

Resourcing a Growing Movement

Dave Patty – Feb 2006, GYI

Growth is a wonderful thing. We all dream of the kingdom growing, of the church growing, and of the growth of spiritual movements that we are a part of. Unfortunately, growing things, if they are alive, must be fed and cared for. This demands resources and money. Unlike a business, where success brings direct financial reward which in turn fuels expansion, the growth of ministry often does not create the resources needed to support that growth. That which brings the greatest spiritual returns does not necessarily generate finances. Often, as God expands the ministry, people and dollars are stretched, systems are overburdened, and the work begins to run into ceilings. How do you finance a growing movement of God?

Of course our greatest resource is people. But our ability to mobilize greater human resources is often tied to the financial resources that will support them. Every good organization has an army of volunteers. But unless they are cared for and well led, they soon become disillusioned and unmotivated, redirecting their energies into some other activity or cause. We know that even a tentmaker like Paul welcomed the opportunity to give his full attention to the work of the gospel, and that the disciples were able to preach the gospel full time because of the generosity of a group of wealthy women (Luke 8:3). Financial resources are essential for freeing up the energy of people.

We know that the mark of a mature servant of God is a deep trust in God in the area of finances. Hudson Taylor said, “God’s work, done in God’s way, will never lack God’s supply.” Paul said “I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” (Phil 4:12) Some however misinterpret this to mean that we should not give attention to the area of finances, that true trust means that we ignore money and hope for the best. However we know that on top of his foundation of trust, Hudson Taylor wrote extensively about the work in China, and traveled widely through England, sharing the vision so that others would join with them. We know he built the systems and strategies for resourcing the team that God sent his way, and the resulting organization was robust enough to survive to this day.

We also know that Paul spoke openly about money, even giving specific instructions as to how a collection was to be gathered, and how the people were to be challenged to give. The text that was cited above continues with the following phrase in vs 14 “Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.” Trust did not mean the lack of attention, nor did it breed a passive or apologetic approach.

When God began to lay on my heart a dream for a moment among the youth of Eastern Europe I invested considerable time and prayer crafting a vision document that outlined our strategy and objectives. My pastor, Rich Kerns, read it several times and became enthused about both the need and potential that lay before us. He recognized, however, that the plan had at least one significant flaw. No thought or prayer had been invested in exploring how the work would be financed.

Rich had an unusual background since he had served in a student movement, then worked with wealthy clients of an investment bank, and only later returned to the ministry as a local church pastor. This gave him a unique perspective on the role of finances in a work of God.

One day he took me on a walk. “Dave”, he said, “we need to prepare the conditions so that God could channel millions of dollars into this work.” As the son of a missionary, I had no

category to even process what he was talking about. The biggest single gift we had ever received was \$5000 for the purchase of a car. I somehow felt like finances should just take care of themselves if someone was being faithful to the Lord. Anything with too many zeros on it felt wrong to me, like it was somehow ungodly and unspiritual.

He saw my hesitation and continued. “No great work of God goes forward without resources. Every time God has raised up a man to open new territory for him, he has also raised up people with financial resources to stand with him. From the outside you only see a Billy Graham, or a Bill Bright, but the broad work they are doing could not stand without a firm financial base. What you don’t see are the key partners that are standing with them, making this all possible. They are absolutely essential to the work.”

I nodded my head, still feeling like we somehow shouldn’t be having this conversation. Then Rich got more personal. “Dave, you do not understand the importance of finances. In the same way as you have studied theology and ministry strategy, you must study how God provides financial resources for his work. If you do not, you will never be able to take advantage of the opportunities that he has prepared for you. You must remember – fund raising is SPIRITUAL WORK.”

This unexpected conversation was a watershed moment for me. I took his words to heart and began a quiet journey that has continued until this day. Somehow in that moment I accepted the fact that my role of leadership required that I lead in the area of financial development as well as spiritual shepherding. I covenanted before God to consistently invest time and energy to make this a priority.

