The Power of the Ask

7 fund-raising principles for pastors.

BY JACK CONNELL

After 20 years in pastoral ministry, I am now a fund-raiser in Christian higher education. In my previous life, I thought constantly about worship services, staff hires, board meetings, and the next sermon. Now my days revolve around major gifts, capital campaigns, donor development, and the next ask.

And, surprisingly to some, I love my role here. For me, there aren’t many joys greater than inviting people into a place of deeper stewardship and larger sacrifice.

I don’t claim to be a fund-raising guru, but the last few years have taught me some basic lessons that I wish I’d known when I was a pastor. I offer them to you with the hope that they will be helpful in your role as chief fund-raising officer for your local church.

I. EMBRACE YOUR ROLE

I once heard a sermon on tithing begin with these exact words: “I’m sorry to have to talk to you today about money, but it’s mentioned in the Bible so I guess I should preach about it once in a while.” Wait... what?

It’s a common sentiment, but deeply flawed. I under-
stand it though—I initially felt some embarrassment when people learned I was a professional fund-raiser. On the vocational food chain, fund-raisers are in the general vicinity of IRS agents, personal injury attorneys, and pawn brokers. It’s understandable, then, that pastors often feel a bit squeamish about the fund-raising dimensions of their ministry.

But it’s so much more than that. Henri Nouwen wrote: “Asking people for money is giving them the opportunity to put their resources at the disposal of the Kingdom.” Fund-raising is ministry. It is a spiritual enterprise. It’s teaching people to emulate the God who loved the world so much that he gave. And if it’s true that we cannot serve both God and money, then asking people to participate in Christian philanthropy is an essential component of discipleship. It is nothing to feel embarrassed or awkward about. Rather, fund-raising for God’s work is a mission-critical role which church leaders must learn to embrace.

2. THE POWER OF THE ASK

I first heard this phrase many years ago at a conference on volunteer ministry. Bill Hybels described the importance of personally asking talented people to step into major leadership roles. It was a fantastic leadership tip that served me well in ministry, but I wish I had been savvy enough to apply it back then to the realm of fund-raising.

Now I know: people will rarely give with sacrificial generosity unless someone asks them to do so. If we don’t ask, many gifts will simply never come. The power of the ask is so compelling in my work today that one of the key metrics by which we measure our gift officers is the number of monthly asks they complete. Gifts don’t tend to drop unsolicited from heaven into our college; gifts arrive in direct response to our asks.

If pastors ask at all, they tend to do so in large group settings—sermons, membership classes, bulletin blurbs. This kind of stewardship “broadcasting” is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Just as the best leader will not just volunteer to chair your elder board, so also major gifts will never materialize for your church unless there is a personal ask. It may be a high-capacity individual who you invite to make a major gift to a campaign. It may be a new board member who you ask to start tithing. It may be a person who has high passion for global ministries and you ask her to fund an initiative in Africa. These conversations must of course be conducted with great wisdom and sensitivity, but just as we ask people to come to Christ, join our small group, lead a workshop, or bring a dish to pass, so there are key moments when we must ask people to give.

3. THE 90/10 RULE

I often joke with my fund-raising colleagues in Christian higher education that we have all taken scissors to James 2:1-11 and removed it from our Bibles. This gets a laugh, but hits a little close to home. After all, giving special attention to the wealthy is an indispensable requirement of my current role. The alumni I invite out to lunch tend to drive BMWs, not Ford Pintos.

My office’s strategic focus on people with significant resources reflects two truths that must be held in a delicate and tension-filled balance with one another:

1. The wealthy are not of any more intrinsic value in the kingdom of God than anyone else; yet
2. The wealthy usually contribute the vast majority of dollars that are given to Christian ministries.

It’s a matter of simple arithmetic: large gifts will generate more dollars than small gifts. Just one gift of a million dollars has the same impact as 10,000 gifts of 100 dollars each. In the current fund-raising campaign at our institution, the top 25 donors will give as much money as the remaining 2,500. The top 200 donors will give more than 90 percent of the total received. Every gift is important and every donor matters, but 90 percent of the money really does come from 10 percent of the people. So what is good stewardship of time for a fund-raising officer?

What are the implications of this for your ministry? How do we stay a million miles away from the kind of favoritism described in James 2, and yet at the same time wisely acknowledge these fundamental realities about fund-raising? You will need to wrestle prayerfully with these questions, but I invite you to consider a stewardship strategy that recognizes the unique role and pivotal importance of those to whom God has entrusted more resources. The gospel calls us to pay special attention to the poor, but we may not have the resources to fulfill that gospel mandate unless we also pay special attention to the 10 percent.
4. WHAT GIVING RECORDS REVEAL

Should the pastor have access to the giving records of individuals in the congregation? For the vast majority of my pastoral ministry, I neither desired nor possessed this level of access. The only exception was a brief time when, prompted by a conversation with a pastoral colleague, I decided that I should know who was giving what. The church board agreed, and one morning the stack of giving summaries appeared on my desk. I found the information so emotionally and spiritually unsettling that it began to impact negatively my pastoral work, and after a short time I discontinued my access.

