The year after his retirement as the minister of the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, California, Raymond B. Cope came to stand in for me at All Souls while I was on sabbatical, and to help get our second congregation started. It gave him a singular chance to evaluate what kind of job we had been doing and what our prospects were for a growing Unitarian Universalist minister in Tulsa. He gave me and our two congregations some startling advice: “Unless the minister is seriously involved in fund-raising, you cannot, will not, accomplish what you have set out to do.”

I remember protesting to Ray that I had been involved, seriously involved in fund raising in Racine and Meadville before coming to Tulsa, and I had even succumbed to blandishments of the professional fund-raiser who had recently conducted our capital fund drive at All Souls to preach a fund-raising sermon. “But, have you done any out-and-out soliciting?” he insisted.

A long-standing artifice fed by clergy and laity alike has it that rabbis, ministers and priests should stay out of fund raising lest their prophetic calling be compromised, their pastoral vocation corrupted. Televangelists constantly ask people for money: proper clergy have better things to do. I was inclined to agree. I had initiated fund raising activities in the churches I served, everything from old fashioned ice cream socials to service auctions and professionally conducted capital fund drives, but save for a half dozen or so exceptions—namely those persons who pretty well made it known that their contributions depended on whether the minister asked for them—I had left the direct solicitation of members and friends of the congregation to the laity. Had I given sufficient thought to it before Ray Cope put his question to me, I might well have reflected how “the long-standing artifice against clerical fund-raising” was rarely shared by most of the people I served. Quite the contrary. People were complimented when I asked them. That some few had insisted upon my asking them for their contribution to the church, or the church’s efforts to reach out to the community at large, should have alerted me to the simple demands of noblesse oblige.

The sweetness of the relationship between minister and congregation is grounded in gifts freely given and accepted. So it is that we are expected to use the authority given us, to take leadership, to show that we honor what has been given us by raising a standard worthy of the gift and the giver.

Each of us has his or her own truth to share, his/her own vision of the good, of what the mission of our religious community ought to be, even so. I have told my congregation that our mission can be stated in a few words: it is to institutionalize religious freedom. Our purpose is to give form and substance to that which is essential to a free society. I have professed my belief that it is ours to secure and preserve, yes to give structure—in bricks and mortar—wherein to shelter and to beautify the freedoms, that were it not for us, might be pirated away in a generation. I have told people that our churches are not our churches, our congregations are not our congregations. Rather we
have a purpose that far transcends our personal needs for comforts and community. It is ours to institutionalize religious freedom! Given such a charge, would I be less than candid not to appeal to those who have called me to be their minister, asking them to support so important a shared calling?

The place of the minister in fund-raising is essential, unless there is no overarching purpose, no transcendent mission, in which case there is no reason to be concerned with raising money. It is the minister’s responsibility to communicate how it is that if ours is a mission essential to the life and well being of a true people, then it is worth talking about the money it takes to do all that we can to carry out. And not to be bashful about it.

**Suggestions**

1. **Timing** is very important. One needs to have served a congregation for a while before engaging in face-to-face soliciting for money, giving people time to know you and you to know them. But don’t wait too long. Begin attending financial and fund-raising committee meetings. Discover who are the gatekeepers (those who want things left the way they are) and who are the pathfinders (those who are open to suggestions and who want to do better). Don’t even try to challenge the gatekeepers. Cultivate the pathfinders, and when you start advanced gift solicitation, start with them.

2. **Think** in terms of large gift giving: thousand dollar increments. Ask for significant gifts when you ask. For example, select ten persons whom you can ask for a thousand dollar increase to their annual pledge. Or, depending upon circumstances, ten persons to raise their pledge to a thousand, or two thousand, or five thousand dollars. Know that it takes time to build a good giving base, but not the time it would take to raise it a hundred dollars here and there.

3. **Make sure** that whomever you solicit, whether you are successful or not, thank them immediately. The next day’s mail. And, as much as possible, describe what their gift means. If they have given for a specific purpose, describe it. If they have given to a general pledge drive, pick out one or two specific things within the budget that they would be most interested in.

4. **Make sure** that all givers are recognized. Listed in the congregation’s newsletter each week during the fund drive. Not by the amounts given. Just their names, as having been among those who have made their pledge or contribution. Acknowledging gifts generally is as important as thanking people individually. In congregations not used to such acknowledgment, it is important that the minister makes sure that the task is undertaken, and carried out with sensitivity and a true sense of mission.

5. **On those occasions** when collections are falling behind after a fund-drive, resist the temptation to complain. People respond to how well they are going, and how much they have done, not how little and how late their efforts are. When you call to remind people of their pledge, or to ask for help bringing the budget into balance, be ready with a list of things accomplished, and a clean expression of your pleasure with those accomplishments. If there is criticism take it seriously, not personally, and make some effort to get something done about it. Then report back. Always report back.

6. **Take every opportunity** to compliment the members and friends of your congregation for their generosity and commitment.