

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fundraising for Campus Ministry

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Building for Building

Michael K. Girlinghouse

The first time I walked into the Luther Center at the University of South Dakota, I got lost in the entryway. Honestly. I had arrived for my first call interview and parked in what I thought was the Center's lot. Then I circled the building looking for the entry door. There were two identical doors that both looked like fire exits. But, because the building sits on a corner, and both doors faced a street, I had no idea which one was the entrance. So, at random, I picked one, found it unlocked, and went inside. As the door closed behind me, suddenly, everything went black. I remembered seeing hangers just before the lights went out, so I figured I had wandered into a coat closet. But one that had an outside door?! I felt for an interior door and found it. Opening that door, I swore to myself, "If I get this job, this is the first thing that I will change!"

It took eight years and \$100,000, to fulfill that vow (though a working light bulb helped a lot in the meantime). By the time the project was finished, we not only changed the entryway, but had remodeled the whole building inside and out, making it a more welcoming, more functional, and better tool for ministry in the 21st Century. The story of the transformation of that space is one of perseverance, patience, and prayer that taught me, my board and our community a lot about fundraising.

At one of my early board meetings as pastor of the Luther Center, we spoke about the needs of our building. Not only was the entryway hard for newcomers to negotiate, but the rest of the building was out-of-date, and no longer well suited to the style of ministry we were dreaming about implementing. However, we knew that the building we imagined would cost a lot to bring into reality, and believed that there wasn't much capital around for that kind of project. So, we put it on the back burner. Unintentionally, that was perhaps the best thing we could have done.

As we talked about the possibility of remodeling and what it would cost, we quickly realized that the potential donors for a project of that magnitude did not know us, our ministry, or what our ministry was about. We had little or no relationship with those who would need to get on board to make our dream a reality. So, we did several things right away. First, we diversified the membership of our Board of Directors. Previously, a majority of the members came from a congregation located a few blocks from the Center. With more congregations represented on the Board, more congregations had the opportunity to hear our story. Second, we never turned down an

opportunity to share who we were and what we were about. We did not have a Sunday morning worship service at our Center and that worked to our advantage. I did as much pulpit supply as I could and never failed to work in a few words about campus ministry. We sent messengers (students, board members and me) to women's groups, men's groups, and any other group who would have us. These visits accomplished two important things: first, the congregations learned about our ministry and second, students who were headed for the university learned that we were there waiting for them. We also got involved in a number of community projects, including the annual community Thanksgiving worship and other local events. That paid off later as community groups helped us in all sorts of ways. After four years, we were a known quantity in the South Dakota Synod and in our community. Saying, "I'm from the Luther Center," no longer drew blank stares from people, but nods of approval.

Somewhere during that fourth year, the board began talking about remodeling again. This new conversation was touched off by the students who asked about updating some of the 1970's décor of the building. We affirmed their desire to update the building, but again, we worried about funding. We also began to ask out loud whether doing ministry in our little building was still the best configuration for campus ministry at the University of South Dakota. We spent the next year developing a long-range vision for our ministry. We vowed to put everything "on the table" and to consider every option that came to mind. To do that, we put together a strategic planning committee that included board members, students, area pastors, university representatives, and an "outsider". The role of the outsider went to the local Episcopal priest. I asked her to join the planning committee as someone who had no stake in the project and little or no knowledge of our ministry. I told her that she was responsible for asking all the "stupid" questions an outsider would ask and to challenge our assumptions. She did a great job. During the year, we invited guests to serve as "leaven" for our conversations. The Dean of Students gave a presentation on student life and future plans for the campus. A local city council representative shared some of the things being discussed in the community. At the end of the year, we decided that the best place to do campus ministry on our campus was right where we were. But, we also affirmed the desperate need to upgrade the facility.

We hired an architect and spent most of the next year designing the new and improved Luther Center. Once more, throughout the process, we consulted with our partners and continued looking for ways to communicate with potential supporters. Though we had not asked for money yet, gifts for the building project began to come in. Others offered in-kind support. As the design took shape, everyone could feel the excitement building. By the time we sent out our first fundraising letter at the end of that year, most of the potential donors were already on board. They knew what we were up to, what our goals were, and what we hoped to accomplish. Sadly, we were a little disappointed with the results of that first letter. I think we expected more than we should have. What the fundraising experts say is true: a letter is not the most effective way to ask for support, even if your supporters know what you're up to.

