

# PRAYER BASED FUNDRAISING

Glenn Williams

An essay contribution to  
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## PRAYER BASED FUNDRAISING

By Glenn Williams

A *Dilbert* cartoon featured a staff member told to complete a nearly impossible task with little available resources. After being declined for each request for additional assistance, he asked if he could at least acquire a prayer rug.

In a world of uncertainty, fundraisers are often asked to do the nearly impossible to cover depleting sources of funding. The fact that time and again Development staff reach and often surpass annual goals can easily be taken for granted. How is it done so consistently in organizations throughout the country when it would appear that external influences might not warrant such successes?

While Development staff have been referred to as agents of hope, experience has shown that successful gift officers do not act as much out of blind faith that positive things will happen but rather they develop actions based upon intuitive cues. Can this intuitive sense be further developed to refine and increase the success rate of our decision-making processes? It is possible if we change the source of our inspiration. Rather than focusing on overt clues such as giving histories, relationships, and wealth-indicators to make decisions regarding prospecting efforts, we can shift our focus to a God-centered internalized approach through active prayer.

Prayer-based fundraising is not a new concept. People have been turning to prayer for support, guidance, and perspective since the dawn of man. Personally getting to this point in my career and understanding the value in utilizing spiritual guidance in my work has taken more than twenty years to fully realize, but using prayer in my work was evident in my first job in fundraising as a student caller for my university's alumni phonathon. Perhaps you can relate to this. We received excellent training in preparing to make these phone calls for the annual fund. I can still recall, however, the anxiety in preparing for that first cold call. The instructor said "You have your script, read over the donors' giving record, familiarized yourself with their background, speculated about their income, are confident that they are candidates for the President's Club, and you have dialed the number...what do you do next?" My response: "Pray that no one is home."

Development has been described by those in the field as a melding of science and art—that there are specific tools any gift officer can use that are fairly standard, but when it comes to making an ask, one has to be artful in assessing the environment around the donor and determining the best course of action at that particular moment. I agree that it is a science and an art, but for me, the science has come to mean metaphysics.

Likely every institution in the country desires a consistent funding source for operating resources. What if, during the strategic planning process, our first goal was to define the spiritual purpose for the organization for which we serve? It can be an extremely challenging exercise. Once accomplished, however, thought begins to comprehend the reality that God provides his own ideas with all that they need to fulfill His purpose. From this the issue evolves then from a need to seek resources into a question of whether your institution is fulfilling God's purpose.

There is certainly much discussion about the need for institutional endowment—which at its core literally means eternal supply. How do we acquire that? By fulfilling God's purpose.

Simple, isn't it? But how does this relate to fundraising?

True success in fundraising can only occur if the vision of your purpose touches both the mind and soul of potential donors. It is important to arouse people's interest and imagination, but if you fail to connect with their heart, you will never convince them to give significantly to your cause nor to give repeatedly. Naturally then, one begins to wonder what to say, how to say it, and when to broach the subject of a gift in a way that will most likely lead to a commitment—and this can cause anxiety for the solicitor. I have come to embrace Mary Baker Eddy's statement in *Miscellaneous Writings* that "When the heart speaks, however simple the words, its language is always acceptable to those who have hearts."<sup>1</sup>

Our primary goal then should not be to solicit gifts, but rather to share our passion for an organization that we know is having a positive effect on the world around us because it is fulfilling God's purpose—it is our passion for the topic that becomes the motivator to prospects, not merely the words we choose. It doesn't mean we don't ask for gifts, for asking is an important component of prospect visits—but it does mean that we as fundraisers need to recognize that the goal of our institution is not to collect money. Financial stability is merely a means to accomplish the ultimate goal of fulfilling a societal need. It is an important distinction, because it shouldn't be considered a failure to walk away from a meeting with a prospect without a gift commitment if the prospect feels more emotionally tied to the organization than before the visit. Once that emotional connection occurs, a gift at some level is likely inevitable with proper cultivation and stewardship.