During my next meeting with Rich I pulled out a notebook and asked him to tell me more. He gave me nuggets of insight that I chewed on for months, some of which I didn’t understand for several years. He also taught me the value of asking questions of those who have a better understanding of this area than I do. This ongoing research process continues until today. Yesterday I filled three pages with notes from my friend Marko, who works as a financial analyst for a large foundation. During our conversation he told me that 100,000 NGOs (non-profit organizations) would be launched this year, and that seven out of ten would fail. I was grateful that Rich had pulled me aside almost 14 years ago with earnest counsel for our infant ministry.

A Theology of Finances

My “quiet journey” actually began with an intensive study of Scripture to better understand the theological basis for financing God’s work. At one point I collected every verse that related to the area of giving and receiving financial support and studied them for patterns. The most profound observation for me was that the process of financing God’s work should be a rich and joyful one, a worship experience that enriches all and multiplies blessing. Rather than a closed system where funds are either lost or gained, giving actually creates wealth, both financial and spiritual. The one who gives is blessed, and entrusted with more resources. The one who receives is blessed, and motivated to also give. The needs of God’s body are met, but more importantly, the process multiplies praise and glory to God.

This was an encouragement to me, as I always viewed fund raising as a “necessary evil” that was inherently unpleasant for both the giver and the receiver. I saw that it was actually designed to bring great joy and richness to both parties, if done in a way that reflects the principles of Scripture.

In order to help our team capture the heart of God’s view of finances I summarized my observations into the list below.

Giving is:

1. An act of grace – *2 Cor 8:6*
2. A habit that belongs to every mature Christian – *2 Cor 8:7-8*
3. Motivated by our wealth in Christ – *2 Cor 8:9*
4. An ongoing way of meeting needs in the body of Christ – *2 Cor 8:13-15*
5. A way of stirring others to action – *2 Cor 9:1-2*
6. A precursor to God's blessing – *2 Cor 9:6*
7. A fragrant offering, pleasing to God – *Phil 4:18*

To the one who gives, God promises:

1. His grace - *2 Cor 9:8*
2. His promise of supply to you – *2 Cor 9:8*
3. An increase of seed - *2 Cor 9:10*
4. An enlarged harvest of righteousness - *2 Cor 9:10*
5. You will be made rich in every way - *2 Cor 9:11*
6. That the needs of God's people will be supplied - *2 Cor 9:12*
7. An overflow of many expressions of thanks to God - *2 Cor 9:12*
8. Praise to God - *2 Cor 9:13*
9. Prayers for you - *2 Cor 9:14*
10. That all of your needs will be met according to His glorious riches – *Phil 4:19*

It is appropriate to:

1. Receive a salary for spiritual work – *1 Tim 5:17-18*
2. Be equipped with the tools for spiritual work – *1 Tim 5:18*
3. Make needs known – *Phil 4:15-18*
4. Challenge people to give – *2 Cor 9:2-7*
5. Tell them specific steps - *1 Cor 16:1-7*
6. Bring your own resources to the task – *1 Thess 2:9*

It is not appropriate to:

1. Demand certain financial conditions as a requirement for service – *Phil 4:11-14*
2. Lose contentment in times of need – *Phil 4:12, Heb 13:5*
3. Pressure people to give unwillingly – *2 Cor 8:8-12*
4. Receive and not give – *2 Cor 8:7*
5. Be trapped by the love of money – *1 Tim 3:3, Heb 13:5, 1 Pet 5:2*
6. Handle funds in an improper way – *2 Cor 8:20-21*
7. Handle funds in a secret way – *2 Cor 8:21-24*

A key verse that opened my eyes was actually one that did not speak directly about finances. In Philippians Paul speaks of his heart for the local believers, saying “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...” (Phil 1:4-5). This idea of “partnership in the gospel” struck a real chord with me. In God's economy each of us are entrusted with a certain number of “talents” - resources from God that can bring growth and profit to God's kingdom (Matt 25:15-28). They still belong to God, but I am to be active in using them, working to increase their value as long as they are under my stewardship. All will be returned to the King in the end, but with a good return comes reward, commendation, and even special responsibilities in heaven. (Matt 25:21)

So what is “partnership in the gospel”? First of all, we need to recognize that our resources are different – one is entrusted with skills, another with relationships, another with opportunities, and others with financial resources. The distribution is not equal, but “according to their abilities”, and one person may have “talents” of several kinds. However, just like in the business world, combining our resources in purposeful “partnerships” can result in situations where the outcome is much higher than any one person could produce alone. In these situations, one plus one can equal four or five, and in some cases even ten.

