

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.”

Exodus 36: 6-7

“Moses instructed them to take his message throughout the camp, saying, “Let no man or woman do any more work for the offering for the sanctuary.” So the people were restrained from bringing any more. Now the materials were more than enough for them to do all the work”.

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,
- treat donors honorably and respectfully, and
- follow the highest ethical standards.

From our perspective at Christian School Management (CSM), 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” (v. 2). They had experienced an astonishing change in their circumstances and were giving, we might assume, out of gratitude for deliverance. We can also assume that these women were 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 have been enormously important in order to cover the expenses of this work. It is one of the great ironies of history to note that Jesus’ ministry was funded in part by Herod!

Why pick Mary? Mary Magdalene is so important that she is mentioned at least 12 times in the Gospels, 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 Jesus’ work with characteristics that one might find in other Bible 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 God has done for each one of us.
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 thirteen 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 fails to address. The consequence is that the need for the donation recurs.
- It does not move the school forward. It does not create space for creative solutions or visionary possibilities. Far from opening up opportunities, it reaffirms the school in thinking that its "faithful prayer" has been answered. The future is not a new day of creativity but only the present day repeated.
- It does not support building capacity in the administration, faculty, and staff of the school. The gift is used to cover deficits in the current budget. It does not fund "moving forward" items such as significant professional development, the use of consulting services, professionalization of operations, technology systems to collect and manage data.

No, 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 have trouble 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 give 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 investment into the lives of children in the school. It is an appreciation of the needs that truly exist in the delivery of the school's 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.

The donor wants to give. The donor has no problem with giving but wants to be asked. Donors want their philanthropy to be an excellent investment in the future. They want to be asked within the context of a plan, to be included appropriately in the conversation, to be thanked, to be told that their gift was used as asked, and to be given evidence that children benefited. Finally, when donors are treated in this way, they will 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. A school that balances its budget, limits its debt, compensates its employees professionally, and has a reserve is a school that is positioned to succeed in raising money optimally. 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 sufficient income to raise their families, is positioned to fail in any meaningful fund-raising. 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.