

Case Study: Hardball Politics in Sarasota

--From the book, *Barnacle Busters: Keeping Your Church Seaworthy*, by Robert Lewis.

Marty was the pastor for the college age group at the Sea Walk Faith Church in Sarasota, Florida. He had a dream to have a building dedicated to the college ministry. He believed it should be near the college campus.

One day he was driving around the college campus area with two guys from the college group named Ben Jacobs and Ted Fritz. They saw a one-story commercial building that looked deserted. It obviously had held a Laundromat on one end of the long building because the faded sign was still in place: "College Village Laundromat." The other end of the building had been a convenience store. Now it was a vacant, sad looking place, that had paper cups, leaves, and other trash piled along the west side where the sea breeze blew from the Gulf of Mexico.

He stopped, got out of the car, and walked with Ben and Ted around building. They peeked into the windows and saw some good possibilities with some opportunities for remodeling. They talked about the possibility of reopening a smaller Laundromat to generate an income stream to help pay for the ministry.

They couldn't find a for-sale sign, so they went to city hall and learned that it was a repossessed property of a local bank. So they went to the bank and talked to the real estate officer. He was very happy to see them.

They learned that the Laundromat went

bankrupt when competition opened in a safer location and the convenience store owner didn't make his last six payments and skipped to Argentina, leaving the bank holding the unpaid mortgage. The bank repossessed the property two years ago and had never had anyone interested in buying. The real estate officer said, "We need to get this property off our REO before our next audit." When Marty gave him a puzzled look, the bank officer said, "The bank needs to get it off the books. We are very motivated to sell."

"Oh, yeah, I get it," Marty said. "How much are you selling it for?"

"The bank has just dropped the asking price again. This is crazy, but you can pick it up for \$250,000. That's a steal," said the real estate officer.

Marty couldn't believe this! He and his two college students went back to the location and took pictures. Then they prayed and asked God to give them the money.

Marty put together a packet of material about the property and his plans to raise the money to purchase it for the college ministry. He had to hurry because the quarterly board meeting was in three days. Marty and his two friends attended the meeting, got a spot on the agenda, and shared when the time came. Marty cast his vision, showed the pictures, and his college students shared. One of the board members, Dennis Adell, made the motion to allow the college department to purchase the buildings for use in the college ministry. The board passed the motion by one vote. It allowed the college department to make the purchase if they could raise the money.

After the board meeting, the chairman, Jed Abercrombie, was talking to Bill Shultz and Alice Rodriguez. “I hope this doesn’t divert money from our family retreat lodge. I’m concerned that so many people haven’t fulfilled their pledges. I think the incident last year with the Smith and McConnell families getting drunk and brawling with the neighboring sports lodge really hurt us.”

“I know for sure it hurt us. What a stupid thing for those families to do,” said Alice.

“That project didn’t have the biggest support anyway. Most of the church thinks only the rich families can afford to use the family retreat anyway, since we have to charge enough to cover the park use fees, the utilities, taxes, and maintenance,” said Bill. “And those fees really aren’t that much.”

“For you they aren’t, Bill, but for the middle class families they’re a lot. This is a rough time for those people,” offered Alice.

“The fact is our reputations are on the line,” said Chairman Jed. “We were the three who pushed this through and defeated the move to start that skid row ministry downtown.”

“Those skid row people are hopeless. I don’t know any ministry that turns any of those people around,” Bill said shaking his head and frowning. “Our families need a safe place to relax and worship God in the beauty of nature.” He said good night

to Alice and Jeb and they left.

The college students, Ben Jacobs and Ted Fritz, wasted no time in sharing the vision with the rest of the college group. With an average weekly attendance of some 700 people from area colleges it was the biggest ministry for college students in the Sarasota area, and Ben and Ted were the elected leaders. Brochures were designed and printed and given to the students to hand out. They started hitting up their parents and grandparents to make a monthly pledge for two years. Each one of them made a monthly pledge, too, no matter how small. They were so young and optimistic that they thought this would be a snap to raise \$250,000.

Within the first week most of the college students were reached through social media and person to person. The number making a pledge was 200, which was less than Marty expected, but the results were more than satisfactory. The largest pledge amount was for \$25 per month. One hundred and five made that pledge. Fifty college students made pledges of \$15 per month. The other forty-five made pledges for \$10 per month. Altogether the college department pledged \$91,800 over a two year period.