These outcomes are credited to both accounts, bringing a greater blessing and return for all involved.

In this picture, the one who asks for financial gifts is not a “beggar” - placing a guilt trip on someone so that they recognize their obligation to redistribute wealth - but a potential “partner”, offering to bring greater kingdom returns from entrusted resources than either could do alone. They are speaking about an opportunity rather than an obligation. He or she recognizes that the commitment, expertise and open doors that they bring to the table is at least as valuable as the financial resources that will support the work. And each realizes that it all belongs to God, and that it is better to manage His resources in partnership rather than alone.

This study was tremendously enriching for us as a team and helped get our attitudes and perspectives in line with the Word of God. But we realized that if we were to expect people to give to our ministry, we would have to manage the funds according to Biblical principles as well. This thought provoked another study, this time of principles of financial management that could apply to a mission organization. Working through these texts as a board, we came up with six guidelines we committed to as an organization.

Six Principles of Financial management

1. **Accountability** – 2 Cor 8:21
Take pains to do what is right before both God and man.
2. **Stewardship** – Matt 5:15-29
Achieve maximum results with resources entrusted to us.
3. **Transparency** – Heb 4:13
Ensure ready access to accurate, complete, and clear financial information.
4. **Donor partnership** – 2 Cor 9:8-15
Be a blessing to those who give by joining hands with them in ministry.
5. **Self regulating systems** – 2 Th 3:10, 1 Tim 5:17-18
Develop elegant systems that maintain internal order through clear feedback channels.
6. **Developmentally oriented** – 2 Cor 8:7-15
Use the management of resources to develop people, relationships and new contexts for ministry.

It has taken several years to begin to put these principles into practice, since the implementation of these kinds of standards is always more difficult than coming up with them. At the same time, knowing that they were rooted in Biblical truth helped motivate us. It is always essential to build an organization on principles (what is true) rather than on pragmatism (what will work). When these principles are rooted in good theology, we know that they will stand the test of time and have lasting value in spite of the variations of culture and setting.

Where should the resources come from?

Next we faced the question of where should resources come from. An ongoing discussion in the mission world relates to the question of whose money should pay for what. Some are quite skeptical of the strategy of paying for local efforts with money from countries far away. They recognize that this approach has a number of built in problems.

A recent publication by Connie Robbins and Rodney Hammer called “Giving in Russia, Pitfalls and Guidance” highlights a number of these.

1. *You will be presented with great needs, both on a personal and church level. Your Christian compassion will make you aware of situations that could be helped by your generosity. Many are legitimate, but not all, and rarely is money a real solution.*
2. *Some individuals have been known to present heartbreaking situations to every foreigner who would lend them an ear. Others, including church leaders, have presented the same need to many potential donors without informing those donors of duplicate gifts.*
3. *If you choose to give money, please check with the missionary you are working with or a head pastor to be sure the gift fits into long-term strategy. A loving, well-intended monetary gift may be counterproductive to a church-planting missionary strategy and may have unintended negative results.*
4. *Give money only when it is possible to track its use for the purpose specified. Many national churches have become dependent on Western funding and do not do ministry on their own. Any gift may tend to perpetuate this cycle of dependency.*
5. *Giving subsidies quickly breeds the negative result of dependency, non-reproducible methods, and non-indigenous strategies in the field.*
6. *Many groups see the opportunity to help a national by providing an educational opportunity in the West. This practice is sometimes warranted but should be coordinated very carefully through indigenous church leaders and missionaries. Training in a distant context is often a mistake.*

Some have suggested that national workers should only be paid for by gifts from their context, in order to prevent unhealthy dependencies and non-reproducible strategies. In a paper called “Chopping Their Legs Out from Under Them” a veteran missionary from Africa argues that foreign support actually hobbles the local work.

