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Depth Perception

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Unified giving versus designation: must we choose between them?

Some chapters of the United Way are changing their annual appeals from being united to being issue-based. This would mean charities funded through the United Way campaign would now compete for attention based upon urgency and market appeal. Donors would be more free to designate.

So even the United Way now concedes that the philanthropic landscape has changed! Yes, donors are now far more interested in specific appeals for specific needs than for general appeals that fund operational expenses for a variety of charities. I acknowledge this trend, and believe that charities and ministries must adjust. Why then do I consider such a decision a possible mistake?

My concern grows from knowing ***a unified appeal can be a cause in itself***. A key oversight in campaigns like these is that they mostly emphasize income in connection to the goal rather than the efficiency of the gift or the results it achieves. They rely on peer-pressure for participation rather than education that brings in new and enthusiastic donors. We hear the name United Way frequently, but seldom in connection to its founding purpose. People perceive it as a catch-all that probably contributes to organizations that they disagree with, rather than as a community-based organization helping small or local charities work more efficiently and do more good. The former perception deteriorates unified giving. Nurture the latter perception and you have a worthwhile cause.

Denominations struggle mightily with this issue. Should they emphasize all the parts and accommodate the individual wishes of donors, or should they seek to emphasize responsibility to support the whole? Mega-churches ask the same question with their multi-million dollar budgets. But it is the wrong question! It isn't a choice between impulses or a need to accommodate both trends in some way. Rather, it is determining once more the reason for existing and then making certain all communication, all administrative decisions and all funding appeals are in concert with that purpose.

This is not a difficult answer to find. The focus is not the organization's survival, the continuing employment of staff, or paying off debt. Neither is it helping donors lighten bulging wallets. Rather it is achieving the purpose of doing good over and over again.

-mark

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