

THE FIRST MONDAY REPORT

Thoughts on Fundraising for Campus Ministry

November, 2008

Hope Is Not a Strategic Plan¹

Several of the newsletters and fund appeals that have come across my desk in recent weeks point to the economic downturn we face in this country. They note the impact on budgets and ways in which ministries are trying to expand programs with shrinking dollars. For example, Jon Magnuson (Northern Michigan University, Marquette), shares his conversation with a local banker. Together they express concern for the economy, particularly students, and the use of credit cards, values, and lifestyles. Let me quote from Jon's well-crafted message: "As the dollar falls in the world market, community meals, festivals, walks in the woods, music, poetry, acts of kindness, and pondering a better redistribution of wealth will be what its going to be about." Later on, an invitation to his campus community: "We meet quietly each mid-week at the University Center to pray and ponder the changes going on around and within us. We share a loaf of bread, drink from a cup, and remember a Promise that one day all things shall come together, everything in heaven and everything on earth. One evening I shall invite the banker. Welcome to a new school year."²

Jon has it right. Finally it is all in God's hands. And in the meantime, we are called to be about those things that we can do to address the times in which we live—from meditation to careful planning, from deep eucharistic celebration to sincere concern for the needs of others.

It seems obvious that no one is immune from hearing about or thinking about the economy these days. We encounter its devastating effects on our lives on many levels, from our income, to our pension plans, to our working budgets in the campus ministries we serve. Some I talk with seem immobilized by the economy's downturn. Others are frantic with anxiety, poised to do something, anything, if only someone in the know would direct their actions and investments. While I'm not inviting you into a hand-wringing session on the economy, I would like to share with you some of the thinking and reading I've done recently that may have an impact on how you do your fundraising in these times.

A recent article in the *Minneapolis StarTribune* acknowledged that "campus fundraising just got a lot harder."³ The writer interviewed a number of folks responsible for large capital campaigns and found that they are appropriately cautious, yet amazingly positive. In the report Carleton College President Robert Oden said, "Part of the spirit of a campaign is the optimism . . . to set an ambitious goal, and because people believe in Carleton we're going to reach it." But he went on to admit that such optimism is harder right now. "You're doing that

¹ Letter from Michael Hoffman, CEO, *Changing Our World*, October, 2008.

² *Tracks*, September-October, 2008.

³ *Minneapolis StarTribune*, October 17, 2008, Section A1. Article by Jeff Shelman.

with one hand, but, with the other hand, you realize things are shaky right now.” Mark Deinhardt, executive vice-president at St. Thomas University stated, “Uncertainty creeps into the mix; they (donors) aren’t sure how much they can part with and send your way even though they believe in you.”⁴ Bruce Flessner, whose consulting firm works with many major campaigns in the area, counsels that organizations are going to have to be patient when it comes to seeing results, while continuing to work hard at the planning process of the campaign.⁵

The wisdom in this article was reinforced a week later at an ALDE Northstar chapter conference. There professionals with more on-the-ground experience than I have encouraged us all to use this time as a way to reflect on the focus and purpose of what we do. One person said, “It’s a hard time to do fundraising, but a good time to do development work.” This is a call to set the foundations straight after we have suffered the quake. Good development work has a strategic plan, has a carefully tuned mission statement, and has a donor base that is informed and up to date. It’s a time to concentrate on “donor stewardship,” on saying “thank you” rather than “please.” While we might be spending more time these days scurrying to plug the holes in the budget, we need to take time as well to step back from the fray to think carefully about our mission and our plan for moving it forward.

Those who study trends in the economy and philanthropy remind us that struggling markets do not necessarily predict a downturn in charitable giving. In 2007, despite uncertainty in the housing market and the skyrocketing cost of oil, Americans donated more than \$304 billion to charity. In the last 40 years, the worst single year decline in inflation-adjusted philanthropy was 1973-74 during the oil embargo. The decline in giving was 5.4%. In 2008, if there is an equivalent decline, the amount will be a drop to only \$289.5 billion, approximately what was available in 2005. One report states, “Philanthropy in America is more deeply rooted in culture than in equity share prices.”⁶

Another study indicates that in current dollars giving has increased 8.4% in years without a recession, but in years with a recession, giving has increased 6.2%.⁷ The reasons for the overall resilience of American philanthropy, the study says, is the high priority Americans give to charitable giving. In times of economic slowdown, other discretionary spending will often be cut first. A pledge to a religious organization or a charity near and dear to their heart will be the last to be laid aside. While donors may pay more attention to timing and the form of their gift (securities vs. cash), those who are able will continue to support causes that are important to them and where their carefully determined gifts can make a real difference. Noteworthy, also, is the fact that estate gifts tend to increase during tough times, as once again people make decisions about priorities.