When a new missionary arrives in a city where there are few if any believers – the first goal is reach these folks for Christ, and the second is to disciple and raise up local leadership. So when someone comes to Christ and is a promising leader, we fine-tune them in leadership and soon they are ready to go. We can hardly contain our excitement. This is what we have been living for. The only problem is this: this capable and trained person has to make a living and can only give a couple hours a night to ministry. If only they could be full-time. Full-time means more ministry time and this is better because it will speed things up.

Seems good. Makes sense. Why not?

Well for one, this is clearly the exporting of a western style of ministry. This is the way we do it in the U.S. and so we figure it is best for them. This is not necessarily a biblical model at all, yet it is our American default. But by thinking this is best and by getting them to become full-time in a culture where there is no full-time, we have just made the local leadership not at all “local” – but very foreign indeed.

Our means for accomplishing this is also very foreign. Since this is a completely foreign concept – full-time ministry – and the locals not only have no vision for it, but neither are there enough believers in the local community to support them – the

foreign missionary then must look outside the local community, and back to America for the support for this national. So you have the national doing something very foreign, and doing it for a “foreign” paycheck.

“No wonder he spreads the gospel. Foreigners are paying him to do it. I would do it too for a nice paycheck” Oh, the times I have heard these words. So this “Local” leader is perceived to be absolutely foreign by his own people. So in our desire to raise up locals quickly, we have failed to raise up something “local” at all. Not only have we failed to do so, but we have just created a model for ministry that will be propagated for years and maybe decades to come.

Africa is the classic case in point. Church Buildings were built with foreign money and they were built much better than the local homes and pastors were paid with outside money. Since it was started this way, the mentality that it should continue this way is so pervasive it is sickening. Churches often say we cannot do anything because we have no money. They have learned falsely that money is the answer to everything, and that a nice building that they cannot afford, is necessary if meaningful ministry is to take place. Local initiative is extremely stunted for there is no reason to give to the church. And why? Because there is an outside source of funding.

China, on the other hand, is something quite different. After a hundred years of missionary work, the church was small and largely dependent upon the west and looking very western indeed. Then all the missionaries were kicked out. So full-time Christian workers – which had been the model – were for the most part, no more. The work – if it was to be done – had to be done by those who held down a normal job. Money was now no more for foreign money was cut off. China became miserably poor.

There was now no fulltime pastor to be paid; so the little giving there was went to meet needs. Church Buildings were confiscated. How can you have church without the nice building that westerners had built them? They moved into the homes.

So, no full time staff? No building? No money? And oops I almost forgot – no academic institutions for formal theological training? These are the four things we deem as most important in the west, and yet it was in the absence of these things that arguably the greatest church growth in history has taken place. China’s one million believers turned into 40 and now perhaps to as many as 100 million.

Is the Church there perfect? Far from it. But it is so much healthier than in the Lands where people wait for a handout before they start ministering.

These are compelling arguments. But it doesn’t take long to find someone defending the other side of the coin. Yesterday I met with Jack Nelson, the president of Worldlink, a young mission organization dedicated to linking up resources in North America with needs in less developed areas of the world. In his former role with Scripture Union, he often came across dedicated nationals who were severely handicapped in serving the Lord in their local ministries. These were proven servants of God, with fluency in the local language, deep insight into the needs of the local people, education, tools, and a passionate commitment to reach their countries with the gospel.

What they were lacking was money. Because of the economic or religious conditions in the country where they were serving, they did not have the financial resources to support their families. Most served in spite of these difficulties, sometimes going without food or basic necessities, or working multiple jobs to make ends meet. “We are the wealthiest nation on

earth,” Jack said, “and I believe we have a responsibility to support our brothers in these needy areas of the world. They can do so much with so little, and we can easily afford to help them. Not only that, we have a moral responsibility to do it!”

Some take this line of reasoning even further. They argue that Western missionaries should be phased out all together. “It is a waste of resources”, they say, “when we can support a national worker who is much more productive at a fraction of the cost. We need to not send people any more,” they argue, “but send our money instead.”

These examples are generally given in regard to the third world, where as little as \$200 a month can fund a full time pastor. Where I serve in Eastern Europe this is no longer true. Economic development and inflation has made it more expensive to support even a national worker. At the same time, there are only 19,000 members in evangelical churches, in a country of 10 million people. The base of Christians is miniscule in relationship to the work that needs to be done.