Now they had something with which to challenge their grandparents, parents, and the rest of the church: \$91,800 from the college group itself. When the group got up in front of the church three weeks after the board meeting, they were excited. The church newspaper had already carried an article, and the college students were so excited that it caught the imagination of the church. People began filling out their pledge cards before the college group finished their presentation. Even more of the

college students jumped on board.

The next Tuesday morning about 9 a.m., a member of the church offering counting committee, Dennis Adell, the man who also had made the motion at the board meeting, came to Marty's office at the church. He had a big smile on his face. Marty caught his excitement and asked him to sit down.

"Did we reach our pledge goal, Dennis?" Marty asked.

"Did we ever!" grinned Dennis. "You won't believe this. This is an absolute miracle. You over-pledged your goal. The total pledge is for \$301,650."

Marty jumped up yelling "Praise the Lord. I can't wait to tell the kids. And the bank will give us a mortgage based on the signed pledges! Whoo-Hooo!"

"I'm so happy for you, Marty. There's more good news," smiled Dennis.

"What!" yelled Marty like a kid at Christmas.

"I'm not supposed to be telling you this, Marty, but I can't keep it to myself. You also got a check from one of our wealthy members who shall remain nameless, of course. Guess how much?"

Marty's mouth was open in delight and

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surprise. “I couldn’t begin to guess. All kinds of thoughts are going through my head, so I think you should just tell me.”

“You have a check designated to the college building purchase and/or remodeling and furnishing for \$300,000!”

Marty screamed. Oh my God! Praise God!
Hallelujah! I’ve got to tell everybody!”

And he did. He called the college department teachers and officers who began calling their members and sharing the good news. The group met that night at a local pizza parlor and celebrated.

On Wednesday, the pastor, Charles Fullerton, went into the church business director’s office to check on the offerings for Sunday. He was happy that the general budget offering on the last Sunday of the month was comfortably over the weekly amount needed to meet all the church’s obligations. He got up to leave when the business director, Harry Huckleberry, said, “Don’t you want to know how the college pledges went?”

“Oh, yes,” said Pastor Fullerton, “how did the kids do?”

“Very, very well,” said Harry Huckleberry.
“You will be pleased to know they went over their goal. They can actually get a mortgage from the bank based on the signed pledges and buy the building.”

Pastor Fullerton sat back down with a surprised look on his face. A little smile started at the corner of his mouth. “I can’t believe that. That’s got to be a miracle if I’ve ever heard of one! I really didn’t think this thing had a chance.”

“Believe me, it caught the imagination of the church. It was a miracle. And I have some other good news Pastor. We now have an extra \$300,000 to pay off the last bit of that mortgage on the family retreat lodge. If you will sign this authorization I’ll take care of that matter.”

“Fantastic! What a great week this is for our church! Let me borrow your pen,” Pastor Fullerton said, and he signed the authorization.

On Friday, Marty, Ben Jacobs and Ted Fritz went to Mr. Huckleberry’s office. “Hello, Mr. Huckleberry. Here’s my voucher for the \$250,000 for the college building plus an extra \$7,000 for closing costs. The total is \$257,000. Could we have a check by Monday morning? We have a meeting at the bank.”

Mr. Huckleberry’s face turned a little white and he reached for his bottle of water. He took a sip while looking over the voucher. Then he said, “I thought we were going to use the pledges to get the mortgage.”

“Well, since we have the cash, I really don’t see the need to use the pledges. I plan to ask everyone to pay their pledges so we can remodel and furnish the college center.”

Mr. Huckleberry cleared his throat. “We don’t have cash.”

Marty’s mouth drooped. “Sure we do. There was a check, wasn’t there?”

“How would you know that?” asked Huckleberry.

“I just know,” said Marty. “What’s going on here? Are you saying there was no check designated for purchasing the college building?”

“I only know what was reported to me,” said Mr. Huckleberry. “I’m sorry you got bad information.”

Marty looked at Ben and Ted. They seemed grave and suspicious.

“We’ll be in touch,” said Marty to Huckleberry. “Come on Ben and Ted. We have work to do.” They left and went to talk to the pastor.

They found Pastor Fullerton in his office listening to a sermon from John Piper. He turned, paused the streaming audio feed, and offered them a seat. As Marty told Pastor Fullerton the story, starting with the visit from Dennis on Tuesday, the pastor’s face turned serious. “I just signed an authorization in the business office for \$300,000 to pay off the family retreat lodge. I didn’t even ask Huckleberry where the money

came from...I just signed the authorization. This is bad. It's too much of a coincidence with what you've told me. I just hope this is all a bad mistake."