An example of this change in philosophy comes from Tenacre, a care facility in Princeton. At a crucial time in their early days, Burwell Harrison, then director of the facility, printed and mailed to friends of the organization a brochure entitled *Blueprint for an Ideal*. Ultimately,

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<sup>1</sup> *Miscellaneous Writings: 1883-1896*, Mary Baker Eddy, p. 262, Christian Science Publishing Society, Boston, MA

*Blueprint* was not specifically designed as a fundraising appeal, but rather as a promotional piece. Yet it became a significantly successful fundraising appeal because it spoke from the heart about the value of Tenacre's work—and one way for those who empathized with that mission to acknowledge their support was by sending money, and people did.

John Barbey, who became Tenacre's largest benefactor through that campaign spurred in part by this brochure, gave the best explanation of how the Spirit works most effectively in fundraising efforts—he said that his gift was the result of two prayers coming together. It was the culmination of the giver wishing to make a positive difference in the world and the receiving organization having the ability to change the world—but needing the resources to do so. By joining together, both the giver and receiver fulfilled their interests and desires.<sup>2</sup>

Think of this as recognizing that according to scriptures, it is more blessed to give than receive—and someone has to be prepared to receive so the giver can accept their blessing. That's our role!

I think that we can agree that development work is most satisfying when it is the least personal—when we become facilitators to match the donors' interests and the organization's efforts so perfectly, that both mutually benefit from the association and are wed by their common interests.

For my work, prayer is the beginning of this effort—for I have no way of knowing the philanthropic need of all of my prospects at any given moment, nor how my organization can meet those desires perfectly—but God knows. So I listen to be led to where to travel, who to see, and what to say. I am always amazed and blessed by what comes from these encounters when I trust that inner voice to guide me—and it removes any personal responsibility to “not blow the opportunity.” For I am there to share what's in my heart about the good that my organization is doing and have to trust that what's in my heart is what my particular audience at that moment is seeking. It can be summarized perfectly in another of Mrs. Eddy's statements in *Miscellaneous Writings*: “By purifying human thought, this state of mind permeates with increased harmony all the minutiae of human affairs. It brings with it wonderful foresight, wisdom, and power; it unselfs the mortal purpose, gives steadiness to resolve, and success to endeavor.”<sup>3</sup>

So how does this specifically apply to our work—how do we convince others that we are worthy of their financial support? In order for a prayer-based effort to succeed, we must first ensure that we believe whole-heartedly in the organizations we serve. One must be convinced of the grand purpose underlying the institutional effort.

Using my own experience at Colonial Williamsburg, our message is that we are preserving the history of our society, our culture, and the individual stories of Americans who made very difficult decisions to help create who we are as a society today. We believe that Colonial Williamsburg is important because we give our citizens the opportunity to touch and interact

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<sup>2</sup> *Tenacre: A Chronicle of Prayer and Listening*, p. 74, Princeton, NJ

<sup>3</sup> *Miscellaneous Writings: 1883-1896*, Mary Baker Eddy, p. 204 Christian Science Publishing Society, Boston, MA

with history. Only by understanding how our country has developed can we truly improve our society in the future.

This vision started from the mind of one man, Dr. W.A.R. Goodwin, rector of the Bruton Parish Church, who convinced John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to invest so significantly in this small Virginia town. His vision for the restoration as the two of them walked the streets set the tone for their later discussions of support. See if perhaps he may have also been able to capture your imagination in the same way:

If you have ever walked around Williamsburg late on a moonlight night, when most of the people who now live here are fast asleep, and felt the presence and companionship of the people who used to live here in the long gone years, and remembered the things that they did and the things that they stood for, and pictured them going into or coming out of the old houses in which they once lived, and remembered the things which they said in the House of Burgesses and at the old College—you would then know what an interesting place Williamsburg is. You would realize that it is about the most interesting place in America.