This creates a different kind of poverty. The church can care for itself, but to grow aggressively it must disproportionately scale up its efforts. What is the role of outside giving in this kind of picture? If large multinational firms like Carrefour and Hyundai are pouring billions of dollars from the outside into the Czech Republic in an effort to capture “market share” in a developing economy, wouldn’t it make sense for the church to do the same?

How do we make sense of this swirl of dangers and opportunities? Some just back off in confusion, as the Western Christian community has recently done in Romania, after years of perceived mismanagement and abuse. Others come up with formulas that attempt to address the issues in a more complex way. One example is the Campus Crusade ministry “Agape” in Eastern Europe. They support new national workers at 80 percent the first year from resources that are collected from staff in North America. This drops off 20% every year until the point at which they are to be fully supported locally after four years.

Sometimes these policies can have unexpected consequences. In Estonia, the result is that most new Crusade staff stay for two years, during which they take advantage of the subsidy. After that time most have been unable to generate local support, so they leave for secular work, only to be replaced by “fresh recruits” who can draw off of the subsidy again.

Are you confused yet? Sometimes when it is impossible to made sense of a certain reality we need to look at the picture from an entirely different perspective. Could our theological glasses give us any new insights?

After several years of wrestling with this question I was caught by a passage in Colossians 3:11. “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” Taking the widest national difference, the widest cultural difference, the widest socio-economic difference, Paul wipes them all away with a simple phrase “in Christ”. The reality of being joined in Christ telescopes all other differences into a unified whole. The barriers are gone, that which is divided and distant has been brought close.

What would happen if we ignored nationality and answered these financial questions based on other principles. If the body of Christ is a “holy nation, a people belonging to God” (I Petr 2:9), then other national divisions should not enter into our reasoning or decision making. Rather, our question should be, what kind of responsibilities do we have to other members of this Holy nation? What kind of responsibilities do they have back to us?

“But,” you say, “there are still huge differences in financial conditions.” Yes there are, but this is true in my home church in Chicago as well. In fact, whole sectors of the ministry of

Grace Church of DuPage are not self supporting. The youth group has a full time pastor, but very little of his salary comes from youth group offerings. In fact, the youth group is not at all self sufficient. Is this a problem? Should we require that every sector of the church be self-financing?

Of course, we are concerned that those young people grow in responsibility and generosity. We should be expecting them to give now, and prepare them for roles of greater financial responsibility in the future. But we base these decisions on principles other than simply age – because we see the church as one.

If we could cancel out the distinction of nationality by understanding our oneness in Christ, what principles should address the question of who pays for what? Let me suggest a few for starters.

1. **Everyone should be giving.** (2 Cor 8:9) Experiencing the fruit of other's generosity should stimulate more giving in those who receive. If anyone thinks they are too poor to give, they do not understand the wealth they have received from Christ.
2. **Everyone should give according to their means.** (2 Cor 8:11) This means that those with greater wealth have greater responsibility.
3. **Those with plenty should give to those who are needy.** (2 Cor 8:14) This responsibility crosses national borders, and expects that those in need may soon have plenty and then be responsible to do the same.
4. **Breaking into new territory with the gospel, or serving the church as a whole often takes outside resources** (2 Cor 11:7-9) This is to help prevent the impression that the gospel is being preached for profit, or that the help is coming from selfish motives.
5. **A certain level of financial stability is not a prerequisite for service** (Phil 4:13) If someone says that they cannot serve because of lack of finances, they do not understand the call of God. When the disciples were sent out, there were more instructions about what not to take than what they were to bring. Their master wanted to teach them that God's provision is found along the path of obedience, not before that path begins.
6. **The administrator of a gift should take pains to do right both in the eyes of the Lord and the eyes of men.** (2 Cor 8:21) Giving can easily raise questions and open the door for criticism. It takes effort to give and receive responsibly, but this effort must be expended.
7. **Those who handle money in unethical or dishonest ways must be corrected without delay.** (Acts 5:3) Dishonesty in relationship to money is a threat to the health of the body and a direct offence against the Holy Spirit. Leadership must respond quickly and firmly to such cases, even when the response involves pain.

