

BUILDING A PERSONAL SUPPORT NETWORK

Hudson Taylor, facing a seemingly insurmountable array of obstacles strewn across the path of God's calling, affirmed the bottom-line hope of all those who dare to leave all to serve Christ: "God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supply." Hudson Taylor was on his way to China. You are on your way to seminary and to a place of service that the Lord has probably not yet revealed. Yet the challenge is the same for all that follow Christ: to obey in faith and hope with the certainty that where God guides, He also provides.

Like the story above, there are countless tales from the lives of missionaries past and present that testify of God's work being funded in miraculous ways. These courageous men and women pursued the calling of God with abundant faith and seemingly little regard for their own well-being. They trusted God to provide all that is necessary in order to bring the gospel to a lost world. In light of their bold endeavors, attending classes at RTS can seem insignificant or even trivial, yet God has called you to a season of study and devotion which will be influential in your future years. We encourage you to see your time at RTS as God's calling on your life today and not just as preparation for future ministry. Those that see their ministry as beginning in the future miss out on what God is doing in and through them in the present.

Honestly, raising money is not for everyone. If you have found yourself in a place where God has sufficiently provided for your needs, raising additional money for seminary is unnecessary. However, the fact is that the majority of students are stretched to the fringes of their ability to fulfill their commitments to church, family, school, and work. The following is a list of steps that we pray will be helpful as you consider raising support for seminary.

1. PRAY! PRAY! PRAY!

Alfred Lord Tennyson once wrote: "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." He wrote the truth. Without doubt, the greatest and most important resource that God has already made available to you is prayer. Prayer is that privileged means of access that He has given to His children. He has invited you into His presence where you may dare to ask great things of your great God. No effort to discover God's will or means of provision should begin anywhere but with prayer. So, ask God to provide for your daily bread, and ask Him to teach you to be dependent on Him as you seek his provision.

2. LIST YOUR ASSETS

You may be asking, "List my assets? I don't have any assets! That's why I'm scratching my head wondering where the money is going to come from." Even though you may not perceive or value your assets -- and you probably have more than you think -- Jesus said that it is a mark of wisdom to assess your situation and resources before making a significant life decision. You are getting ready to "build a tower," and you need to know how many bricks you have right now as well as how many more bricks you will need to finish the job. (Luke 14:27-32)

- **INDIVIDUAL RESOURCES:** The obvious assets are those related to you personally: the money you have in the bank, the savings you have invested, the employable skills you (and your spouse) have to earn money, the property you own that can be liquidated. All these must be factored into your list of assets.

However, you are not coming to seminary alone. You were not let off at the wrong bus stop; you were not abandoned on the seminary's doorstep; you did not wake up this morning and announce out of the blue, "I think I'll go to seminary!" Your decision to attend seminary is the result of a growing conviction that this is what God wants you to do. You have certainly thought about it, prayed about it, and talked about it with trusted counselors. As a result, there is a significant corporate dimension to this decision. It is vital to recognize that coming to seminary does not disconnect you from your personal history. You bring with you a wealth of personal relationships that the Lord has given you for a reason -- perhaps, "for such a time as this."

- **COMMUNITY & INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT:** Many of our neighborhood institutions take serious interest in helping members of the community make contributions for the good and advancement of the community. Check with some of your local business and community leaders to see if any foundations have been established that help students pursue advanced graduate studies. Some communities may even have a ministerial fund to specifically help students go to seminary. Many national corporations invest in students pursuing graduate studies even when those studies are in an area unrelated to that corporation's immediate business interests.
- **FAMILY SUPPORT:** More than one father has said, "I helped you get through college, but you're on your own for graduate school." It is true that, after putting their children through college, many parents have exhausted their ability to pay for additional education. While your family will likely not be your sole or principle source of financial support, they will probably have a strong desire to help you -- you are, after all, still family. If your family loves Christ, they will want to be a part of what God is doing through them as a family. Remember that you take a part of your family with you into ministry. Faithfully remind your family that in a very real sense they share in the fruit and blessing of God's grace at work through you.

Of course, your family members may not be Christians, in which case their interest in encouraging you may be limited. You should be discerning when seeking or accepting help from unbelieving family members. Do not overlook the opportunity this situation might afford to demonstrate your faith and trust in Christ in a very tangible and effective way.

- **CHURCH SUPPORT:** Few events are more encouraging to a pastor and more fulfilling to a congregation than for God to send out one of the church family into Christian service. Your decision to follow God's call into the ministry enables the local body to reach far beyond its immediate boundaries and participate in God's work through you. Those whom God has not called to go can now send you through their prayers, encouragement, and gifts.

At this point your formal connection with the officers of your church and your denominational boards is most significant. Hopefully, the officers have seen in you the gifts and calling to Christian service, and they have commended you to preparation for that service. Once this commendation has been given, you should formally come under the oversight of your officers to

demonstrate your desire for their guidance as well as your commitment to the Church. It is then appropriate for you to inquire about any financial assistance that the local church or denomination makes available to seminary students. You are asking the officers and congregation to send you out from their company to do the Lord's work. Ask for their blessing, and ask for the spiritual and material support that accompany that blessing.

Be sure to inform your church about the RTS Church Partnership Program, a cooperative relationship between the local church and the seminary that can provide 2/3 of your tuition costs. When a church supports a student for up to 1/3 tuition, RTS will match up to another 1/3 if the student demonstrates financial need.

