

# Beyond Giving and Getting

## *The Board's Role in Fund-Raising as a Ministry*

by Rebekah Basinger



Questions about a board's role in fund-raising are almost always met with a cryptic, three-word response—give and get. Unfortunately, this oft-repeated mantra confuses the responsibility of individual board members with the work of the board as a corporate entity. If the ultimate goal for the development effort is to glorify God and bring people into a closer relationship with Him through the experience of giving, the board's role centers around four critical issues that go well beyond this year's fund-raising goals.

**First and most important, a board must educate itself to the principles of and requirements for a ministry-centered development program.** The idea of fund-raising as a faith building activity doesn't make sense unless the men and women on the board have experienced their own hearts growing bigger as a result of joyful giving. Sadly, too few board members report this kind of "heart growth." Worse still, there are individuals on the boards of Christian organizations whose hearts have actually grown less generous because of the fund-raising strategies employed by well-intentioned but ill-informed ministries.

If the board is expected to support a different way of thinking about fund-raising, it is crucial that individual board

members be introduced to a fuller understanding of what can be accomplished through the ministry's development efforts. A helpful step in this direction is for the CEO and board chair to design a faith-and-money study plan. This includes a review of biblical and theological teachings about money and faith along with opportunities for board members to share personal stories of what giving has meant to their walk with God. Some board members initially may be uncomfortable with all

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*“A faith and money study plan may help your board understand ministry-centered fund-raising.”*

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this money talk. But when pursued over time, these discussions can transform a board's thinking about and their role in the fund-raising program.

It is also helpful for boards to keep track of comments and questions about the fund-raising program that come up during board sessions. References to organizational needs and funding goals, as well as complaints about competition from other ministries, sometimes dominate boardroom discussions. When this occurs, it is a clue more work needs to be done in educating the board to fund-raising as a ministry. The actions and words of theologically astute board

members, on the other hand, make clear that it is possible to pay attention to donor hearts without compromising the organization's bottom line.

**Second, the board should turn its attention to organizational attitudes and assumptions about the fund-raising program.** Every ministry has its money myths, and it's crucial that the board be aware of the assumptions—both right and wrong—that form internal thinking about finances. Staff whose duties don't include attention to a ministry's budget are often ignorant to the realities of what it takes to fund the ministry. Without proper education, staff members can make unkind comments about donor motivations and the methods and messages used by the fund-raising team.

Board members should stand with the chief executive in helping others within the ministry appreciate the importance of development activities that build up donors' hearts. The simple truth of the matter is that it takes money to raise money, and especially if fund-raising is to be carried out as ministry. The boards' role is to determine appropriate expenditures for fund-raising—even if that determination may not go down well with everyone within the organization—and then to monitor the use of those funds to ensure that development goals are met in ways that encourage donors in the life of faith.

**Third, the board needs to assure itself that fund-raising goals communicate the “right” messages to donors.** The surest evidence that a board understands its role in shaping a ministry-centered fund-raising

program is found in the goals it helps set. Faith-encouraging goals reflect an understanding of the difference between targets that challenge supporters to stretch themselves on behalf of the ministry, and goals that are simply beyond the ability of a constituency to achieve. While it is good to aim high, unrealistic expectations almost always lead to frustration, dashed hopes, and failed programs. This is not the way to encourage God's work in donors' hearts.

The conventional approaches to fund development tend to focus on the current needs and future plans of the organization. As fund-raisers are pressured with ever more ambitious funding goals, the

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larger vision of fund-raising as a means of advancing God's kingdom can be lost. In contrast, a ministry-centered approach to fund development puts the emphasis on God at work in donors' hearts. Standard 7 of the ECFA Standards of Responsible Stewardship is a useful guide when thinking about faith-encouraging goal setting. In the area of fund-raising, board policies are not simply rules to be followed, but are actually theological statements that embody organizational attitudes about desired outcomes in donor hearts.

**Finally, the board needs to encourage the CEO to hire and nurture fund-raisers who understand their work as ministry.** If a ministry is looking for a “messiah” who can save the program with his or her fund-raising

skills, the leadership will surely be disappointed. Skills may be transferable, but success in fund-raising is about much more than skills. This is not to suggest that finding the “right” development team is an easy thing. But to ignore the importance of matching the personal faith commitments of the prospective fundraiser with the theological underpinnings of the organization is a grave mistake.

Donors and other friends of the ministry are quick to pick up on a disconnect between the public messages of the organization and private conversations with a development officer. When a prospect's faith commitment is added to the equation, the search process becomes all the more challenging. Insiders can become impatient with a lengthy search process or seemingly unnecessary questions about the faith commitment of applicants. It's the board's role to encourage the CEO to devote the extra time and care needed to recruit first-rate fund-raisers who understand their work as ministry.

Money is necessary to support mission, and the giving record of board members does set the pace for other donors to follow. But when the development goals are bigger and bolder than ministry needs—when the goal for the fund-raising program encompasses God at work in donors' hearts, the board's role can't be described in just three words. The answer is found in attention to Scripture, personal sharing and careful, prayerful attention to organizational practice. Most important, the board's role in fund-raising must give voice and witness to the organization's commitment to growing givers' hearts right along with growing the ministry. ©

*Dr. Rebekah Burch Basinger is a member of the ECFA Board of Directors. She works as an independent consultant providing fund-raising assistance and board education to Christian ministry organizations. Rebekah may be reached at RBbas3001@aol.com.*

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