

# Great Ideas

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1. Rebrand your “Annual Fund” and call it something like the “Seminary Fund.” Many institutions are shifting the focus of their annual fund from being a black hole fund to being about the mission of the organization, so how about renaming your annual fund or operating fund the “Seminary Fund?”

—Gary Hoag, *Generosity Monk*

2. Ask trustees to give just six minutes of their time. Getting your board members on board can be tough because they get intimidated about making commitments to things like committees. Consider dispelling that fog by letting them know that during the course of a year, you will probably only ask for six minutes of their time, such as setting up a lunch for the president to meet a prospect, sponsoring a foursome for the golf tournament, attending a special lecture on campus and bringing a friend, being at board meetings, etc.

—Gary Hoag, *Generosity Monk*

3. Be generous sharing praise and appreciation with colleagues. —Wes Brown, *Duke University Divinity School*

4. Stay near, clear, and dear to your donors. Keep the relationships close and don't stop presenting your programs, but also be sure to listen with empathy, understanding where they are coming from and the challenges they are facing. I am finding that we must not stop asking; they still want to be involved, and many are stepping up to give at higher levels to help with shortfalls. —Kim Till, *Dallas Theological Seminary*

5. Invite key donors to “adopt a student” as a giving option within the annual fund. Ask them to cover the student's annual tuition, have lunch with the student's family, pray with them, and encourage them in their pursuit of ministry.

—Dave Wicker, *Covenant Theological Seminary*

6. Prayerfully acknowledge that God will provide for our needs, though we are not able to see just how that will be fully accomplished at this moment. —Lyn Perez, *Reformed Theological Seminary*

7. Continue to support the friends who support us no matter what their circumstances, praying for their needs and communicating to them the accomplishments of our alumni and the opportunities before our ministry.

—Lyn Perez, *Reformed Theological Seminary*

8. Regularly report to all our constituents how God is working among us, our students, and our alumni and how we are winning people to Christ—building strong and healthy churches and ministries. In challenging times such as these, there are tremendous opportunities to reach people for Christ!

—Lyn Perez, *Reformed Theological Seminary*

9. We have been sending a summer stewardship letter to all of our benefactors for the past two years. It is *not* a gift

appeal—no gift form or reply envelope is enclosed. It is simply a one page letter from the rector thanking them for their prayers, encouragement, and financial support. We get hundreds of notes back thanking us for what we are doing (and some checks). This is tremendous for building goodwill with donors. The response rates to our regular appeals have increased dramatically. —Dave Kelley, *Sacred Heart Major Seminary*

10. We have looked at the mailing list of our magazine with a view toward removing names of alumni/friends who have not been in contact with us. To friends/alumni who have not contributed we tell them, by letter enclosed with an issue of the magazine, that we are happy to continue sending them the magazine free of charge, but they must reply back and let us know they wish to continue receiving the magazine. We get a high rate of return on this, and many first time contributions. We send this letter twice before we take non-responders off our mailing list. This has allowed us to cut back our distribution so we are only delivering to friends/alumni who want to stay actively involved (saving printing and postage costs); we have converted many to annual fund donors. —Dave Kelley, *Sacred Heart Major Seminary*

11. We have included a “Give a Subscription” card in our magazine, inviting readers to send us the names of their friends and relatives who might like a free copy for themselves. We received names and addresses of 140 new “subscribers” with our last issue who now become prospects for annual fund appeals. —Dave Kelley, *Sacred Heart Major Seminary*

12. Major benefactors in older age brackets have seen dramatic declines in their portfolios and are worried about outliving their assets during this economic recession. This is the best time to visit with them about the legacy they want to leave and to encourage them to consider planned gifts. We have aggressively pursued this and, in the past year, we have increased membership in our Legacy Society by 56 percent and tripled the number of Charitable Gift Annuity contracts. —Dave Kelley, *Sacred Heart Major Seminary*

13. One of the things I've observed is that our board members and other key volunteers like to be well-equipped to communicate key messages to those they come in contact with, but often feel at a loss as to know exactly what to say. I've started preparing for each board meeting a small card with three to four current and strategic “talking points” about the seminary; I'm going to start laminating them so they can be stored in a wallet. The card would include the seminary's mission statement on one side and then bullet points such as: “Luther Seminary is a leader in preparing free, online resources for pastors and laypeople” and “www.enterthebible.com is a first-rate online resource featuring video, artwork, commentary, history, and interpretation of the entire Bible” and “Enrollment at Luther Seminary is 814 with

# Great Ideas (continued)

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an increase of 5% in MA and MDiv students,” among others. Telling the story well is more important than ever, and we need to do a better job of equipping our volunteers to help with this. —*Kathy Hansen, Luther Seminary*