You may say, "But God hasn't called me to be a pastor or missionary. Why would my church be willing to help me go to seminary?" Church leaders have always valued godly, skilled lay leadership because the work of the Church simply is not complete without Christ's representatives serving effectively in the secular arena. Besides, the Church is constantly encouraging and appreciating diverse and creative approaches to ministry. It is no surprise, then, that more and more of the people coming to seminaries want to teach, to practice law and medicine, to counsel, or to write. Your calling is sacred whether or not God is preparing you for vocational ministry, and Christian leaders increasingly understand the importance of lay leaders who can articulate truth with clarity and wisdom. So, ask for your church's help and support.

- **PERSONAL SUPPORT:** How did God confirm His calling you into the ministry? How did you come to the conclusion that the next chapter of your life will be written in seminary? The answers to these questions often point to people God has used along the way to instruct you, to guide you, to encourage you, to shine a little bit more light upon your path. As a consequence of their influence, you now stand at this exciting doorway of seminary preparation. This extended family has been His means of grace to you. Acknowledge that fact with them, and invite them to join you on the next phase of your journey together. You may discover that they are a tremendous source of God's provision.

Organizations such as Global Service Network (GSN) can help you build a support network, as well as providing the administrative framework for managing support. GSN has been used by RTS students to help fund their time in seminary. Find out more at www.globalservicenetwork.org.

3. COMMUNICATE

Once you have listed those personal relationships that are your important assets, you need to begin a systematic plan of communication. Simply, you need to let people know what is going on in your life. You will have opportunity from time to time to communicate in person, but these situations will probably be too infrequent to rely upon for regular communication. "But I'm an awful letter-writer," you may say. Here are some suggestions that may make your efforts more pleasant and effective.

- **THE PEOPLE:** Remember that you are writing to friends. These are not strangers; they are not names plucked out of the phone book. They are people who are important and close to you. So, write to them as friends and see their faces in your mind and heart as you communicate with them.

- **THE GOAL:** Remember that you are writing your friends to enlist their camaraderie and support. You want them with you through this great adventure known as seminary. Their support will take many forms: some will write encouraging letters, some will send money, some will give gifts, some will visit you, some will connect you with significant people and opportunities, and hopefully all will pray. Do not reduce the idea of support to money, because it is much more than that. You are writing your friends to let them know that their support (of whatever sort) is valuable to you.
- **ASKING VS. INFORMING:** "But I just can't bring myself to ask people to give me money!" Nobody likes to beg or feel like he is banging a tin cup for a handout. Aside from the personal embarrassment it brings, groveling for money does not seem an appropriate way for Christians to behave. However, think for a moment about the people with whom you are corresponding. They are not strangers. They are people you know and people who have an interest in you. They are folks with whom you can be honest and conversational. So, instead of wondering how you are going to make your pitch for help, simply talk to your friends and let them know what is going on in your life.
- **THE STRATEGY:** As with any well-written letter, you should carefully plan what you will say. Filling up several pages with all that fills your life should be no difficulty. However, the challenge is to be selective, to re-tell those details that are important to your purpose and your specific audience. Several topics that your extended family will appreciate hearing about include what you are learning, how God is using you in ministry, how you (and your family) are maturing and growing, what needs you have, how God is using them to provide the sustaining encouragement and support that you need. Be specific -- your friends like to hear details, not generalities, so they know how to specifically pray, encourage, or give. Your correspondence should begin 3-6 months prior to your enrollment and should continue about every 8-10 weeks or at least quarterly. Don't ignore the fact that many people make decisions about their charitable contributions at year's end, so it would be wise to plan a November-December letter. Keep your letters to 1 side of 1 page -- even 1 side of a legal-size page is better than using 2 sides -- so that your readers will be more likely to read your letter as soon as it arrives.
- **THE RESPONSE:** Always, always, always acknowledge every expression of encouragement and gift of support. The grateful heart is a contented heart that reflects the deep understanding that every provision that comes through people ultimately comes from God. Every provision should be recognized by a prompt word of appreciation.

4. LEARN, TRUST, OBEY

The lessons you learn when you trust God for the means by which you can obey His call are some of the most important you will learn in seminary or at any time in your journey. Keep a record, a journal, of the journey -- your prayers, God's provision, the struggles, the joys. Very often it is through financial provision (or lack of which) that the Lord confirms the timing and direction of His call. You will not find a course in economics in the RTS curriculum. You will not take special classes in how to get your prayers answered. You will, however, be faced with the day to day opportunity to walk by faith as you are surrounded by fellow students who face the very same challenges and by faculty and staff who truly understand the cost involved in following Christ.

Know that, as you live by faith, the Lord expects you to be both resourceful and wise. Occasionally (perhaps, even rarely), He may choose to deeply impress His direction upon you in such a way that reason seems thrown to the wind. However, normally, He will give you enough evidence to make a wise decision based on reasonable evidence. Yet, even then, He rarely seems to give us all the information we would like about the decisions that face us -- we always would like to know more, wouldn't we? We desperately want to know how it will all work out. So, we are faced with the challenge to make wise decisions with the information He is pleased to give us. In so doing, He brings us back to basic trust in Him as we respond faithfully to His call. As a result, we go anywhere He leads simply because He leads. He is a great God who is worthy of our full and unwavering trust!

"Attempt great things for God. Expect great things of God." -- Jim Elliot