There are thousands of cities in this country with Main Streets, but only one Duke of Gloucester Street like ours. There are many Protestant churches, but none so long conspicuously in use as Bruton Parish...when you walk around Williamsburg late on a moonlight night you can see the Indians on the Court Green, where they used to meet to make their treaties of peace...and you can see the agents of old Lord Dunmore, stealing the powder out of the Powder Horn, and you can hear the rattle of the horses' hoofs coming down the Richmond Road as Patrick Henry and the Hanover Volunteers ride on to Williamsburg and demand the powder be restored.<sup>4</sup>

Reading Dr. Goodwin's words, you may begin to understand why Mr. Rockefeller became so passionate about the restoration—why he invested more than \$150,000,000 in today's dollars. You also begin to understand why the Colonial Williamsburg mission statement is *That the future may learn from the past*. It is a statement repeated over and over again so that those from whom we seek funding are aware of us before we even approach them for support. And this can be key. For those who are on our prospect lists have already self-identified in some way as being interested in the organization. But what will inspire them is not a convincing argument for investment—it is the spiritually-inspired vision of what has been and what can be.

Consultants have done numerous research studies through the years on why donors give large gifts to capital campaigns. There are four primary conclusions that can be drawn by the majority of these studies: (1) those organizations that most need the money are the least likely to receive it—no one wants to back an institution perceived as a sinking ship; (2) people are most likely to support those organizations that have clearly articulated goals and missions; (3) the

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<sup>4</sup> *The Background and Beginnings of the Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia*, Elizabeth Hayes, p.32-33, Williamsburg, VA

most significant gifts most often come from active trustee involvement—they can generally reach those with influence more readily than can staff; and finally, (4) ego and self-identity are very powerful motivator for donors—fundamental ego needs are power, success, affection, and security—and organizations need to address these to be successful. So if those are specific motivators, how do we define the best one for a particular donor? Pray for insight and trust the response.

Consider another statement by America’s first premier fundraiser, Benjamin Franklin:

My practice is to go first to those who know the cause and believe in it, and ask them to give as generously as possible. When they have done so, I go next to those who may be presumed to have a favourable opinion and to be disposed to listening, and secure their adherence. Lastly I go to those who know little of the matter or have no predilection for it, and influence them by presentation of the names of those who have already given. Do not neglect those who you are sure will give nothing, for in some of them, you will be mistaken.<sup>5</sup>

It only requires one person or organization to commit to a significant gift that can transform your operation—the challenge is knowing specifically who that might be. This is where a prayer-based approach can result in huge dividends. Trusting that voice within—often called instinct or intuition—can provide insights into prospects that all of the research at your disposal may never uncover. It can be difficult to hear that inner voice over the shouts of naysayers suggesting a particular prospect with whom you are focusing will never give significantly to the institution because there are no overt signs of intent. But honing your ability to trust your instincts and treating everyone as if they have the potential to give the largest gift imaginable, you will be rewarded in ways in which you have yet to imagine. Anne Lamont suggested that “You get your intuition back when you make space for it, when you stop the chattering of the rational mind.”<sup>6</sup>

Craig Wruck once described an experience that occurred at Oxford University a number of years ago that speaks well to also considering the long-term value of our efforts in trusting our instincts.

On the Oxford campus stands a grand old building called Commencement Hall, which had housed graduations for more than 200 years and, as you might imagine, is rich in history and tradition. It finally came time to renovate the building at which time the engineers and architects discovered that the large oak trusses and beamwork that held up the ceiling had dried out and needed to be replaced.

The dilemma was that the wood used in these beams was a clear, solid oak more than 12 inches square and more than 40 feet long. Lumber that grand was just not available any more. After a search for alternatives, it was finally decided that

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<sup>5</sup> Source unknown

<sup>6</sup> *Random House Webster’s Quotationary*, Leonard Roy Frank editor, p. 412, Random House, New York, NY

it would be necessary to use a combination of laminated wood and steel that would at least preserve much of the look and feel of the original beams. Although it was a compromise, they felt it was the best solution to minimize damage to the original character and tradition of the place.