14. Communicate honestly. Lexington Theological Seminary, like many theological schools and other non-profits, experienced a financial crisis at the time of the global economic collapse. The Board of Trustees was convened in early January to literally address the survival of the school; twenty-one resolutions were adopted as a plan for moving forward. A letter from the president was immediately sent to all donors and alumni describing the crisis and offering the steps outlined by the board for actions to be taken. The letter closed with an invitation to give generously to the annual fund. —*Sonny Wray, Lexington Theological Seminary*

15. Communicate often. Approximately thirty focus groups will be held during the next three months in congregations and with alumni groups, along with face-to-face meetings with judicatory executives. —*Sonny Wray, Lexington Theological Seminary*

16. Communicate broadly. The semi-annual alumni council meeting was dedicated to sharing timely information with council. A follow-up letter on the progress of actions being taken was sent to donors and alumni in late May with another plea to support the annual fund before the close of the fiscal year July 31. The annual fund received the highest dollar amount on record, with a 46 percent increase during the previous year. —*Sonny Wray, Lexington Theological Seminary*

17. Take time at regular intervals to get a perspective on your work. —*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*

18. We invite our students who are scholarship recipients to a thank you party, scheduled at three different times early in the semester and made more attractive with free pizza, where we provide note paper and sample texts for each student to write thank you notes to several different donors including their patron. Younger students do not always care for this on their own (some have never written thank you notes!), but the captive audience and group spirit make it fun and effective. Donors are deeply impressed and grateful to hear from students, and it is yet another reminder of the continuing positive impact of thoughtful gifts. —*Wes Brown, Duke University Divinity School*

19. Seek names of individuals from former parishes rather than their current church community when talking with graduates about donor prospects who might consider supporting theological education. They are much more inclined to share names, contact information, and occasionally even make introductions. —*Wes Brown, Duke University Divinity School*

20. Encourage long-time donors to “endow” their annual gift so they will continue to make an annual contribution in perpetuity; show them the size of the endowment gift they would need to make in order to do that. —*John Puotinen, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*

21. Share a “scorecard” with board members showing the activities and the progress that is measured in the development program such as alumni participation in annual giving; number of trustees with a planned gift arrangement; total visits by staff during the fiscal year; etc. —*John Puotinen, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*

22. Use a matching gift challenge for multi-year pledges. —*Keith Christensen, Luther College*

23. Call donors on the anniversary of their last gift to thank them and seek new support. —*Keith Christensen, Luther College*

24. Send an annual report to donors of endowed funds, showing the benefits distributed from their specific fund as well as the growth or decline of the fund. They will appreciate the information and the transparency. —*John Puotinen, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*

25. We have always had trouble getting our Board of Trustees and our Advisory Board involved in fundraising or even “friend-raising” for the college. We decided to ask all of the members of these two boards this year to buy a table at the President’s Dinner and to bring their friends. It was easy for them to invite a friend or ministry partner to attend the dinner as their guest, and they didn’t have to ask for money. We tripled our attendance at this event doing it this way, and the board members actually got excited about it and are ready and willing for next year’s event. —*Patricia A. Webb, McMaster Divinity College*

26. Getting major gifts is difficult sometimes because our donor constituency is older and have been faithful in the smaller donations over many years. Because we wanted to do some major renovations to our classrooms as well as install some state-of-the-art teaching technology, this year we involved several of our larger capacity donors—particularly one who was a builder by trade. It was a lot more work in some ways, but his expertise saved us some glitches while the project was unfolding and recommitted him for next year’s renovation project for another major gift. —*Patricia A. Webb, McMaster Divinity College*

27. Hosting “Continuing Education Unit” events for all our counseling graduates has led to new alumni/ae donors. —*Leroy A. Solomon, Ashland Theological Seminary*

