

# Aiming for the Heart: Fundraising as Ministry

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The mid-year update to the congregation by the chair of the Stewardship Commission was anything but encouraging. “At this time last year, we were behind in meeting our budget by \$39,433. For this year, we’re behind by \$57,340. We remain far behind in meeting our 2000 budget of \$722,610. Have you considered how you may be willing to help us meet our budget?” As the frustrated volunteer returned to his seat, he was heard to mutter, “There must be a better way!”

This man is not alone in wondering why it’s so tough to raise the funds needed to support the work of the church. Because the majority of Christian ministries operate in a perpetual state of scarcity, members of stewardship councils and development committees from all across North America have felt his pain. In the midst of the pressure of the fiscal year, it can be hard to imagine a successful conclusion to a difficult financial situation. Yet there are individuals, congregations, and ministry staff who take seriously the promise of God’s abundance, and in that promise, have found the courage to press on toward a new way of raising funds.

A little over four years ago, the two of us set out in search of Christian organizations that have found the “better way” for which beleaguered stewardship staff long. We looked for places where the leadership was committed both to raising resources and encouraging the spiritual development of donors. We sought out organizations that had re-visioned the development program as ministry. We looked for staffs who are careful to test fundraising methods and messages against what they believe to be a biblically and theologically correct understanding of Christian stewardship. We were aided in our quest by a grant from Lilly Endowment and the generous goodwill of staff and volunteers from a variety Christian organizations.

In the course of our study, we talked with several hundred fund raisers, consultants, board members, pastors, and others who care about or are involved in seeking funds for Christian ministries. We also observed up close the fundraising programs of seven exemplary organizations. In the end, we identified a number of

principles we feel are essential to shaping Christian fundraising as ministry. Although our study focused on the fundraising staffs and boards of parachurch ministries – extralitururgical organizations such as hospitals, social service agencies, schools, and mission societies – we are confident the suggestions we uncovered for growing givers’ hearts are relevant in congregational settings as well.

## Missing the Mark

While we might hope the local church would be the “seed bed” where generous spirits are cultivated and habits of giving take root, in reality, something quite the opposite is often the case. A rash of recent research reports tell us the majority of pastors would rather talk about God without mention of mammon. As a result, stewardship education is minimal in most churches today – a finding echoed in our own interviews with 60 pastors and church treasurers. In response to the question, “When you (or your pastor) talk with the congregation about giving, do you use the biblical language of the tithe?”, more than half of the respondents told us money or giving is seldom mentioned from their pulpit. Several pastors said they aren’t comfortable “begging for money.” Others insisted that money talk turns people off. In the words of the pastor of a seeker-oriented congregation: “You can’t grow a church if you’re constantly talking about money.” And, if by “church” he means the buildings, program, staff, and stuff usually associated with congregational life, he may be right.

On the other hand, if we define “church” as people whose lives are shaped by faith, whose deepest desires include a growing and genuine relationship with God, and who are eager to share their experience of God with others, money talk should be no problem. Indeed, it would be tough to grow this church without talking about money. When the aim of our stewardship efforts shifts from concern about meeting this year’s budget or advancing future plans for the congregation, to the more crucial end of seeing God at work in hearts through the experience of giving, people will be encouraged to even greater service and generosity.

Consider, for example, the message with which

one congregation welcomes visitors. "We believe the true spirit of our love for Jesus Christ is best revealed by our love for one another and the stranger who enters our community. Giving is the greatest expression of our love. . . This giving spirit emerges from the warm and caring fellowship of believers. This spirit of love, caring, and giving is contagious to all who enter here." The welcome message goes on to name the outreach ministries - local, national, and global - with which the church is involved, and concludes with an invitation "to come out and grow with us." The testimony of this congregation is clear and without apology: giving is central to their understanding of what it means to be the church. Money talk for this congregation is part and parcel of its ministry.

## Shifting Our Aim

The table below differentiates what we feel is a necessary shift in the aim of the fundraising programs of Christian organizations if that work is to be carried out as ministry. While the conventional paradigm of fundraising isn't "wrong" in what it seeks to achieve, it misses the mark if we are shooting for the two-fold goal of raising required funds AND growing givers' hearts. At first glance, the differences between the two models can seem so subtle as to be of little consequence. However, a closer look at five key factors - focus and goals; ideal outcomes; ethical framework; philosophical and cultural underpinnings; and ultimate objective - shows that the possibilities presented in the ministry-oriented model go well beyond what is hoped for or sought through the traditional approach. The alternative vision calls Christian fundraisers - including stewardship committees and other congregational leaders - to carry forward the best of the conventional paradigm while looking at, assessing, and possibly improving the aim of their stewardship efforts.

In the course of our research, we've noticed that conventional approaches to fund development tend to focus on the current needs and future plans of the organization. As fundraisers are pressured with ever more ambitious funding goals, the larger vision of fundraising as a means of advancing God's kingdom can be lost. This problem is clearly evident in the Stewardship Chair's fundraising "pitch" with which we began this article. His appeal to the congregation was all about the budget. In contrast, the alternative approach puts the emphasis on God at work in donor hearts. The goal for which we aim is to bring people into a closer relationship with God through the experience of giving. This, we suggest, is the "better way" for which the Stewardship Chair was seeking.

Within the conventional paradigm, success is defined by what the organization receives - when the

budget is met, a new initiative supported, a campaign won. As fundraising is approached as ministry, however, success rests with the giver. Each gift becomes an occasion for and a celebration of growth in faith. Ministry-centered programs make every attempt to listen for, lift up, and honor the vision God has placed upon the giver's heart. There's no need to push for the quick result. In the words of a stewardship committee member of a local parish, "The journey we've started on will take years, because we are trying to build a faith community."

In ministry-centered fundraising efforts, the theological underpinnings of the organization are plainly manifest. The desire to meet donors on the common ground of faith is a primary characteristic of programs committed to growing givers' hearts. The alternative vision challenges the giver to an understanding of herself as a steward to whom much has been entrusted and from whom much is required. The goal for which ministry-centered programs aim is bigger and bolder than the narrow interests of a single organization or congregation. Programs that follow the alternative way are grounded in the confidence that God's abundance is great enough to more than meet all challenges we may throw God's direction.

## Practicing Our Aim

We believe the work of raising up support for kingdom work can and should be conducted in ways that provide spiritual nurture to all the people involved. Those of us involved in Christian fundraising feel challenged to raise the money we think is required to support the good work God has called us and others to do in the world. But just as surely, we should feel challenged to grow givers' hearts. For people of faith, the act of giving - elicited and received as an act of grace and faith - can be a powerful occasion for spiritual growth.

In those churches and parachurch agencies where the leadership has chosen to pursue an alternative vision for fund development, everything done to encourage faith-filled generosity will be informed by a shared sense of who God is, how God is involved with individuals, and how that involvement shapes attitudes about giving and receiving. Every invitation to give will aim straight for the hearts of individual givers. If that kind of fundraising is carried out in enough places, hearts will grow bigger and God's good work on earth will go forward, in whatever form that work may take. This, then, is the "better way."

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