



# DIMENSIONS

A Publication of the National Catholic Development Conference | July 2010

## Engaging Lay Volunteers in the Ministry of Fundraising

By Leslie Biggins-Mollsen

The idea of incorporating lay women and men into the Catholic Church has long been discussed and in many places, practiced. But last spring, when Pope Benedict XVI encouraged lay leadership throughout the Catholic world, a concept quickly rose to the forefront. Catholic organizations of all types began exploring how to weave lay volunteers into a myriad of roles.

As Catholic organizations across the board promote fundraising as a ministry, the need for lay leadership has increased. Many organizations have long relied on volunteers to sustain their missions, but volunteer boards, development committees and advisory councils are now emerging concepts. It is as innovative as it is necessary to take these leadership roles one step further and involve lay persons in major gift fundraising.

It is important to recognize that bringing lay leaders into a Catholic organization can often be a significant culture shock, especially given the modesty and humility of the women and men religious in advancing their missions. However, it is possible to create a symbiotic relationship between lay leaders and an organiza-

tion that preserves mission while bolstering major gift philanthropy. In fact, it is not only possible but it is also essential if Catholic organizations hope to advance their development efforts in the next decade.

While direct mail and special events continue to generate funding, a true ministry of fundraising depends on personal relationships. And a truly sustainable culture of philanthropy depends on major gift fundraising—an effort that cannot succeed without lay leadership. Everyone in development knows that people give to people. The key is to recruit the right lay people to broaden organizational reach and expand philanthropic expectations and outcomes.

How does an organization recruit the right lay leaders to volunteer roles?

To start, let's look at the simple raw numbers. Last year, 63.4 million people (26.8 percent of the population) performed unpaid work for non-profit organizations, at an average of 50 hours per person per year. Among those people, 34 percent gave their time and talent specifically to religious organizations. Further, 7.7 percent of the volunteer time was devoted to professional service like board or committee membership. (*Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 26, 2010*)

So how do organizations take their efforts to the next level and engage lay leaders in major gift fundraising? **They ask.** Over 40 percent of those who volunteered their time last year were asked by their main organizations. It is often that organizations forget that a simple "request" can lead to a remarkable and meaningful relationship.

An organization seeks volunteers capable of filling leadership roles—board members, committee members, advisory council members—so well-defined recruitment criteria are critical. An ideal lay volunteer will be someone who:

- is dedicated and committed to the organization;
- has influence, affluence and name recognition;

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How can you effectively lead others in your mission?

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- is well-respected within the community and by peers; and
- leads by example both in giving and getting major gifts for an organization.

Beyond the criteria that one could apply to any organization, a lay leader's heart must be with God and his/her actions must be in the true spirit of ministry. As Pope Benedict XVI expressed in last year's "Church Membership and Pastoral Co-Responsibility" conference:

"The Church, therefore, is not the result of a sum of individuals, but a unity among those who are nourished by the Word of God and the Bread of Life" and the Church "grows and develops," he affirmed. "The future of Christianity and the Church of Rome is also the commitment and the testimony of each one of us." (*Catholic Online, May 2009*)

Stressing the Pontiff's references to commitment and testimony is certainly a persuasive recruitment tool. Where to recruit, however, varies with the type of organization. Some ways to search for prospective lay leaders that bridge organizational type include:

- examining donor lists to identify existing relationships that meet leadership criteria;
- exploring the community's leaders and if they have a Catholic affiliation;
- speaking to the women and men religious on the "front lines" to identify relationships that could be possible prospects;
- expanding organizational borders—looking beyond the confines of bricks and mortar and following mission and service to identify prospective leaders on a national or international level;
- considering staff relationships—spouses, families and other outside interests connect staff to a host of

prospective leaders; and

- remembering to consider women for these positions, as nearly 58 percent of all volunteers are women.

When the right lay leaders have committed to volunteer, it is time to engage them in your fundraising ministry, specifically in securing major gifts for the organization. The first step will be indoctrinating volunteers into your culture. Knowledge is, indeed, power. A well-informed volunteer is a passionate, articulate spokesperson for an organization and its mission. Tours, missionary visits, onsite retreats, visits with those benefiting from an organization's mission—from a high school student to a homeless woman—all of these will help a volunteer connect with the organizational mission.

The next step in the process may be Fundraising 101, depending on the individual. Lay volunteers, depending on organizational expectations and past fundraising experiences, need to understand the basics

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of fundraising and the role they will play in an organization's philanthropic development. Some expectations may include:

- introducing the organization to new prospective donors;
- soliciting peers for major gifts;
- accompanying the right organizational leaders on cultivation and solicitation calls;
- hosting small peer events to introduce an organization;
- recruiting peers to leadership positions; and/or
- representing an organization at community events.

In order for lay volunteers to be successful in fulfilling their roles, they must first be comfortable with those roles. Board retreats, leadership training and participating in NCDC or

other professional development opportunities will help new and existing volunteers understand and embrace fundraising. To be successful, they must feel confident in their abilities to succeed.

In the ministry of fundraising, lay leaders, like all volunteers, must feel engaged and appreciated. They must know that they are partners in an organization's philanthropic endeavors. Likewise, the organization needs to hold its lay leaders accountable in fulfilling their fundraising responsibilities. Clearly defined expectations should be a part of conversations with prospective volunteers very early in the relationship.

If a lay leader is not meeting an organization's expectations, it is very likely that the organization is not meeting that individual's expectations either. Just as an organization would outline a strategy for each major

gift donor, the organization should consider a strategy for each of its key lay leaders. Each volunteer will have his or her own needs and motivations for committing to an organization. A volunteer at the leadership level is worthy of personalized cultivation. Not only is this person expected to be (and should be) a major gift donor, but a happy, fulfilled lay leader will help an organization develop new relationships that will lead to more major gifts. This is a cycle that, if nurtured properly and in God's spirit, will bear much fruit and ensure long-term, sustainable philanthropy.

■ NCDC

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