This list could obviously be extended, but these principles illustrate that the data we need to make wise decisions in regard to finances does exist in Scripture once we remove the distorting eyeglasses of nationality. These are "family" principles, designed to bring health and empowerment to all members of Christ's "one body".

How do we keep from running into the ceiling?

Yet this still does not address the question we raised at the beginning, that of financially keeping up with a growing movement. As we observed, growth stretches resources as the presence of greater needs thin out the finances we have available. We may challenge others to partner with us, but at some point we will reach the limits of our relational and time capacity. The growth of a spiritual movement does not necessarily create the fuel needed for further growth.

Or does it?

To understand the nature of ceilings we must recognize that there are two kinds of financial resources, **renewable** and **non-renewable**. In many ways they are similar to sources of energy. I can heat my house with coal or with wood, with gas or with solar panels. Coal resides deep in the ground, just waiting to be discovered and put to use. With skill I can find it and dig it up, but the supply is limited. Once the coal seam is exhausted in one place I must move on to another. Because this source of energy is “ready made” it seems to be easy to attain, but the supply is inherently limited. In addition, the process of removing it often creates unpleasant waste and toxic byproducts.

Wood, on the other hand, works by different laws. If a forest is carefully managed, it is self-renewing. A new tree grows in the place of the one recently harvested. At the proper time it can be also transformed into heat. Under skillful management, the forest not only produces wood, but serves as a haven for beauty and life. It creates a multitude of byproducts, such as oxygen for breathing, and roots to stabilize the soil. Its source of heat is renewable and non-toxic, and the byproducts can be recycled to create richer soil for the next generation.

I am convinced that many people approach fund raising like coal mining instead of forest management. Because of that they run into natural limits, and can even pollute the environment for future generations.

If we would engage in organic methods, we would find them self-fueling, even creating resources where there were none. Organic systems have the ability to naturally increase as a ministry grows, and do so in a way that enriches the soil, fills the air with oxygen, and creates a haven for life.

So how can we distinguish between an organic approach to fund raising, and the mining method?

Put most simply, it is the difference between a circle and a straight line.

Someone with resources (the coal seam) ----- is challenged by someone who has access to them (the miner) ---- to give to some particular need (my cold house, for instance). In this system, the key to growth is to find more people with resources, develop better ways to motivate them, and more efficient ways to get the resources to those who need them. This is an efficient, inorganic system.

But what about donor fatigue? What about the next Tsunami, that unexpected disaster that eclipses my project with a much greater need? How do we keep the miners motivated and paid for (it is a dirty job, you know)? “Why do you need heat again this year – I thought I gave to that problem last time around.” “This is boring, give me something new.”

Do you feel the coal seam getting spent, and the toxic waste building? Maybe we need better miners. Or maybe it is time to move on to a new location - these rich people just don't understand how poor I am.

All inorganic systems work in a straight line, but all organic systems function in a circle. It begins with the preparation of soil – investments are made into the ground before the plant even begins. Then seeds are planted. These are carefully tended to make sure they have the water and care needed to thrive. After a certain amount of time we can reap a harvest. But even then the work is not done, because the soil must be built up again and prepared for another cycle of fruitfulness.

Did you notice that we ended where we began? Living systems always form a circle, and all of the parts of the circle must be tended with equal care. One who is only concerned about a harvest will only collect that which grows wild. One who does not build into the soil will find the crop decreasing with every season. Out of necessity he will move on after a period of time to “slash and burn” a new plot of land. An impatient farmer can shock the soil with fertilizer and supercharge the crop. However, this technique generally borrows off of the future, and poisons the soil.

The most productive farmer works in concern with the laws of the living things, and devotes as much of his attention to building into the soil and creating a healthy environment for growth as he does to the actual harvest.

What does this look like specifically? Let me give some practical suggestions for the five parts of an organic cycle of fund raising.

1. Preparation of soil

When I was raising funds for our training center in the Czech Republic I visited a friend of mine who was a pastor in the Denver area. After I described the project he basically said “Silver and gold have I none, but I can give you some advice.” Then he paused and looked me in the eye. “When you think about financing the work of God, remember that money always follows vision, and always flows through the channels of relationships.”

