

As I lean on the perimeter fence enclosing the charitable sector, I can't help noticing that there is a sharp and uneasy divide between the secular and religious sides of the field. We're all Canadians here, so the tension is kept politely under control, but there's no mistaking its presence. When secular groups talk about their "mission", they're using the word very differently from their religious counterparts.

If religious groups represented a negligible fraction of all charities, this lack of comfort wouldn't be a problem. But in fact religious charities are huge in this country, representing almost half (49%) of all Canadian giving. Plagued by an aging cohort, a lot of expensive and crumbling downtown real estate and some very bad news stories, our Christian churches in particular have been in a serious financial crunch for years, and many congregations have turned to modern secular fundraising techniques to help refill the coffers.

An intriguing new book says this is absolutely the wrong way to go. "The Passionate Steward: Recovering Christian Stewardship from Secular Fundraising" by Michael O'Hurley-Pitts throws Christian charity into stark relief against the more pragmatic, results-oriented approach used by lay agencies, and challenges churches to get back to Biblical basics. O'Hurley-Pitts is a transplanted American now living in Toronto who runs his own faith-based fundraising consultancy, Faith Matters. He's flogging his new book over the Internet (www.stbridgpress.com) mainly to Christian organizations, but the ideas he raises are worth pondering in a secular context as well.

First he takes on donor recognition programmes, from tote bags to wall plaques, which are such a staple of modern fundraising as to be virtually unquestioned. He sees them as nothing but a shallow appeal to vanity. If you believe, as Christians do, that everything we have comes from the hand of God, then the donation was never really ours to give in the first place, and certainly not something for which we should get credit or reward. Here's what Jesus had to say on the subject: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Christians may or may not buy this argument. On a more practical level, O'Hurley-Pitts notes that a lot of donor recognition involves physical plant: a new stained-glass window for the plutocrat of the congregation, a buy-a-brick programme for the plebs. But all those windows and walls will be changed sooner or later due to renovation, expansion or demolition. In a shifting world, what is donor recognition actually worth?

Next he challenges the use of the "gift chart method" to divide congregations up into lead gifts, major gifts, pace-setting gifts and general giving. This practice runs contrary to the notion that all are equal before God. Moreover, because it involves a review of people's annual offerings to decide which category they fall into, the method "fundamentally breaches the trust of parishioners that their socio-economic status will have no bearing on their spiritual or religious worth to a community of faith."

The gift chart approach, which has been widely used in Canadian and U.S. churches since the 1950s, teaches the majority of parishioners that Christian stewardship is not their personal responsibility, and it leaves the wealthy few embittered. It tends to discourage regular weekly giving, so that churches lapse into financial crisis much more frequently. And, says O'Hurley-Pitts, it's disastrous in small, poor and rural communities, where the wealthy 5% that the gift chart method aims to target are often non-existent.

The man is on to something here, and not just for religious groups. I recall the executive director of a major arts institution telling me, "This would be a much stronger, healthier organization if we had a thousand donors each giving us a hundred dollars rather than a single wealthy donor giving us a hundred thousand. But we can't afford the time or the effort to cultivate them." The revival of a stewardship model (something the environmental movement has successfully lifted from religion) could be helpful in many areas of philanthropy.

On the vexed question of pedophilia, O'Hurley-Pitts argues that just because individuals have sinned is no reason for parishioners to stop supporting the church itself, which remains holy. He may convince some Christians with this argument; certainly secular donors are quick to punish charities that have been found guilty of malfeasance. This may be one of the genuine differences between secular and religious charitable relationships.

These aren't just questions for the people who run churches. Since the CCP's own statistics show that three-quarters of the giving and volunteering in Canada is done by church-goers, what happens in those congregations matters. If they become alienated, either by secular fundraising methods or by the continuing fallout from the residential schools issue, it will affect (and probably is already affecting) the entire charitable landscape in this country. •

THE PASSIONATE STEWARD: RECOVERING CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP FROM SECULAR FUNDRAISING
Michael O'Hurley-Pitts, St. Brigid Press, Toronto – 2002 ISBN: 0-9731378-0-0 \$19.99

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