

Fundraising in a Changing World

5 Challenges Facing Ministries

By Larry Yonker

Change is one of the few constants of modern life. It seems that just as soon as we feel we've got something figured out, it changes. The assumptions we once used need to be continually reassessed. The standard operating procedures we've developed sometimes need to be completely overhauled.

Christian ministries find themselves facing unique challenges. On the one hand, the spiritual foundations of their work never change. God loves us. And he has called us to work with him to redeem the world he created.

On the other hand, the cultural context in which ministries work changes moment by moment. As a result, just about everything other than our spiritual foundations undergoes a continual process of change. Adapting to this ever-quickening pace of change without sacrificing our core principles is the key to moving the work of God's Kingdom ahead.

Change Brings New Challenges

We're living at a time of tremendous transformation, and I believe the five changes described below are among the most important challenges to the health and effectiveness of our ministries this year and in the years ahead.

■ Challenge 1: Message Overload.

Every year, we're bombarded by thousands and thousands of advertising and promotional messages: on billboards, on TV, in magazines and e-mail. They even vie for

our attention in church services, bulletins and newsletters.

We see ads on movie screens and on the tray tables in airplanes. We get sales pitches on increasing numbers of video screens, including those on gas pumps and ATM machines. And here in Colorado, skiers see ads on "lap maps" installed in ski lifts.

When people are repeatedly bombarded, their behavior becomes very predictable. They become shell-shocked and distracted. Advertisers know this, but instead of backing off and giving us a break, they ramp up their pitches, using new approaches designed to overcome or circumvent our defenses.

Some companies are investing in expensive ad campaigns that tell us virtually nothing about the features or benefits of their products or programs, but focus instead on how they'll somehow meet our deeper needs for community, intimacy or spirituality.

But no matter what approach they use, the net effect of so much information and advertiser messages bombarding us day after day is chaos and clutter, complicating our efforts to get our own messages out to our supporters and donors.

Donors don't like it any more than we do. And many of them see our ministries' mass marketing efforts as part of the problem. We need to take their shell shock seriously.

One way to cut through the chaos and clutter of our culture is to cut back on mass marketing and focus instead on rela-

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tional marketing. That means building volunteer networks, creating personal messages for board members, and partnering with authors, speakers and artists. More often than not, you can find these spokespeople from your existing donor pool.

We also need to tighten our segmentation and focus our messages on relevant segments. Do a survey (written or phone) to assess the profile of your donor base, and then target your various marketing initiatives directly at those people who are most likely to respond to them.

Unless we emphasize relational marketing and focus on segmented efforts that match our messages to our intended audiences, more and more of what we do will be rejected by recipients as part of the chaos and clutter of our ad-saturated age.

■ **Challenge 2: The Spiraling Costs of the American Dream.** Wherever you look today, people are under intense pressure, working harder and longer than ever, with more fear and anxiety that their jobs will be cut, or replaced by technology, or outsourced to Asia.

Once upon a time, most families had a single wage earner. Today, increasing numbers of families depend on two wage earners to help them get ahead, or in some cases more than three if children are included. But many of these two-income families aren't making as much progress as they hoped they would.

Couples are sacrificing more and more of their personal time together and their time with their children in a desperate effort to reach out and grab their piece of the American dream. The only problem is that for many of us, that dream seems to always be moving further and further away.

Many of us lost retirement funds in the boom-and-bust cycle of the 90s. Many of us are struggling to pay for and heat our bigger houses, and pay for gas for our bigger vehicles. And we're wrestling with a whole host of new monthly fees for "essential" technology services like cell phones, cable TV, and digital Internet connections that seem to suck precious dollars out of our bank accounts with amazing speed.

Organizations are under pressure, too, trying to do more with less, trying

to stretch their dollars further while having an even greater impact for God in our world.

One place the challenges of doing more with less become obvious is in employment issues. Christian ministries used to be able to rely on a fairly sizable population of workers who would be willing to work for less in order to achieve something great for God. Today, many of these workers are struggling to make ends meet. The desire to serve God is still there, but the freedom to do so in ways that sacrifice their potential earnings is becoming rare.

These struggling people are our employees and our donors, and they're under tremendous pressure! They want

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to serve and give to your ministry, but there are so many bills to be paid, and so many pieces of the American dream yet to be grasped.

