How to Raise Money for Your Community Projects

A congregation’s community project often starts with someone’s idea or dream, followed by a plan designed by a core team, and then, a group of volunteers willing to roll up their sleeves and get to work. Yet how can this worthy work be sustained over time? Whether the project involves food, clothing, or housing assistance; counseling and job training; or organizing residents around an issue of local importance like the need for a community garden or more stop signs, at some point the program might require funding in order to continue.

Plan for Sustainability

In order to raise money effectively, leaders must develop a plan for future spending, that is, a budget. Some leaders prefer to build long-range planning into their thinking at the outset. The Reverend Constance Delzell, Rector at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in Denver, decided to factor the necessity for funding into her dream of a children’s ministry for the community. She describes waking from a dream, which she believes was divinely inspired, telling her that now was the time to take action on her wish to start an arts ministry.

Based on this vision, she founded the Children’s Center for Arts and Learning, a neighborhood ministry serving a low-income community in the city of Denver. From the beginning, she began developing a plan for sustainability. She thinks that many congregations often make a mistake by failing to plan for their project’s financial future. Because St. Andrew’s was small with few resources, she approached members of previous churches she had served whom she thought might be interested and who had financial means. Then a personal friend provided $10,000 in seed money over three years. At this point, she took some of the total received to hire a secretary and part-time grant writer. Thinking strategically helped the program move from vision to funding.

Beyond Grants

As this example illustrates, individual giving plays an important role in fundraising efforts. In fact, a vast majority of funding for nonprofits originates from individuals, not foundations. In 2017, foundations provided only about 15% of all donations to U.S. nonprofits, while 72% originated with individuals. With this in mind, leaders can keep their eyes on the prize by reaching out to both close ties and community members, letting foundations take a secondary role. Basing a budget strategy on individual gifts provides more stability than funding from foundations, whose priorities tend to change every few years.

Joy Skjegstad, who advises churches on their community ministry programs, suggests starting with church members who already have the strongest connection with the project, including volunteers currently working in the program or previous volunteers. Meet with potential donors face to face and ask for a specific amount, following up with written materials (no more...
A Miracle Sunday campaign typically lasts about twelve weeks and takes place in the spring so as not to interfere with the fall stewardship campaign. The planning team sends four mailings spread over several weeks, holds two informational meetings, and makes a series of worship service announcements. No home visits are required. The goal for the Miracle Sunday is a single offering that exceeds anything the church has given before (hence the name, “Miracle Sunday”).

To make it most effective, set an ambitious goal, usually at least one-third of the church’s annual budget. Herb Miller states, “Miracle Sunday has raised an amount equal to between one-third and three times the size of the church’s annual operating budget in countless congregations across the United States.” He observes that congregations that experienced a budget shortfall in the previous year are surprised at the success of their Miracle Sunday campaign the following year, which may be due to the fact that contributions come from accumulated resources and may even represent a once-in-a-lifetime gift. For that reason, Miracle Sunday should not be relied on as a yearly event, but used sparingly.

Providing funds can help community engagement work grow and thrive. When projects reach a certain size, fundraising may provide an answer to previously insurmountable challenges such as maintaining volunteer involvement, acquiring needed equipment, or ensuring enough space to make it all work. While funding should never be considered an end in itself, it can help keep the lights on, the bills paid, and the program thriving. Funding just might be the key to future success.

Do you have stories or comments to share about your church’s experience with Herb Miller’s Miracle Sunday? Please email them to info@theparishpaper.com.