

Asking as Teaching: Seminary Fundraising Programs Should Minister to Donors

by Rebekah Burch Basinger

A rash of recent research reports warn that a not-so-funny thing has happened on the way to church. The majority of pastors, we are being told, have decided they'd rather talk about God without mentioning mammon, ignoring the subject of Christians and money except for the once-a-year obligatory stewardship sermon. As a result, stewardship education is virtually non-existent in many churches, and persons of faith have been left to learn about giving where they may. By default, the majority of churchgoers today are being introduced to the whys and hows of giving not by their pastors, but via fundraising appeals from the myriad religious organizations, including seminaries, that dot the North American charitable landscape.

This situation presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the leaders of theological schools, and it suggests that a seminary's development program is understood as being more than just a source of funds for the institution. As the Catholic scholar Michael Raschko notes, "In fundraising, as in any other pastoral activity, we are subtly, yet powerfully, shaping people's images of God, themselves, the Church, and their world." The way in which a theological school goes about raising money IS a form of stewardship education and the fund-raising staff ARE stewardship educators – whether the work is thought of as such or not. When development officers show as much concern for the "stewardship IQs" of donors as for the fiscal health of the school, fund-raising can be a powerful "sermon."

Over the past three years and with the support of a grant from Lilly Endowment, Thomas Jeavons, general secretary of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends, and I have had opportunity to look closely at what happens when religious organizations approach asking as teaching. We sought out organizations that have re-visioned the development program as a ministry to donors. We looked for places where the staff are careful to test fund-raising methods and messages against what they believe to be a biblically and theologically correct understanding of Christian stewardship. What we discovered through our research, above all else, is that fund-raising as "right" stewardship education doesn't just happen. It requires intentionality, institution-wide re-education, and most important, the full commitment of the president and the board.

The good news is, institutions don't have to go it alone in expanding the vision for the fund-raising program. Thanks to the good efforts of organizations such as ATS's Development and Institutional Advancement Program, the Catholic Stewardship Council, Christian Stewardship Association, and the Ecumenical Center for Stewardship Studies, there is a growing body of literature and resources that frame the task of fund-raising within a theological perspective. Unfortunately, the impact of these organizations on the broader world of development continues to be limited. There remains then, the need for religious organizations to exercise care in where they turn for help shaping their fund-raising programs.

That said, the obvious question for the readers of *In Trust* is, what's the board's role in rethinking a seminary's development program to encourage the dual goals of asking for money and teaching positively about Christian stewardship? Drawing upon what I've had opportunity to observe over these past few years, I have identified four key issues to which trustees should give careful attention. These are:

- 1) board education that encourages board members to think theologically about fundraising;
- 2) campus climate and its impact on the fund-raising program;
- 3) goal setting that communicates the "right" messages to donors; and,
- 4) staff recruitment and hiring in light of institutional mission.

Educating the Board to Asking as Teaching

If the board is expected to support a different way of thinking about fund-raising, it is crucial that individual trustees understand the whole of what can be accomplished through the seminary's development efforts. Working together, the president and the board chair should design a study plan for the board that includes both a review of biblical and theological teachings about money and faith and opportunities for trustees to share personal stories of what giving has meant to their faith.

It is likely that some trustees will be uncomfortable with the discussion in the beginning, but the rewards of such conversations can be tremendous, as a trustee from San Francisco Theological Seminary

reported. “A fund-raising effort that is spiritually based, that has specific goals for ministry, and which is carefully managed and realistic, is empowering to trustees. We feel like we know how to help, and it’s a very positive experience,” he said.

A study plan is especially helpful for boards and presidents who are considering adding a development program or at seminaries where fund-raising activities have been minimal. However, this exercise can be just as useful for boards of seminaries where the fund-raising program is well-developed and has enjoyed a history of success. In the words of a trustee at Biola University, home to Talbot School of Theology and a very fine fund-raising program, “The philosophy of the department is well circulated. The board is involved – ‘a stand-with approach’ – as an encouragement to the staff. There’s a good system of checks and balances. All this contributes to an organizational openness to the work of the development office.”

In addition to planned-for times of reflection, it is helpful, as well, for boards to keep track of comments and questions about the fund-raising program that come up during the general board session. This is a great way to assess the impact of board education on board practice. After all, reflection should lead to changed practice. We should expect that the kinds of questions board members ask will change as trustees explore the idea of fund-raising as an extension of the seminary’s teaching ministry. In time, board queries should come to include attention to God’s good work in donor hearts as well as God’s good work on behalf of the seminary’s bottomline. When that happens, trustees can know that their commitment to board education has been worth the effort – both personally and for the institution they serve.

Paying Attention to Campus Climate

After spending time working through their own assumptions about what the seminary can – and should – accomplish through its fund-raising efforts, the board is ready to listen in on what the campus community has to say about the development program. However, trustees should not be surprised if what they hear suggests confusion about the seminary’s fund-raising activities. Because so much of what the development staff does is external to the organization, their work is often a mystery to the faculty and other staff. As a fundraiser responded when asked how the development program was perceived across the organization, “They’ll tell you we’re the people with the credit cards.”