# Great Ideas (continued)

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28. We hold “Women in Dialogue” events, inviting area professional women to our campus to hear a Christian woman speaker.—*Leroy A. Solomon, Ashland Theological Seminary*
29. Host geographic area lunch or dinner events for current donors and alumni/ae, highlighting what is happening at the seminary.—*Leroy A. Solomon, Ashland Theological Seminary*
30. Challenge trustees to give toward a particular dollar goal collectively each year, with each trustee being assigned to one of the seminary’s development team.  
—*Leroy A. Solomon, Ashland Theological Seminary*
31. Have a student share his or her testimony and experience at the seminary during any event or trustee meeting.  
—*Leroy A. Solomon, Ashland Theological Seminary*
32. There is no substitute for personal, face to face, passionate invitations to support. Focus on impact before dollar needs and vision, rather than financial goals, when making the case.—*Tom Ryan, Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity*
33. Host an annual Sunday service (Mass) for all benefactors regardless of gift amount, followed by brunch with students/seminarians.—*Tom Ryan, Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity*
34. Host an annual or semi-annual day of reflection or weekend retreat for benefactors and their family and friends—no pitch and no cost.—*Tom Ryan, Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity*
35. Invite benefactors to sponsor a student and, for those who do, pair them with a student to whom they can send two notes during the school year, letting them know they are praying for them.—*Tom Ryan, Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity*
36. Recognize outgoing board members with an annual reception or dinner after the board meeting and give them a unique gift (e.g., framed artist’s drawing of chapel) that can only be given to board of trustees.—*Tom Ryan, Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity*
37. We have focused our other donor efforts on creating programs that connect with our history and the things people are interested in—missions, students. For instance, they have created programs in Burma (Myanmar).—*John W. Grasley, Central Baptist Theological Seminary*
38. We have created messaging components that answer everyone’s primary question during a time of economic trouble. Is your institution viable and unique with a strong vision for the future? Consistent messaging tone and content answer that question. It has been successful in combating the concern many donors have regarding an institution’s financial stability.—*Greg Henson, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary*
39. I try to include a handwritten note when I thank donors, focusing on a spiritual character trait rather than the donation: “Thank you for your generosity, faithfulness, ministry partnership, etc.” My role is to shepherd the donor into greater Christlikeness rather than simply thank them for the donation. The Lord will raise up future donations from the donor’s spiritual character.—*Steve Prieb, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary*
40. Don’t forget former board members! We have an annual event specifically for the former board members with the president rector giving an update on the seminary and creating an opportunity for them to hear first-hand from the seminarians. They really appreciate the continued connection, and there is never an ask for money at the event!  
—*Betty Visconage, St. Mary’s Seminary and University*
41. Develop a set of dashboard indicators that help you understand your progress toward goals and allow you to clearly present the state of your work to the board.  
—*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*
42. Coordinate with admissions and recruitment offices to cover alumni, church events, and brochure production.  
—*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*
43. Don’t forget your local Chamber of Commerce for networking.—*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*
45. Get out of the office!!—*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*
46. Set specific goals of churches and donors to visit each week and work with your team to be accountable.  
—*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*
47. Take the vacation you earn—rest allows inspiration to rise to the surface.—*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*
48. Be specific in your appeal letter about what a certain dollar amount will “buy.”—*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*
49. Install an “Honorary Walkway” and sell bricks that can be engraved with an alum’s name and year of graduation, or the name of a church or pastor, or the name of a professor or staff member. (We have one from our controller that says “Michael \*\*\*, 40 years”)—*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*

# Great Ideas (continued)

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50. Remember (and cherish) the pastoral side of development. —*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*
51. Maintain good communications with your CFO—be sure you are speaking the same language and understanding the same numbers. —*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*
52. Learn something new each week about finance, theological schools, church organization, theology, etc. —*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*
53. Appreciate your team, your donors, your school community, your call. —*Priscilla C. Deck, Andover Newton Theological School*
54. “Reach out to past supporters of students...” We have a scholarship program that allows churches to officially partner with a student to provide tuition assistance. Once that student graduates, however, the church usually stops giving. We have created a program that brings past “partner” churches into a new relationship with our seminary. —*Greg Henson, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary*
55. Keep learning. We often find ourselves focusing so much on fixing the problems, when times get tough, that we fail to remember the importance of professional and personal development. Don’t forget to hone current skills, develop new ones, and enrich your personal development. —*Greg Henson, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary*
56. Create a donor experience. We often lose donors because they have not felt connected to the seminary or because they had no sense of belonging. Schools spend a lot of time developing a brand for enrollment. Does your brand, your experience, your sense of belonging extend to your donors? —*Greg Henson, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary*
57. Discuss the impact of economic forces upon the mission of your organization in clear, non-technical terms. Don’t dodge the reality of any negative results, and avoid the temptation to engage in short-term thinking and knee-jerk solutions. —*John Puotinen, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*
58. Contract for the services of an ethical, values-based estate planning expert to meet confidentially with your best donors at no charge to them. Offer donors the opportunity to sort through legacy questions as a service of your organization to its best friends. The likelihood is that donors will recognize the value of this service and find more effective ways to reach their goals for family and charitable beneficiaries, including your organization. —*John Puotinen, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*
59. Ask charitable gift annuity donors to consider, temporarily, gifting their annual annuity payout for unrestricted uses for the next year. —*John Puotinen, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*
60. Experiment with sending planned gift marketing materials to a younger audience than is typically identified. Some organizations report that people are planning for future gifts in their thirties and forties in order to protect their families and make a greater impact with their giving. —*John Puotinen, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*
61. Allocate a percentage of matured planned gifts whenever possible, such as ten percent, for unrestricted purposes to address current priorities. This may also be seen as a way to recapture some of the costs associated with the planned giving program that are often part of the operating budget. —*John Puotinen, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*
62. Develop the mind-set of consistently showing donors the effectiveness of what the organization accomplishes with their contributions. This can be as important as “the ask,” though it sometimes feels that securing the gift is the end of the process. —*John Puotinen, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*
63. Create an “Institutional Story Book” in the development office to record those stories told by donors that express the mission and the impact of the organization in human terms. Development officers can use the book for inspiration for themselves and for the potential donors they meet. —*John Puotinen, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*
64. Develop an ongoing list of “Great Questions” that development officers can use in conversations with donors. Questions can do much to focus the conversation on the interests of the donor. We need to listen more than we speak. —*John Puotinen, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*
65. Outsource, delegate, and share resources where possible. If you’re not already using a print broker, for instance, he or she can save tremendous amounts of time and money, especially if one broker is shared throughout the school. Consider whether doing something yourself really *is* cheaper if it is distracting you from time with your donors—that could cost far more in the long run. —*Jami Moss Wise, Duke University Divinity School*
66. Take advantage of free technology—email, Facebook, LinkedIn—to communicate with your donors, especially younger ones. Even a simple text-only message with a link to your Web site costs very little and can convey to constituents that you are thinking about them and need their support. —*Jami Moss Wise, Duke University Divinity School*

