on positive experience
Optimistic/hopeful
Focus on the values of the organization
Building a relationship with the donor
Thrive
Cooperative
Focus on the donor
Donor wants to do something
Influence/elicit/invite
Abundance of resources

The list goes on in a considerably longer fashion. But you get the picture. The last comparison clues this new way of thinking best. It calls us to recognize that we are generously gifted by God in all that we do. There is an abundance of resources, and out of gratitude for this overwhelming providence, we respond willingly and generously to others.

In our campus ministry settings we often fall victim to the thinking represented in the column on the left. Our budgets are tight; our programs are lean. We feel the wolf’s breath at the door. We can slide very quickly into survival mode, where we are desperate enough to plot to get the gift at any cost. It is about our needs and our crisis. It’s not about the desire of the donor to do something of significance or on building an ongoing relationship with that donor. It’s “hit-and-run” fundraising, getting the gift however we can, without concern for the giver. In the end, it’s more about scarcity than abundance.

I invite you to think about the fundraising appeals you receive (and those you send). What/who is the focus of the appeal? As potential donor, how are you being treated and thought of? Is the group desperate, negative, coercive? Are they operating out of gratitude and abundance or out of scarcity and manipulation? How will your gift be received, and how will it be used to enhance the lives of others?

I came across a new publication recently titled NEED¹. Its uniqueness is that the content is dedicated to telling the stories of people whose acts of kindness and foresight nudge the world toward change. They are humble stories, but they are powerful examples of how one individual can respond to the real needs of others. The story that caught my eye was an article about Dr. Keith

¹ NEED Communications, 2303 Kennedy Street NE, Minneapolis, MN 55413 www.needmagazine.com

Taylor, who shares poignantly about his need and his plan to give back.² He talks about the time when he was a graduate student, scraping by on \$800 a month, when he had to decide between fixing his car or paying rent. He chose the former because it got him to his work. Just days before he was going to be evicted, and literally put on the street, someone paid his rent. That gift kept him in school and focused on his career. This generosity made a deep impression on Taylor. He says, “The word ‘philanthropy’ has nothing to do with money itself. Suddenly I realized that what I’d been missing all of those years as I thought about helping others. They’d simply been compassionate and shared with me what they could when they knew it would make the greatest difference in my life.” Philanthropy has to do with person-to-person care for the needs of others.

Soon after this epiphany, Taylor assessed his own finances, cut out unnecessary expenses, and started *Modest Needs*, an online charity that assists those in situations like his in former days. Based in New York City, it offers “self-sufficiency” grants to hundreds of economically vulnerable individuals who experience sudden, untimely misfortune. Someone in need submits an online application to *Modest Needs*. If approved, the request is posted online for the *Modest Needs* network to review. Donors respond, some very modestly, many because they have been helped themselves. Payment is made directly to a creditor or service provider on the applicant’s behalf. Sixty-five percent of former recipients have donated back to *Modest Needs*, each giving what they can out of a sense of gratitude for the generosity of someone else.

Researcher W. Gerrod Parrott has isolated 135 different emotional states, each distinct enough to be instantly recognizable. Fundraiser Tom Ahern³ identifies seven emotional triggers that most organizations use when they produce their materials. Some of these triggers are blatantly negative, while some are strongly positive. These triggers engage people’s emotions and incite feelings. People like to feel good, or proud, or valued. They want to feel needed or soothed. The seven top emotional triggers, Ahern writes, are: anger, exclusivity, fear, flattery, greed, guilt, and salvation. Many of the ones that we would consider negative are used in the commercial world to motivate people to buy products or join a club.

Hopefully, the Christian community strives to rise above using the triggers of fear, exclusivity, guilt, and others like them. Yet, when we make our annual appeals and design our capital campaigns, we often slip into using these negative motivators. “Join the Thousand Friends Club.” “It’s too bad that when new students arrive, they have to sit in lounge chairs long overdue for the dumpster.” “If we are not able to raise \$25,000 by the end of this year, we will have to cut our campus pastor’s time back to 50%,”

I urge you to consider building your fundraising approach around positive motivators, such as: appreciation, abundance, vision, mutuality, and generosity. Invite those who have received much to give much in return. Go the extra mile to include all donors within the circle of your supporters,

² “Generosity” A Little Goes a Long Way,” Keith Taylor, NEED magazine, Issue 3, 2007.

³ Tom Ahern is the author of *How To Write Fundraising Materials that Raise More Money: the Art, the Science, the Secrets*.

regardless of the size of their gifts. Say thank you with frequency and genuineness. Open your visioning process to a wide variety of participants; see their ideas and dreams as part of your abundance. Proclaim God's goodness. Celebrate generosity.!

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