Over dinner at a gathering of seminary administrators and presidents, a group of development officers talked about the feeling of “otherness” they’ve experienced on the campuses where they work. “I came to my assignment with different credentials and a different career path than the faculty and other administra-

tors within the seminary,” one of the women stated. “If it wasn’t for the president’s willingness, along with the encouragement of several key trustees, to ‘part the waters’ for me – to convince the rest of the community that my work is a legitimate and important part of the seminary’s mission – it would have been a tough go.”

Her experience mirrors that of many seminary development staff. She was called to a setting where fundraising had for many years been viewed as outside the bounds of the institutional mission. Fortunately, she enjoys the support of a president and a board who understand and can interpret the development program to the campus community. As a result, she feels supported in her work and her person. In addition, others within the seminary are discovering the joy that comes from involvement with donors for whom giving is an extension of their faith.

If the campus community defines the success of a fundraising program solely by the bottomline, it is not likely the development staff will feel safe in giving attention to the spiritual life of donors. In settings such as these, fundraisers assume – and rightly so – that their performance will be judged on dollars raised, with little interest in how their work might have contributed to building up the generous spirit of God’s people. For many seminary development officers, it is professionally risky to focus on donor hearts.

Boards that desire a different approach to fund-raising will seek to say and do whatever they can to assure a safe environment for development as stewardship education. Trustees can model for the campus community a different way of talking about the fund-raising program. Priorities are communicated, as well, in the things a board chooses to highlight when describing the development effort. Bringing in the necessary dollars is vitally important to the health and vitality of a seminary – there’s no getting around it. And dedicated development staff take seriously the goals set before them. However, as increasing numbers of seminaries are discovering, it is possible to also give attention to donor hearts without compromising the bottomline.

Fund-raising Goals as Teaching Tools

The surest evidence that a board has “gotten it” when it comes to a different way of thinking about fund-raising is found in the goals they set for the development program. Faith-encouraging goals reflect an understanding of the difference between targets that challenge supporters to stretch themselves on behalf of the seminary’s mission, and goals that are simply beyond the ability of a constituency to achieve. And while it is good to aim high, too great expectations almost always lead to frustration, dashed hopes, and failed programs. This is not the way to encourage God’s work in donor lives.

A key role of the board in this regard is to stand with the president in saying “no” to some good opportunities. All proposed new initiatives need to be tested against the institution’s longrange plan. Possible activities must support previously agreed upon goals of school. Consideration also should be given to the constituency’s ability to fund the goals. As Henry Schmidt, president of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary stated, “The range of programs and special projects we could pursue are almost without limit, but there’s only so much one seminary can do. We keep a close eye on our constituency, and we try not to run too far out ahead of what we believe the Church and individual donors are able to handle.”

This is not to suggest that seminaries should be timid about responding to new opportunities. Indeed, too low expectations and a comfortableness with the status quo do little to build the self-confidence of institutional leaders or the donors who support the seminary with their gifts. Acting in a pessimistic way denies possibilities for both groups. Ann McKusick, formerly the vice president for advancement at Fuller Theological Seminary, put it this way. “There’s a direct correlation between the vision presented through the fundraising program, and what donors give. Ask for a dollar, you get a dollar. Ask with a bigger vision, and donors respond in kind.”

In the end, it takes honest, thoughtful discussion across the whole of the seminary community to avoid the trap of too great or too small expectations for the fundraising program. Leading in the conversation is board work at its best.

What’s the Donor’s Heart Got to Do with It?

A donor described her experience with fundraisers in the violent terms of the street, referring to the uncaring approach of some organizations as “drive-by shootings.” “In one day, fundraisers from three Christian organizations stopped by for a visit. Not one of them took time to ask about my life or what my goals were for my giving. They didn’t even pretend like they wanted to know me. I felt like I’d been ambushed.”

In sharp contrast, Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, tells about a note he received from a man who requested that his gift be used to “fix the plumbing.” Upon completion of the work, the maintenance staff of the Seminary prepared a photographic record of the projects made possible by the gift, and mailed it to the donor with their own word of thanks. The friend of Fuller was delighted by the seminary’s response. “There’s nothing that could have pleased me more,” he told Dr. Mouw.

These stories are a powerful reminder of the need to pay close attention to how the seminary’s development program is perceived by donors. How

Christian organizations go about asking for money provides the greatest opportunity both for abuse and for spiritual connection. On the one hand, the language of faith can be a powerful manipulative tool that will part people from their money, but leave them feeling diminished. On the other hand, the language of faith can be used to help believers connect their giving to a deeper relationship with God, and thus provide an opportunity for spiritual growth. Unfortunately, donors are rarely encouraged to provide feedback on how giving has changed their hearts, and so most fundraisers do not know what donors perceive their work. A board can change that.

