

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fundraising for Campus Ministry

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Embrace the Change

Change is perhaps the only constant in our lives. We older folks know that through experience. The sureties we established in our younger years no longer look like what we envisioned. Society is not the same; the church is not the same; ministry is not the same. The way that I learned to do ministry in my seminary days is very different from what is required and expected today. Hymnals change; pastoral roles change; the missional focus of the church changes. For good, I trust (but not always).

Certainly the life of campus ministry changes, often from year to year. Programs that worked in the 80s will not draw much interest these days. Vocational discernment is in; protest marches are out (mostly). Worship styles ebb and flow, moving from what we considered “contemporary” to a new attention to historic liturgical patterns. Campus pastors are expected to be more in touch with faith and science issues, conversant about world religions, technologically savvy, and able to coordinate mission trips flawlessly. “Back in the Time” most of the funding for campus ministry came through a national system, supported of course by synod/district benevolence. Very little fund raising was done locally, from either individual donors or from congregations. In 1985, when “We Care for the Future” presented us in campus ministry with a new challenge to build endowments and prepare for a leaner funding future, few were prepared to embrace the task. Many resisted, piously stating that if the church calls them to serve, the church would provide the resources. However, many others saw the change on the horizon and bent their shoulders to the work ahead. Fund raising for campus ministry is one of the major changes in the 100 year history of our important work on campus.

“Financial vibrancy is the capacity of an organization to make the transition from one sustainable moment to the next.”

This pithy quote comes from an article about change in organizations by Gayle Gifford.¹ In the article she waves the flag that I am waving, pointing to change as a constant, and encouraging organizations to see this never-ending flux as a way to keeping their mission sharp and their goals focused. Referring to the quote, she says that “its brilliance lies in its ability to succinctly capture the complex and unfolding dynamic that each of our organizations negotiates over its lifetime.”

She urges us to give ourselves credit for agility and the ability to survive and adapt in a rapidly changing landscape. One would think that she refers to campus ministry specifically. We feel

¹ *Contributions*, volume 21, number 2, 2007

appropriately named, as one of those organizations that are still around after 100 years, because of our nimble ability to foresee change, name it, and adapt to it. We have changed the way we staff our ministries, moving from traveling lay “counselors” and pastors who were like campus circuit riders in the early years, to a more traditional stable of staff who provided solid Lutheran word and sacrament ministry in the middle years, to a time when we are now looking at new alliances with congregations and ecumenical partners. We have moved through a variety of facility styles, from houses to chapels to storefronts. Campus ministry has been agile and adaptable in the midst of change.

It’s helpful to think about your campus ministry organization in terms of its “lifetime.” We recognize that we change as people and our bodies and minds transform themselves over time. In many ways we are not the same people we were when we graduated from high school. Organizations, too, cycle through stages of adolescent turmoil, maturity, and generativity. It’s not necessarily a linear progression, like the process of aging itself, but a cycle where our organizational growth may be plotted in terms of its success, its ability to make decisions, its conflict manifestations, and its enduring legacy. Change motivates us organizationally from one stage to another, and not always smoothly.

For example, news of a shortfall of funding in the next fiscal year may cause an organization to panic, spend down the encumbered funds, and slide into a survival mode. An exhausted board may simply give up or turn up the volume on the “way we did it before.” A mature response would be to face the change head on and develop a strategy for inviting new gifts from new donors, while strengthening communication about a new vision for the ministry. A new development committee may need to be formed. A new database of donors may need to be established. New ways of communicating with both key and potential donors may need to be put into action. New relationships may need to be built with area congregations and synodical leaders. How change is received and embraced says a lot about your board and the willingness of the leadership to make appropriate adaptive moves.

Gifford states in her article, “Our organizations will rise and fall and rise again with the availability of and our ability to capture—even if only for a brief organizational moment—many different kinds of funding.” That is a key concept. In times of change, those organizations that endure will not place their funding eggs in one basket. They will not only have a strong annual fund, they will be hard at work securing larger gifts, even as they invite legacy gifts to build an endowment. Strategic gift planning is one of the necessary tasks of a contemporary campus ministry board. They will need to be adept at reading the landscape, as they plan for what kinds of financial support will be required to navigate that landscape. It will not work to simply keep sending out one newsletter per year hoping to garner enough income to sustain the ministry another year. A multiplicity of strategies must be put into place. It will require carefully judged and quickly executed tactics to keep the ministry viable through the current wave of change.

Marking that sense of change in the philanthropic world is the report of a recent study by the Prime Group of the DonorTrends² survey of the Baby Boomer generation. Boomers, born between 1946

² The DonorTrends Project is a collaborative effort of Craver, Mathews, Smith and Company and The Prime Group.

and 1964, are now surpassing the previous generation in terms of the percentage of their income given to non-profit organizations. Data from an online survey of 2,333 adults indicates that Boomers give on average \$1,361 per year, compared to \$1,138 for older adults. Late Boomers give a higher percentage than early Boomers. Like their elders, Boomers give about 75% to traditional charities in the fields of health, education, social needs, disaster relief, arts, and culture, while the remaining 25% goes to issue advocacy and political campaigns. Religion was not mentioned in the survey, but other studies indicate that this is still a high percentage.

The higher levels of giving and the sheer number of Boomers shifts the center of the fundraising university radically, the report indicates. And what may be even more significant, members of Generations X and Y signal even larger gift potential. (Contrary to the conventional suspicion that these post-Boomers were “lost to the philanthropic world) Post-Boomers currently give on average \$791 per year, but 56% assert that they intend to give more in the future. Furthermore, we already sense that the preference for making gifts by this cohort is online, and not through the usual patterns of response to mailings and newsletters. The study indicates that 19% of post-Boomers have made online contributions, while only 13% of Boomers and 9% of pre-Boomers have done so. However, the study indicates that only 15% of post-Boomers prefer to be solicited by e-mail rather than by conventional mail. If relationships are important to the post-Boomer crowd, we will have to find new ways to personalize our contact with them in order to secure their gifts.

It is also important to note that post-Boomers are more culturally diverse and that there is little fundraising history with this under 40 group. Their giving priorities may turn out to be very different from those of their parents. Right now they seem to be as interested in family values as in women’s rights, suggesting more political diversity. As they gain more life experience, their values may shift as a result. The question is whether post-Boomer giving will morph into traditional patterns as they grow in years and experience, or whether that experience will radically reshape their values and their willingness to support those values with their contributions. Finally, what could turn out to be very significant is the way in which post-Boomers are open to hearing about groups and causes they aren’t familiar with, while at the same time they are not familiar with groups that are working on causes that they care about. The study says that “Non-profit ‘brands’ are not yet established with post-Boomers; the competition for shares of their giving wallets has barely begun.” Donor loyalty is not a given; if you get them once, can you keep them for the long haul?

Gifford encourages us to consider organizational transformation. The ones that survive are those with the courage to look forward, as they hold on to their core values, and make the shifts that are necessary in these turbulent times. Bob Dylan sang years ago that “the times they are a-changin’.” It’s still true today. Be organizationally alert. Change is on the horizon. Will you and your organization be ready? Will you become “financially vibrant?”

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