

LESSONS LEARNED

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By James Collins

The parish council elected me chairperson of the finance committee in 1978. The budget expenses were out running the weekly collections. The parish committee decided that they would have to initiate a parish request that the member the families increase their weekly donations. They felt that the goal for the donation should be the pay associated with one hour's work during the week. After numerous meetings, they decided that they would request an 'Hour of Giving' and that as chair of the finance committee it was my job to manage and control it.

Initially I had to request volunteers to assist in passing our message to all the members of the parish. I started on this by getting a list of the parish members who used the envelope system from the rectory with recommendations from the parish committee as to those people who most likely would respond as volunteers. We had 1200 families in the parish and a couple of weeks in which to contact everyone. We estimated we needed minimum of 40 volunteers and preferably 50 so we can have a smooth transition and meet our goals.

The volunteer work consisted of making telephone calls from their home to the other parishioners informing them of the need of the parish and helping to answer questions. We planned to do training for the volunteers and informed them of that. I made up a document for a telephone introduction, which identified me, the parish and the main purpose of the call. I also had notes so I could respond to the general questions about the budget the size of the parish and the percentage of families that were using the envelopes. I structured the notes so that my conversation covered everything and that I would convey the request with a minimum amount of time. I had to keep it interesting so that people would not hang up.

Over the next week, I contacted a little over 100 families asking for volunteers. I also requested that if they knew another parishioner who would be interested that they contact them and bring them along to the meeting, which was scheduled a week later. At the volunteers meeting, I was very pleased to see that approximately 65 parishioners attended.

After we brought the meeting to order, I immediately thanked them all for their attendance, for volunteering and for helping the parish. I asked them if they had any thoughts or comments on the matter and opened the floor for responses. I got an education. A well-dressed woman in her 50s raised her hand to take the floor. I acknowledged her and she began to speak,

"Mr. Collins I want to tell you that the only reason I am here is because when I answered the phone you immediately began to speak to me and explain who you were and

that you are from the parish and that you needed help. Normally if I answer the phone and a man is at the other end, he asks to speak to my husband. If you had done that, you would have received no help whatsoever. My husband does not go to church and he does not volunteer for anything. If my husband transferred the call back to me, I would have ignored you. The fact that you spoke directly to me, a woman, and asked me for help made all the difference. That's why I'm here and I am willing to do whatever you need to help with this project."

Another man in the back was waving frantically to get the floor. First, I thanked the woman for her comments and welcomed her and then I turned to the man and asked him if he wanted to speak. He stood up and said,

" Definitely. You called me and spoke to me directly in the same way as you spoke to the previous woman. I am not from this parish; in fact, I'm not a Catholic. My wife is, but at the time of your call, she was out shopping. I am an Episcopalian and I'm always willing to help a good cause. Nobody from this parish ever called before and asked me to help. You assumed I was from the parish and asked for help. My wife is sitting right here beside me and the two of us have come to assist."

A couple of volunteers indicated that they felt they might be uneasy asking people to increase their donations. I told them we would give them a detailed written presentation that they could present to these people over the telephone. We learn from the two people at our first meeting that you want to speak directly to the first person who answers the phone. The family members know who is the person involved with the parish. If you make an assumption, and you are wrong, you can upset someone's feelings. A family member reached by phone knows if they are the one from the parish or if their spouse is the person interested. We also sensitized the volunteers to the fact that some of the people they would be calling are the people who need help. The volunteers themselves are all contributors and it was important for them to understand that the people we were calling, in some cases, were financially hurting. We asked them to listen carefully and make notes especially if their response indicated they needed help themselves.

The drive worked fantastically. In a few weeks, we met all our goals and identified a dozen families that we could assist. We had weekly meetings with the volunteers and they all agreed it was a very pleasant, emotional, experience. One response, that is memorable, was from a truck driver who initially was very reluctant to talk to people on the phone. He spent most of his time driving a truck cross-country and had little interaction with people on a regular basis. He went through training and we had volunteers act as the new contact on the phone. He relaxed after the few interchanges. After three real calls, he discarded the instructions, and used his own informal presentation method, which was quite successful. In fact, he came back requesting an additional list of people to contact because he was enjoying the process.

The archdiocese of New Hampshire was so impressed by the process that the pastor and myself were drafted to go around to dozens of parishes all over New Hampshire and give formal presentations on the process, the training, the notes, and the methodology. Overall, it was an uplifting experience.

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