Trustees should seek opportunities to hear what donors have to say about the messages and methods used by the seminary in seeking funds. Along with the happy stories of God’s blessing on individual lives, board members should be prepared for stories that are not so joyous. Both types of tales are helpful to the board’s understanding of how the seminary is doing with donor relations. In short, it’s not enough for trustees simply to state that donor relations should be a high priority within the seminary’s fund-raising program. They need to back up their words with action, and require an annual review of the fund-raising program that includes a plan for soliciting candid feedback from donors and other important constituents. If the organization’s aim is to help create channels through which God’s love and joy can flow, then the board can do no less than pay attention to what is happening in donors’ hearts as a result of the way in which the seminary goes about raising money.

Rethinking Staff Recruitment

In today’s job market, competition for knowledgeable fundraisers is almost as keen as for gifts themselves, and as result, religious organizations aren’t always as careful as they should be when hiring development staff. The difficulty in finding good development staff encourages some presidents to overlook the importance of matching the personal belief system of a prospective fundraiser with the theological underpinnings of the seminary, and this is a grave mistake. For a fundraiser to accurately and personally convey the uniqueness of the seminary’s mission and program to the donors, he or she must understand and embody the theological tradition of the school. Seminary boards and presidents would do well to listen to the words of a longtime fundraiser who, when we asked about staffing patterns, observed that “there are too many people in the business who don’t understand the cause they represent. There needs to be a measure of intimacy.”

The importance of institutional fit surfaced during a luncheon conversation with a group of development officers from the seminaries that make up the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley. “Presidents should focus more on the candidate’s philosophy of

fundraising, and whether this matches what the president and the institution wish to accomplish through the development program,” one of the fundraisers said. “There needs to be a value check,” another person responded. “The president should ask questions like, ‘What’s most important to you as a development professional?’ and ‘Why do you want to be at this place and at this time?’” The fundraisers gathered around that table were adamant that “you have to have a commitment to the specific mission of the organization. The connectedness with place and purpose is all important.”

As these comments suggest, spiritually mature development staff have an interest in bringing together the principles of their faith with the principles of fundraising. They are quick to draw good ideas from wherever they may be found, but they are just as quick to test those ideas against the standard of what they believe God desires for a particular ministry. To paraphrase Henri Nouwen, seminaries must seek out fundraisers for whom “every word spoken, every advice given, and every strategy developed” is tested by a “heart that knows God intimately.” It’s not likely, however, that such a person will surface via advertisements in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or similar such publications.

Finding a different kind of fundraiser requires a different kind of search, and most especially if the search is for the chief development officer. Before a position description is drafted or an advertisement is placed, the president and selected board members should spend time discussing the personal qualities and values they feel are necessary to adequately judge a potential candidate’s fit with the institution. Additionally, the persons whose job it is to conduct the search need to list the spiritual gifts, skills, and knowledge necessary to assure good performance in a particular place. If an organization is looking for a “messiah” who can save the program with his or her fundraising skills, the leadership will surely be disappointed. Skills may be transferable, but success in fundraising is about much more than skills. When a candidate’s faith commitment is added to the equation, the search process becomes all the more challenging.

Ronald Lundeen, vice president for advancement at San Francisco Theological Seminary, recalls how his decision to accept the position at SFTS came only after the president sought him out, and not just once, but several times. The turning point in Ron’s decision-making came when the president asked him some “wrong” questions – questions about what was most important in him, about his commitments to family, church, and friend, and his understanding of divine call and God’s will for his life. “The president had confidence in my fundraising skills. That’s why he approached me in the first place. He was checking out

was my theological fit with the seminary and with his own view of the work,” Ron stated.

When all is said and done, if the development staff of seminaries and theological schools aren’t able or willing to embrace the added label of stewardship educator, chances are slim to none that theological schools will have a part in picking up the slack in stewardship education. If, however, seminary boards and presidents are purposeful in seeking out fund-raising staff who have the heart and the skills to handle an expanded vision for the development program, theological schools can lead the way in calling men and women to faithful lives of Christian stewardship.

Concluding Thoughts on Asking as Teaching

Recently I picked a little booklet titled *The Grace of Giving* from my bookshelf and reread it again for the first time in almost fifteen years. It had come to me following the death of my father, an American Baptist pastor and someone who was not shy about preaching on the theme of stewardship. Among the many passages he had highlighted were the following words. “If believers are not taught a Scriptural doctrine of stewardship, can they be expected to give intelligently and can they be expected to realize that giving is indeed as vital a spiritual ministry as witnessing, reading the Bible, and praying?”

This question summarizes the challenge and the opportunity present in the way a seminary raises money. In those schools where asking and teaching are seen as one, everything done by a fundraising team 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. If that kind of fundraising is carried out in enough places, perhaps the next round of research will have rosier results to report. It will be good news indeed to discover that persons of faith are giving more because they know more about Christian stewardship. And perhaps, part of the credit for the change will go to seminary boards.

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