Here are other words and phrases that I have encountered in my recent reading about fund raising in a time of economic stress:

- Now is the time for dedication to building relationships.

⁴ *Ibid*, Section A18.

⁵ *Ibid*, Section A18.

⁶ “Economic Q&A”, *Our Changing World*, October, 2008.

⁷ The Sharpe Group, 2008.

- Tell your story every day.
- Convey tangible results.
- Communicate positive messages
- Speak with conviction about your mission.
- Demonstrate clearly the emotional impact of changing lives.
- Is your case the strongest, most updated statement of who you are as an organization?
- Emphasize the seriousness and immediacy of your needs.
- Be candid.
- Your vision must be set to the future.
- Institute efficiencies—audit and streamline your operations.
- Thank, thank, and thank again.
- Develop unemotional, calming strategies.
- Be near, dear, and clear: as near to your donors as possible, keeping your mission dear to them, and being clear about why funding is needed.
- Flexibility and innovation.
- Develop a specific strategy for the chronic phase.
- Communicate more than less.
- What no one should do is sit still.

There are several implications for fund raising in campus ministry that I suggest you spend some time discussing with your board. These points are valid for any time and place, but they are particularly significant in these days.

1. Be clear about your mission. Your community of donors needs to know exactly who you are and what you propose to do before they will support you.
2. Create a vision that is both stretching and realistic. Don't get caught up in an impossible dream. Does your vision have the marks of relevance, urgency, and sustainability?
3. Develop a strategic plan that is doable and measurable. Supporters want to see progress toward a goal and want to celebrate with you when you've reached it.
4. Go to even greater lengths than before to communicate. With more organizations vying for fewer dollars, you will want your donors to be highly aware of your ministry and continue to hold you in deep regard. It's easy to slide off the plate at many levels. Stay in close touch with all of your constituents, from synods to congregations to individuals.
5. Make your appeal about the mission, not about the shortfalls in the budget. Donors support you because they affirm your mission, not because your budget is shaky. They want to invest in "changed hearts and saved lives" and want to make a difference with the limited resources they have. Show them how that can happen through your campus ministry.
6. If you need to make an emergency appeal, keep it real and honest. Let them know that once you get past this bump in the road (new roof, salary shortfall, etc.), you will be as strong as ever. Let them know that their contribution will help get you through these risky times. While most people won't give to a sinking ship, they will give to a ship that will continue to sail if repairs are attended to. Don't whine, don't blame, don't scare or threaten. Be positive, be candid, and focus on mission.

7. Give people a reason to contribute, not a reason to withhold. Don't commiserate by saying, "I know that these are tough times for everyone, so we understand if you are not able to make a contribution this year." Instead, let them know that while some may not be able to contribute readily, their generosity can make up the difference. Not everyone feels the same economic impact; some are as able to contribute as before and will understand the challenge to step up with an extra gift.
8. This is an emotional time and appeals need to be made on an emotional level as well. A cold, rational letter filled with dry facts and trite words will not connect.
9. Most importantly, remember that this continues to be about stewardship of the many gifts that God provides. Let your donors know that you are carefully stewarding the gifts to your ministry and invite them to consider how they might share from the abundance in their own lives.

Finally, Dr. Paul Dovre, president emeritus of Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, offered his ten basic principles of fundraising in his keynote address at the ALDE Northstar conference. You know these principles already, but I share them with you again as a way of re-grounding in these times. In his experience, Dovre says, fundraising is about:

10. relationships that involve recognition, affirmation, and care,
9. donor interest, but the need to educate if necessary,
8. competence to listen, organize, and know the vision,
7. perseverance and faithfulness, including keeping confidence,
6. volunteers and the energy and commitment they bring,
5. our relationship to money from a Christian perspective,
4. the ministry of money, "the vocation of inviting others to share,"
3. blessing—ours and other's,
2. the community of the generous, which multiplies interest and energy, and
1. God's work, recognizing that out of the generosity of God comes our own invitation to be generous with others.⁸

"Hope is not a strategic plan" and does not allow us and our ministries to sit idly by and do nothing in these trying times. Yet, we are called by the gospel to be people of hope. Focus on mission—yes. Plan wisely—to be sure. Tell the story well—by all means. Invite all to share gifts at all levels—continually. Through it all, in the community formed by Christ, we do not lose hope, even as we are submerged in hard times and faced with tough decisions. May you find hope and be blessed abundantly as you continue your faithful ministry on campus.

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⁸ ALDE Northstar conference, October 24, 2008