That pithy summary was actually more valuable to me than a gift toward the project. I’ve chewed on that one for many years! For me it meant that to prepare the soil, I would need to purposefully build relationships with people that might have the potential to give. It also meant that I would need to both clarify my vision, and increase my ability to share it in a compelling and motivating way.

This might seem manipulative at first, but I must remember that I expect both the process and the outcome to be a blessing to all of us. I purposefully build relationships with non-believers to share Christ with them. I purposefully build relationship with those I lead so that I can build into their lives. And I purposefully build relationships with my children so that I can raise them in the training and admonition of the Lord. In the same way I need to purposefully build relationships with potential donors in order to bless them and further God’s kingdom.

I also carefully prepare the vision so that it is clear and compelling, able to be communicated with passion and persuasion.

2. Sowing the seed

The seed is not a full grown plant, but the beginnings of one. For it to take root in the soil, I must not put it there “fully formed”. In the same way, the greatest ownership is generated when I invite people into unfinished processes. A vision needs time to take hold, and it does so more vigorously when others are allowed to be a part of its development.

When I was with Marko yesterday, he shuttled me through various meetings with key individuals in his foundation. He asked me to share what the Lord was doing, and tell stories of life change through the work. Then he had me share the beginnings of a proposal for a television project, one that we will work on together, but is now still being formed.

“I’ve found that I have to prepare people, to ‘pre-sell’ projects in rough form before I bring the final version to them. This allows me to pick up issues that they will be sensitive to, as well as plant seeds of curiosity and interest. Then when the actual project arrives, we already have a foot in the door and they are much more likely to seriously consider it.”

Marko has learned to “plant seeds” and think ahead about what kinds of information will prepare the conditions for a later harvest. Though he is working with major donors, this is true with small donors as well. When they have the opportunity to walk through the process with you, they are much more likely to invest resources in the work.

3. Watering and care

One of the most common complaints I hear from donors is that they only hear from the ministry when there is a crisis or need. Communication is the lifeblood of resource development, and it must flow generously if we expect ownership and interest to grow.

Not only should communication be often, but it needs to be a certain kind of communication as well. Supporters do not need a travelogue, nor do they like hearing a long detailed list of how you spent your time. What they do want are stories, snapshots, and heart. They want to feel connected with you and with the work. They want to know that you are touching real people in transformational ways. And they love being inspired by glimpses of the Character of God displayed in and through your ministry.

The more personal this communication is, the better. Even a short line that is addressed directly to someone is more powerful than an extended “mass mailing. People want to be known and valued as individuals. The speed of communication is also important. When E-mails are responded to quickly, it communicates that the person is valued. When long delays occur, the message is that my life is filled with a hundred things that are more important than you.

4. Harvest

Not long ago I was talking with a friend named Scott about the financial needs of one of our staff members. “Why didn’t he tell me about it,” Scott complained. “I would have loved to assist him, if I had only known about the need.”

One of the hardest things for me to learn was the importance of asking. This seemed rude or selfish to me, until I learned if it is done right it is very empowering and respectful.

When you ask you need to be specific and clear about the need as well as the way they can respond. You need to not use guilt or pressure as motivation, but challenge people to ask the Lord if he wants them to respond to this opportunity. In many cases it is important to be very specific in what you ask for. In an interview with Peter Drucker, Donald Hafner, CEO of the American Heart Association, said, “What we’ve found in asking for a specific gift is that it dramatically improves the return on our campaign. I would say that organizations could probably increase their income by as much as 25 percent by asking for a specific gift. People who find the appeal sets its sights a little bit too high are not offended; they’re usually flattered. For the individuals who are being asked to give less than they had in mind, we find they tend to go ahead and give what they had in mind anyway, and then you can build from there.”

It also helps to give several kinds of ways that a person can be involved so that there are more “connect points” that the Holy Spirit can motivate them to.

5. Building back into the soil

Someone once told me that the most important thing that I do with a donor occurs after he or she gives. Everyone has a basic need for relationships and impact. If I disappear after a gift is given, the donor is left hanging on both accounts. He feels disconnected relationally from his investment, and doesn't know if it made a difference or not. This will probably leave him with an unexplainable sense of having been used, like his money was more important than himself. This experience is very unpleasant, and will most likely destroy any motivation to give again.

