

Reflections on starting a church-based non-profit organization.

I recall several years ago the Episcopal Church announced its 20-20 plan for church growth. One of the respondents to that challenge suggested that we seek to draw the Hispanic immigrants into the church as a way to accomplish that goal. As a Vicar of a congregation that was 70% recent immigrant, I gasped in dismay.

Why such a reaction?

Often, immigrants arrive here in the United States after fleeing hardships born in their mother country. Their motivation is important to understand. Culturally, the environment they have left is significantly different than the new one they are embracing. The transition for many is very difficult. To sooth the transition many immigrants are searching for the recovery of something that has been lost – namely, a familiar culture of traditions and norms for living. Though well intentioned, a vision of inclusion that grows out of seeking to increase numbers in the pews misses this important motivation of the people we are seeking to attract. And most importantly neither the host congregation nor the invitees are prepared for that undertaking. Understandably the congregation is seeking to expand its reach into the community, but not necessarily at the expense of loosing elements of its identity in the process. The act of inviting others into the congregation is an act of opening itself to change. And, as with many pastoral relationships, preparation is an essential component of healthy change.

Non-profit enterprises are somewhat like a congregation seeking to host a new constituency in a community. Without sufficient preparation good intentions can lead to costly and unnecessary conflict and confusion.

The unhealthy aspects of a congregation's culture will remain long after the decision to pursue the new venture has been adopted. Those unhealthy dynamics need to be addressed and resolved so that interaction between the existing congregation and the new non-profit can develop to their fullest potential without risk of sabotage. The needs of the community may not be a good fit for the gifts of the congregation. Its important to remember that non-profit organizations exist to fill a need of the community not for the sake of fulfilling the need of their agency. If overlooked, this important point may result in the community's unmet needs remaining unmet, while a congregation continues to focus on its perceptions of a need that doesn't exist.

In today's very competitive and refined world of non-profits neither funding partners nor volunteers are likely to support an organization that is not positioned to respond to a recognized need. While great potential for church-based non-profits exists that can strengthen a congregation, as the Alban Institute article clearly suggests, the critical factor of success is the link between the need of the local community to be served and the capacity of the congregation to respond to that need. Every effort made to collaborate with other local programs will strengthen that link. How a congregation organizes itself to fulfill that collaboration begins by how it collaborates as a congregation in the community.

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