During a presentation to the Board of Overseers, the staff arborist spoke up. Everyone was surprised that this particular gentleman would have an opinion about this topic. But he recalled that when Commencement Hall was built, one of his predecessors had planted a grove of oak in a remote portion of the grounds that were now mature trees; harvesting a portion of them would easily provide the timber needed to properly renovate the building. So the plans were redrawn and the foresight of that arborist 200 years prior made possible a top quality renovation that preserved Commencement Hall.<sup>7</sup>

Those trees were planted without any sure knowledge of how and when they would be used, yet 200 years later this work made a difference between the merely adequate and truly first-rate. Another important aspect of this story is that the original arborist may have had the foresight to plant the seedlings, but it took many hands through the years to care for those trees and bring them to maturation. Think about the intuition and conviction of thought among all involved through the years that made this repair so exceptional and perfect. We all should be such arborists for our organizations.

Mr. Rockefeller was once asked to speak to campaign workers for a project in which he was involved and shared these thoughts:

Never think you need to apologize for asking someone to give to a worthy object, any more than as though you were giving him an opportunity to participate in a high-grade investment. The duty of giving is as much his as is the duty of asking yours. Whether or not he should give to that particular enterprise, and if so, how much, is for him alone to decide.<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes our instincts lead us down unexpected pathways. It is important to note that we are not trying to pick pockets, twist arms, coerce donations, or even just get our foot in the door. We have programs that are transforming the world and we should be willing to share them with the joy that brought us to the organization in the first place.

In the end, it is crucial to remember in this type of fundraising that when God is motivating our efforts we can remove any personal responsibility to “say just the right words” to someone that might prompt a gift. When we pray for guidance on where to go, who to see, what to say and we find ourselves face-to-face with a potential donor, remember that they are seeking to do good in a way that our organizations can fulfill. Do not deny that person a chance to give to such a worthy effort—to feel the joy of transforming the world—by bringing two prayers together.

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<sup>7</sup> *Oak Trees and Endowments*, Craig Wruck, *Planned Giving Today*, Nov 1993, Edmonds, WA

<sup>8</sup> *The Raising of Money: Thirty-Five Essentials Every Trustee Should Know*, James Gregory Lord, p. 4, Third Sector Press, Cleveland, OH

## ABOUT GHC CONVERSATIONS

Annually, Gary Hubbell Consulting convenes and hosts a small hand-picked group of social sector professionals from throughout North America for three days of intense dialogue and critical thinking. We strive to create a thought-provoking, mind-opening, and stimulating conversation about philanthropy, organizational leadership, and the sector as a whole. This deep exploration of the nature and challenges of the philanthropic environment is intended to engage, inform, and inspire senior leaders to be catalysts for change in their own organizations and communities of influence. With each GHC Conversation, we seek to establish the seeds of a continuing and enriching network that nourishes us as individuals and helps each of us change how we converse, inspire, and seek new dimensions of philanthropy. This essay is one contributed for *Conversation 2010*.



## Conversation 2010 Participant Bio

### Glenn Williams

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Until recently Glenn was the Vice President of Development for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. He has been with the Foundation for eleven years. Prior to moving to Virginia, Glenn worked for his alma mater, Washington State University, for ten years in all aspects of development. Starting his career as a student telemarketer calling alumni for donations, upon graduation he spent five years in athletic fundraising (Go Cougs!). After deciding that relying on student-athletes to win games as a means of having success in the job was much too stressful, Glenn decided to return full-time to school for a Masters in Education degree to become a fifth-grade teacher. After just one semester, he was asked to fundraise part-time for the College of Business as an Assistant Director. As often happens with part-time work, he soon found himself doing full-time work at half-time pay. Re-joining the Development staff full-time, he spent evenings in class. Soon he was recruited to become Director of Development for a branch campus. Currently Glenn is active in church work and is on the Board of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters. He volunteered for many years with CASE, including as a regional Board member and district conference chair.

This is Glenn's first GHC Conversation.