The pastor got up and said come with me.

Marty, Ben and Ted got up and followed Pastor Fullerton back to the business office. While they walked, Marty motioned for Ben and Ted to walk beside the pastor while he called Dennis Adell, the counting committee member. Marty quickly filled him in, and asked if he could come to the business office. Dennis was just leaving his office and said he could be there in ten minutes.

Pastor Fullerton sat down in Huckleberry's office and told Marty and the guys to sit down. The pastor proceeded to question Huckleberry. "I didn't ask you where the extra \$300,000 came from when I signed the authorization. Was this money from the general fund or from a designated check?"

"I'm quite sure it was a surplus from the general fund, pastor," said Huckleberry, wiping sweat off his brow and looking down at his papers. He went through the paper as though he were looking for something. He found the authorization and picked it up, reading it. Then he said, "The money is coming from the general fund."

"Marty says that he was told by Dennis Adell that there was a check for \$300,000 designated to buy and furnish the college center. Do you have knowledge of that check?"

"No, pastor, how could I. You know that I don't count the money and deposit it. All I have to go on is what

the counters and depositors give me.”

“Surely there is a paper trail for us to audit. Who audits it?” asked the pastor.

“Bentley and Barnes Accounting,” answered Huckleberry. “But, if I may make a suggestion pastor, doing an audit is not necessary. All we need to do is go to the bank and get the cancelled check and see what happened.”

At that moment Dennis Adell came into the room. Everyone said hello and Dennis sat. “Is it true that there is no accounting of a \$300,000 check given to the church to buy and furnish the college building?” asked Dennis.

“It’s true,” answered Huckleberry. “We were just saying that we need to go to the bank and see what happened.”

All six men climbed into the church van and Marty drove them to the bank. When they were seated the banker listened to the issue, called an assistant and asked her to retrieve the cancelled check and the information about the account into which it was deposited.

All six men were angered when they saw the cancelled check. The memo line originally had the words “purchase and /or remodel & furn. Coll. ctr.” These words had been scratched out with a pen and above it were written the words “family retreat lodge.” The initials of the person who donated the money had been scribbled beside the change. Yet, something else was

strange, instead of being deposited in the batch going to the designated account it had been deposited in the general fund.

The bank confirmed with the owner of the account on which the altered check was drawn that he had indeed intended it to go to the College center. He also confirmed that he had not altered the check. Pastor Fullerton got on the telephone to apologize to the man who gave the gift and to try to assure this wouldn't happen again.

Dennis Adell and Harry Huckleberry retrieved the name of the person who had actually deposited the weekly church offering. It was the chairman of the offering counting committee, Alice Rodriguez, who usually asked someone else on the committee to do it.

The pastor, Harry Huckleberry, and Dennis Adell discussed what they should do with the bank manager. The bank manager said that if the church didn't press charges and get the local authorities involved that the bank would. This event had already triggered an obligation for the bank to file a stack of incident reports to federal and state officials. The bottom line was that a police officer went with Pastor Fullerton, Dennis Adell, and Harry Huckleberry to confront and arrest Alice Rodriguez. Alice implicated Bill Shultz and Jed Abercrombie. She said that she had called them and they told her what to do.

The story made the front page of the Sarasota newspaper. Gov. Mike Huckabee interviewed Pastor Fullerton and Pastor Marty. Nancy Grace interviewed Alice Rodriguez. When the church realized what a manipulative crowd the leaders of the church

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were, half of the church members left. About 300 people joined Pastor Marty and the college group to start a new church.

Group

Discussion Questions Regarding this Case Study

Write the answers to the following questions listed below after reading the case study entitled “Dirty Politics in Sarasota.”

ONE. What about this story brands it as a story about hardball politics, that is, which of the characteristics of a hardball political church are seen in the church portrayed in the case study?

TWO. The story didn’t portray Marty conferring with the pastor about his idea of buying the building. Did the pastor seem to be in touch with what was happening at the church? How might this fit into the idea of a political church?

THREE. What was your impression of board chairman Jed Abercrombie and his friends, Bill Shultz and Alice Rodriguez?

FOUR. Why do you think so many people didn’t support the family retreat lodge with their contributions while overwhelmingly supporting the College Center?

FIVE. Is your church a hardball political church? Or perhaps a softball political church? Give reasons for your answer.

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SIX. How would you go about getting a
hardball political church back to the New Testament model of a
church?