With large donors I try to visit them after major gifts for the sole purpose of thanking them and telling them the results of the investment they made. It takes discipline not to immediately bring another request, but impatience is disrespectful and inevitably backfires. The greatest opportunity to invest in the future comes AFTER someone has given rather than before. When cared for, the person most apt to give is someone who has already given in the past. However, when there is no investment in the person after the gift, the opposite can occur. A disillusioned donor can be almost impossible to motivate to give again.

A businessman friend of mine recently shared how Wheaton College cared for him after he made a gift to the school. “When I later contacted them about another issue, they remembered me and bent over backwards to help me. Their goal is to thank a major donor in at least seven different ways after the gift has been given. This brings enrichment to my life and motivates me to give again”.

In preparing the soil in our garden, my farmer father always tried to get as much organic matter worked back in before the next growing season. This material was either the fruit of life, or something currently living (leaves, grass, cover crop). Worked back into the ground, it provided the raw materials for life to flourish in the future.

In the same way, we need to help those who give experience the life of the ministry they are supporting. Testimonies, pictures, personal visits, phone calls and notes all convey life in rich and meaningful ways. Like organic material, it builds a rich environment for future growth.

Thinking in biotic ways about generating resources can offer many additional insights to the fund raising process. Here are a few.

Tap roots and surface roots

A healthy tree needs both tap roots and surface roots. Tap roots are the major donors or foundations. These givers have significant capacity and can be drawn on to fuel major steps forward or support significant growth. If you only have tap roots, however, you can be vulnerable. If one is cut off it can threaten the survival of the entire tree.

That is why you also need surface roots, the web of small donors. This is what gives stability to the tree and brings in nutrients. These people are more likely to pray and resource the work in other ways, and their many small gifts can add significantly. If all you have, however, is surface roots, it may be difficult to respond to large opportunities or crises. A good tree has them both

Optimal sizes and forests

Every living system has an optimal size. As it approaches this limit it begins to be burdened down under its own weight. Pushing it beyond this can actually borrow off of the health of the system, and cause dysfunction.

Nature gets around this by starting over with another tree with seeds from the first one. In this way, the living system is duplicated, and joins with others of its kind in a larger ecosystem called a forest. In this way the natural limit can be overcome in a way that increases the capacity in orders of magnitude rather than merely in percentage points.

Every person will reach the limit of their relational capacity, especially if they are doing a good job of caring for their team of supporters. The key to growth is in teaching others to do the same and spreading out the responsibilities of nurture and care. The five steps of an organic system can be running simultaneously in a number of different webs of relationship, each linked together into a larger living whole called the forest. The interrelationship of these “trees” actually helps each one to be healthier, as they protect and nurture each other, and create environments that are optimized for their health.

Tractors and silos

In every organic system there is a key place for inorganic tools and the use of non-renewable resources. They should be used, however to better manage the living relationships, to increase capacity and fuel movement forward. Many grants from foundations fall into this category, since these kinds of donors rarely have interest in funding repeating or ongoing expenses.

Foundations are generally most motivated when they see that their gift has moved the ministry forward to a new level that can be maintained without their help. Because of that, these grants are best used for capacity building, for “priming the pump”, starting something new, or the purchase of tools or facilities. When too much of the funds from one time grants goes to cover salaries, the ministry can be very vulnerable, since these repeating costs will not go away when the grant comes to an end. Because of that, we try to cover salaries as much as possible from regular or “renewable” resources and save the grants either for programs or the launching of something new.

Conclusion

All of this requires great faith and trust in the “Lord of the Harvest”. He almost always calls us to work that is beyond our resources, and this generally includes significant financial demands that stretch our abilities. In the process, however, he teaches us new lessons about dependence and faith. He stretches us to believe greater things from him, and to humbly seek, ask and knock. The challenge of finances is an important tool in his hands for refining us and teaching us more of his character. We must remember that financing the work of God is not a “necessary evil” but an essential responsibility of a spiritual leader.

More importantly, it multiplies blessing, and brings great glory and honor to God.