During the next year, we continued to work at raising funds. And it was work! We set our goal at \$100,000, though the projected cost estimates were more in the range of \$150,000 to \$160,000. We hoped to make up the remainder of the costs through sweat-equity and volunteer labor, though, at the time, we didn't know exactly from where that would come. NLCM, Inc. provided a generous grant to help defray some of the costs. Some of our fundraising efforts were successful, some not. I would not recommend doing a hot dog stand on dorm move-in day. (Especially with students coming from communities where there is no Burger King or MacDonald's close at hand.) The spaghetti dinner at a local winery (they donated the space) was a huge success, especially when the money was matched by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. Through it all, our primary support came again and again from congregations where we had developed relationships: those where I provided regular pulpit supply, those who had students involved in our ministry. and those where we sent students to make presentations. If I learned anything during these efforts it is that people *do* want to give, and that they are *happy* to give to a project if they know something about it, know someone involved, and believe in its mission. The old fundraiser's adage held true: the most effective form of fundraising is one-on-one conversation. Though for us these didn't happen in homes so much as in church basements, grocery store aisles, and shopping mall halls.

When we had \$80,000 in the bank, and after much discussion and prayer, the board decided to take a leap of faith: We decided to actually begin the work of renovation. We knew the risk, but decided we would get as far as we could on what we had. In retrospect, I think that decision helped us. The momentum of building helped encourage some of the donors who had previously been sitting on the fence. Once people could see something happening, they wanted to get involved. We met our goal about half way through the building project. I would be lying if I told you I never worried about running out of money! But, God is good. Very good.

As I wrote earlier, we had hoped to do some of the work with volunteers, but I never imagined the outpouring of skilled and semi-skilled people that were willing to lend a hand. It was amazing the way the network of relationships we had built came together at just the right time. It proved again and again just how good God can be. More than once we simply shrugged our shoulders and said, "It's just a God thing." I was visiting one congregation across the boarder in Iowa when a man approached me at coffee. He said he had a plumbing company and told me that, if we bought the plumbing materials, his company would provide all the labor to install it. Then, he found out his Iowa plumbers weren't licensed to work in South Dakota, so he just bought the materials and let us find the laborers. Another person connected us to a work-release program at an area minimum security prison. One Saturday, about fifteen inmates came and spent an enjoyable day tearing the inside of the building apart. One of many moments of grace came late in the afternoon when a woman from an area congregation saw the men working, went to the Dairy Queen, and bought them all Blizzards. More than one men's group came and put in a day or more of work. However, the greatest gift we received came in the form of two retired men from our community. I had originally asked them to help me put gypsum board around some large windows in our new worship area. That was just before Christmas. They did that. I left for the Lutheran Student Movement National Gathering and when I returned, they had done the whole worship area! Between New Years and the

completion of the project the following August, these two guys worked full time and wound up doing most of the coordinating for us. Both had all sorts of connections in the contracting world and used them on our behalf. Early on in the fundraising process I said, “If anyone gives us \$25,000, I’ll name a room after them!” When we added up all the hours these two men gave, and figured the going rate, it totaled a lot more than \$25,000! Being a man of my word, we named the front room in their honor.

In the fall of my eighth year at the University of South Dakota, we dedicated our new facility. It was an amazing celebration, which we shared with the great variety of people who had been involved in bringing our dream to reality. I am glad to say that on the day of the dedication *no one* had to hunt for the front door! It was marked by a huge red awning, a large glass door, and an open, welcoming entryway.

As I think back on those challenging years, I mostly remember the positives. I know that not everything went as planned. I am sure we made mistakes. But my memory of those things has faded with time. The thing that stands out is the relationships that were formed, the partnerships that developed, and the sense of ownership that was shared by everyone who was involved. No one of us could have done it alone. And, I believe, that’s the way God intends it.

From this experience I have learned that fundraising is not just about money. Fundraising is not about survival—at least, not if you go about it the right way. Instead, I have come to believe that fundraising is about building relationships and partnerships and friendships, so that together we might do the work of ministry. Campus ministry is exciting work, it is important work, and it is God’s work. The people who helped us rebuild the Luther Center experienced that in many, many ways, and it was both a privilege and a joy to invite them into it.