# Great Ideas (continued)

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67. Thank, thank, thank, especially now!—*Jami Moss Wise, Duke University Divinity School*

68. A “cultivating party” is an event hosted by an individual or couple in their home or in a country club type setting. A guest speaker will be invited to talk about the successes of the seminary, programs, degrees offered, and, most importantly, the students. The guests in attendance will be educated, informed, and encouraged on how they can participate in philanthropic ways to benefit the seminary.—*Steven Robinson, Saint Paul School of Theology*

69. Having trouble getting appointments with the big hitters? Jot them a note telling them you will be calling and, in the note, tell them why. The major players don’t have time for fiddle-faddle so give them the facts—tell them you have a big project and you need their help and then tell them you’ll be calling to arrange the time and place. Then follow up—you’ll like the results.—*Joel S. Wudel, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary*

70. Present events that spotlight your faculty. They increase awareness of your presence in the community and give people a chance to get to know you.—*Dawn West, Ashland Theological Seminary, Mauritz “Moe” Erhard, Atlantic School of Theology*

71. Upgrade and expand your donor database, which can result in more donors and more gifts.—*Mauritz “Moe” Erhard, Atlantic School of Theology*

72. Turn your magazine into a quasi-journal of cutting edge theology and vital issues facing the church by faculty and alumni. It sends a message of quality work being done at the school.—*Mauritz “Moe” Erhard, Atlantic School of Theology*

73. Reorganize the alumni association and enable it to conduct continuing education events throughout your catchment area. This can result in disinterested alumni reconnecting with the school.—*Mauritz “Moe” Erhard, Atlantic School of Theology*

74. Establish an art gallery and a sacred music concert series that brings new people from the community on the campus.—*Mauritz “Moe” Erhard, Atlantic School of Theology*

75. Our seminary has been tracking donor’s gifts with a software to key in on when a donor does or doesn’t give for our direct mail appeals. By doing this, we are able to downsize our mail appeals to be more cost effective. We are also able to track by the mailings what appeals to the donor for their gifts as well. We used this during our Christmas mailing breaking down into three groups, which generated an increase in donors giving to us.—*Rad Finch, Concordia Theological Seminary*

76. Include updates on campus expansions and direct them to your Web site to view ongoing construction when receipting donors. We just started to do this, but we expect additional gifts in support of our library expansion.—*Rad Finch, Concordia Theological Seminary*

77. We had our first ever Thank-A-Thon at Evangelical Theological Seminary. Every donor who gave \$100 or more to the seminary in the previous fiscal year received a call that included a brief update on seminary news and a THANK YOU! The Alumni Council members called alums in this category and the trustees called the others. Many of the callers reported that the donors appreciated the call *and* were quite pleasantly surprised that the *real* purpose was to say thank you.—*Ann E. Steel, Evangelical Theological Seminary*

*Submitted by industry peers, these Great Ideas have been implemented by development officers at ATS member schools, resulting in success despite these challenging economic times. Many thanks go to the contributors.*

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