

Christian School Management The Mary Principle

“For Jesus; Through Mission; With Students.”



Christian Philanthropy: The Mary Principle

Luke 8: 3

“Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.”

Christian Schools need supporters who will give of their abundance (at whatever level that indicates) in order to further the work of the school. While parents can be expected to pay tuition and fees for the services they receive, that money typically does not purchase property, build facilities, or provide items that are over and above normal everyday expenses. It is thus very important that Christian schools:

- Raise money over and above operating income.
- Exercise and teach philanthropy.
- Develop a culture of philanthropy.
- Treat donors honorably and respectfully.
- Follow the highest ethical standards.

It is no casual statement to call this the Mary Principle. The women mentioned in Luke’s Gospel had been “cured of evil spirits and diseases” (verse 2). They had experienced an astonishing change in their circumstances and were giving, we might assume, out of gratitude for deliverance. We can assume that these women were also the same ones who, in Luke 23 and 24, gave Jesus’ body its final ministrations and were the first at the tomb the next day. Certainly, having someone as wealthy as Joanna in the ranks would be enormously important in order to cover the expenses of this work. Mary Magdalene is so important that she is mentioned at least 12 times, more than many of the apostles, and mentioned in connection with the key events of Jesus’ life. These women were not just appurtenances, but key and vital members of the Jesus’ work with characteristics that one might find in other passages such as Proverbs 31. Connecting philanthropy to these women is to establish important points about the work of raising money for Christian schools. There are five operating principles that the Lukan narrative identifies:

1. Giving is in gratitude for what has been done.
2. Giving is done by people who are intimately involved with the action.
3. Giving includes involvement, not just the act of giving itself.
4. Giving galvanizes possibilities that otherwise could not be imagined.
5. Giving is recognized and honored.

We don’t know if these women were asked to give or if they initiated the conversation. We can imagine, however, that once someone like Joanna had been healed, she asked in what way she could be part of what was going on with Jesus. There was obviously some kind of organizational structure to Jesus’ ministry such that when he arrived at a place, there had been some preparations: food bought for the road, fresh clothing to replace what was wearing out, new sandals on occasion, even transportation such as the special time that Jesus told his disciples to seek out the ass for his entrance into Jerusalem. It can’t have been a simple thing for 13 men and other followers to travel around the countryside living a peripatetic lifestyle. Joanna would have been gratefully welcomed into the company of donors who kept

things on an even keel. Maybe she asked; maybe she was asked. What we do know is that she and others (many others) were thought important enough to be specifically honored through Luke's narrative.

Giving for Christian education needs to follow these five principles. Unfortunately, caring for the money of others has not been a strong practice on the part of Christian schools. Christian donors often (very often) become disillusioned because their money, given thoughtfully and hopefully, vanishes into a black hole that has these characteristics:

- It is not well accounted for or accountable – how was it spent and what was it used for.
- It does not solve problems; in fact, it merely papers over the problems the school has and the school fails to address the issues it has. The consequence is that the need for the donation does not go away but reappears over and over again. The gift is seen in the present tense only.
- It does not move the school forward. It does not create space for creative solutions or visionary possibilities. In fact, the school refuses to acknowledge that the need for the gift suggests that the school has any problems at all. Far from opening up opportunities, it reaffirms the school in thinking that their “faithful prayer” has been answered. The future is not a new day of creativity but only the present day repeated.
- It does not build capacity. The gift is used to plug the budget that currently exists. It does not fund those things that could help the administration, faculty, and staff of the school see any change in their own circumstances that would allow them to move the school forward: it does not fund significant professional development, the use of consulting services, professionalization of operations, technology systems to collect and manage data.

Thus, Christian schools must manage and think about gifts in a different way. Even the manna in the desert enabled the Jewish people to move towards the Promised Land! Christian schools must know how to look after the gift legally and ethically. Christian schools must know how to use the gift in a way that moves the school from the present into the future. Gifts that only serve the present, by definition, mask underlying management and leadership problems that the Board of Trustees and School Head are not addressing effectively. Gifts are about the future and about vision and about direction.

Interestingly, Christian schools are also bad about asking people for money. It would seem that Jesus and his disciples were not shy about it. Mary, Joanna, and many others supported their work. The Mary Principle suggests that many want to support the work of Jesus in the Christian school. Penelope Burk in her research into giving says that, for example, “9 to 10 percent of people say they have put bequests in their wills, but more than 30 percent say they would definitely do it or take under serious consideration if asked.” It is clear that our schools do not have the confidence, or they do not think it is right, to ask their potential supporters for money. There is sometimes the thought that these people SHOULD give and we shouldn't have to ask them. We do not take a position on that. What we do know is that if the school does not ask them, many who would will not. After all, they ARE being asked by many other organizations and individuals, sometimes on a weekly basis, to contribute to many worthy causes.

The Christian school needs philanthropic dollars. It is not a “love of money” that leads to asking for money. It is an appreciation of the need to serve the children of the school and carry out its mission. It is because the school can clearly and authentically identify a future-oriented need. It is done with complete integrity and open accountability. It is done transparently and without embarrassment. It is

done with the operating budget taken care of – it is not a replacement for good daily management and accounting practices.

From the donor’s perspective, the gift is given because it has been asked for. The donor feels that their philanthropy is an excellent investment in the future. Donors equally feel that they are honored in their giving – firstly, by being asked within the context of a plan; secondly, by being included appropriately in the conversation; thirdly, by being thanked, told that their gift was used as asked, and given evidence that children benefited. Finally, the donor is treated in a way that makes them want to be equally or more generous the following year. A ‘tired’ donor is typically someone for whom these things have not happened.

The Mary Principle is built on the Ox Principle. The school that balances its budget, limits its debt, compensates its employees professionally, and has a reserve is a school that will raise the most money. The school that manages its budget poorly, fails to charge tuition that pays the bills, goes into debt, and asks its employees to work “sacrificially” i.e., without the ability to raise their families, will raise the least money. These two principles work hand in hand.

Every Christian family that is involved with a Christian school wants to support it. The Mary Principle, and the Ox Principle that underlies it, gives them every opportunity to do so. They will be eager and excited to see the miracles of what God has given them translate into the miracles that God will perform through their school.