■ **Challenge 3: Pluralism.** I grew up watching westerns on TV. Even at the age of five, it was easy for me to distinguish the good guys from the bad guys by looking at the color of their hats. The sheriff usually wore a clean, white hat, while the horse rustlers and bank robbers wore dirty black hats.

Today there's a lot less white and black in our world. Instead we live in a world of gray. One of the areas where you can see the grayness of modern life is in the pluralism in people's beliefs.

There are more Muslims in America today than Jews or Episcopalians. And many of us live in communities where churches are located just down the street from mosques, Buddhist temples, Hindu ashrams, or neo-pagan ceremonial centers.

On the positive side, the presence of so many different kinds of believers living

next door to each other can produce understanding and tolerance. But on the other hand, the coexistence of so many different faith groups means Christianity is competing with other gods and world-views for people's hearts.

We say Jesus is the way, but other voices proclaim that there are many ways to God. We say the Word of God is truth, but other voices proclaim that there are multiple truths, and each person should find his or her own truth, instead of depending on any single holy book or set of doctrines.

This makes it much more difficult to reach others with the message of Christ.

Religious pluralism can also produce uncertainty among Christians about

whether evangelism is even good or necessary. Many believers have become uncertain and insecure about the absolute truth claims of their faith. And even if their faith remains firm, they feel uncertain about how it applies to the big, complex world outside their church door.

This ambivalence has a direct impact on people's giving to Christian ministries. Donors want to see proof that meaningful impact is accomplished through their gifts. But for many donors, ministry claims that another hundred or thousand people have been "reached" with the Gospel seem less and less compelling. How do average believers get their arms around "millions of new converts every day?" Again, the context is lost.

■ **Challenge 4: Mega-Culture.** Trend watcher Bill Easum recently wrote an article for *Outreach Magazine* about the growing size and number of megachurches, those with 2,000 or more members.

"Twenty years ago American megachurches numbered just over two

dozen,” wrote Easum. “Today they exceed 830, with more than 30 exceeding 10,000 worshippers.”

Easum and others have proposed a new term for these 10,000-plus churches calling them gigachurches.

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We live in a mega-culture where bigger is seen as better. Perhaps the best example of this is Wal-Mart, the company that in a few decades has become the world's biggest retailer.

I don't have any problem with megachurches, but big churches can make it harder on many ministries to effectively reach the millions of churchgoing believers who constitute their core constituency. Megachurches may support many missionaries, but often do so directly, rather than funneling the bulk of their significant contributions through existing missionary or parachurch organizations.

■ **Challenge 5: Resistance to America.**

In the weeks and months after 9/11, America enjoyed an outpouring of support and affection from people all over the world. Today, America's foreign policy and the war in Iraq have weakened U.S. ties with many of its traditional allies.

Many major U.S. corporations are seeing a decline in once-strong international demand for their products. And many American-based ministries are encountering new kinds of resistance as well.

Meanwhile, Christians in other nations are stepping into the gap and doing their part to spread the Gospel around the world. For example, a November page-one story in *The New York Times* focused on the growing role believers from South Korea are playing in global evangelism.

“South Korea has rapidly become the world's second largest source of Christian missionaries, only a couple of decades after it started deploying them,” wrote reporter Norimitsu Onishi.

American missionaries still significantly outnumber South Korean missionaries. But while some American missionaries are facing tough going in Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries, South Korean workers are planning to open a Christian seminary in Baghdad.

There are 6,000 British missionaries around the world, but African churches are rapidly catching up. This African missionary movement is beginning to reverse centuries of white, Western domination of missionary activity.

From a Kingdom perspective, this transformation is very positive. But once again it will create new challenges for

ministries by changing the dynamic of raising funds in the United States. Many parachurch organizations are actively building their capacity to raise funds from other nations. International efforts like these will be critical to these organizations' long-term future.

Hope in the Midst of Change

These five cultural changes are serious, and will force many of us to make significant alterations in the way we do what we do. But I hope none of you sees this as a “sky-is-falling” message of doom and gloom.

Personally, I'm very excited about what God is doing in the midst of our present chaos and transformation. Our job is to remain tirelessly focused on what God has called us to do and trust that he is actively searching the world for those faithful servants who will obey him and respond to his message.

My prayer is that all of us will address the challenges that face us without abandoning our core ministry values or our faith in the God who remains sovereign over all things.

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