

Marketing firm focuses on vocation directors' primary needs

By Susan Gibson



Phil Labadie

When Phil Labadie read that there are 5,640 seminarians studying for the priesthood today in the United States, compared to 49,000 in 1965, it was an eye opener to say the least.

He talked to numerous people who are knowledgeable about current vocation issues and became more and more convinced that the U.S. Church will face an even greater shortage as priests from the Baby Boom generation retire or die. That insight set in motion a change of direction for his Lincoln, Neb.-based marketing firm, Labadie Communications.

"They talk about the Baby Boomer generation hitting social security hard; I think the looming priest shortage will hit the U.S. Catholic church even harder," said Labadie. "I knew we could help vocation directors, but we needed to know what the main issues were."

Phil first talked to former NCDVD Executive Director, Steven Covington, and a number of vocation directors across the country. Two common issues surfaced from those conversations: the need for added personnel and financial resources. Those are problems that effective marketing can help solve.

He recruited a mentor from his past, Mike Browne, who is now a partner in the firm. Mike had built a very successful database marketing firm in the 1990s and sold it in 2000. Since that time he has invested in start-up technology companies. When Phil brought his idea to Mike, the timing was right because he had just exited a start-up.

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Another tacit partner for the firm is Fr. Robert Matya, vocation director for the Diocese of Lincoln, which has a Catholic population of approximately 80,000. Labadie noted that Fr. Matya has a gifted mind for marketing, he knows the issues vocations directors face and is constantly pushing him for new and innovative approaches. He has worked with Fr. Matya and the Office of Vocations for 12 years in developing and improving its seminarian education appeal. The funds raised from the faithful in the diocese offset seminarian education costs.

Prior to beginning this direct marketing program, the Lincoln diocese held a second collection once a year to raise the seminarian funds. Today, the Seminarian Education Annual Appeal raises 12 times what the second collection used to raise, and covers 90% of the costs of over forty seminarians.

Labadie Communications is now working with other Catholic organizations and has recently expanded to working with seminaries as well. Other natural allies for Labadie Communications' mission are Serra International and the Serra USA Council. Phil found the local Serra Clubs at the NCDVD convention in Minneapolis to be very excited about what Labadie was doing. One who was very encouraging was current District 7 governor, Bob Labat of Minnetonka, Minn.

"Labadie Communication's marketing program that generates Office of Vocation partners in every parish in a diocese is very exciting. Not only does this activate laity on a parish-by-parish basis in assisting the Office of Vocations, but it creates a tremendous list of potential new Serrans," stated Labat.

Labadie offers two programs for vocations offices. The first seeks laity in every parish that have a heart for priestly vocations and agree to become the point group that help coordinate and publicize vocation events, as well as encourage individual vocations. Labadie calls this the new millennium army of workers for vocations. The second program is the Seminarian Education Annual Appeal that raises funds to offset diocesan education costs for their seminarians.

"Both of these programs are very strategic and incorporate much more than direct mail. We are working very hard to make them available and affordable to every diocese and archdiocese," said Labadie.

If you would like more information, contact Phil Labadie or Mike Browne at 1-800-245-1281 or info@labcom.com.

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