At the other end of the spectrum is the pastor who posted everyone’s individual giving records in the church lobby for all to see. “Doesn’t this make people mad?” the pastor was asked. “Not the ones who give anything,” he answered.

You will have to decide your own approach on this issue, but my experience in fund-raising affirms the fact that giving records do reveal valuable information. A significant drop-off in a person’s giving usually reflects a financial set-back, dissatisfaction with the church’s resource allocation, a spiritual struggle, or even the early stages of a decision to leave the church.

A significant increase in giving can reflect an important step forward in personal discipleship, an improving financial condition, the resolution of a longstanding church frustration, or a new level of buy-in with mission. All of these are valuable to know from a pastoral perspective, and might only be revealed in the money trail.

My suggestion is to empower a member of the church’s finance team who already sees individual giving records to communicate any significant shifts in individual giving patterns to you or someone on the pastoral team.

“Pastor, you might want to know that the Fitzpatricks have given faithfully for years, but stopped completely about three months ago. And Mrs. Williams started attending only a few weeks ago but has already given a very large gift.”

Dollar amounts do not have to be revealed. This approach, in my opinion, achieves the win/win of both protecting some degree of donor confidentiality and ensuring appropriate pastoral follow-up.

5. LEADERS NEED TO BE GIVERS

In the world of higher education, it is absolutely essential that 100 percent of our board members and other leaders be generous supporters of the ministry. It is unconscionable that someone would be sitting in a position of leadership and not be personally invested in the mission.

We communicate this expectation clearly to prospective board members, reinforce it during the orientation and on-boarding process, and regularly highlight it as a value in meetings and conversations. And since we track individual giving records (see previous point), it is not difficult to maintain a high level of accountability around this value. Candidly, if a leader is not generously supporting the mission, that person’s seat at the leadership table is in serious jeopardy.

I believe this principle also applies in the local church. I remember a particularly cantankerous board member who seemed to oppose virtually everything I suggested. His frustration with me reached the point that he ultimately told another board member that “the Lord had called him” to another church in town.

While I was personally delighted at this news, I expressed concern to the church treasurer about the hit to the church finances caused by the departure of this pillar and his family.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “he never gave a nickel to this place.”

Another time the church bookkeeper mistakenly put the year-end giving summary of a pastoral staff member in the same envelope with mine. I was astonished to see that this influential and long-time staff member gave less than 1 percent of her salary back to the church. Both of these situations (and who knows how many more) would have been averted if we had put into place systems of accountability that ensure that leaders are givers. No exceptions. No excuses.
6. DONORS DESERVE FULL DISCLOSURE
Nothing will rain on a fund-raising parade more than the perception that something shady is going on with the organization's finances. If donors don't have high confidence that their gifts are being stewarded with wisdom and in ways that tangibly support mission, they will understandably dial back their giving.

Superfluous spending, inequitable salary structures, over-leveraging with debt, smoke-and-mirrors accounting games, and lack of control and accountability are just a few examples of the financial shenanigans that quickly demotivate even our most loyal donors.

In order to prevent even the appearance of financial sloppiness or impropriety, I recommend a policy of full disclosure to donors about church finances. This doesn't mean that the church checkbook needs to be posted in the church lobby, but it does mean that financial statements and supplementary information should be readily available to anyone who asks.

You want to know the salary ranges for the pastors? You bet. You want to know the balance, interest rate, and payment on the church mortgage? Absolutely. You're wondering what policies guide the use of church credit cards? Here they are. You want to know how much we spent on the youth ski trip last year? Of course.

Think of donors as investors. They have every right to know that the funds they invest are being used in ways that reflect the highest possible levels of integrity and stewardship. Total transparency and full disclosure are the only ways I know to give donors that assurance.

7. THE POWER OF APPRECIATION
In reflecting on 20 years of pastoral ministry, I think we did a pretty good job of thanking volunteers. I wrote countless thank-you notes to board members, nursery workers, drummers, and landscaping crews. We hosted numerous volunteer appreciation events at which the paid staff honored and thanked those who volunteered their time. I said to our staff, "Whenever you see a volunteer serving around here, take 10 seconds to stop and say thanks.” We tried to create a culture of gratitude that valued volunteers as the heroes of the church, and the result was a mobilized and motivated army of volunteers.

I wish I had exercised that same diligence in expressing appreciation to donors. In my current role, I do it all the time. I write countless thank-you notes. We host appreciation events. We even have a staff position that has as its primary responsibility ensuring that donors are appropriately thanked and recognized. We want every college donor to know that their gift matters and is deeply valued; I'd think we would want every donor to our church to know the same thing.

I remember a conversation many years ago with a surgeon who attended our church. He apologized to me for the fact that the demands of his practice didn't allow him to be involved in volunteer ministry, but said with a smile: "I try to make up for that when the offering plate comes around on Sunday." I found his comment somewhat off-putting, and made an awkward joke about trying to buy off God. Now I wish I'd told him he was a hero.

The sacrificial giving of money is just as noble as the sacrificial giving of time, and those who do it are equally worthy of our intentional thanks and appreciation. Finding meaningful ways to say thanks, especially to those who give significant or sacrificial gifts, is an indispensable component of your role as chief fund-raising officer.