

July 7, 2011
Vol. 2, Issue 6

In this issue:

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The Benefits of a Diocesan-Wide Capital Stewardship Campaign

By Paul Votaw

The benefits of a diocesan capital stewardship campaign are numerous, surprising, and – frequently serendipitous. I have run into people who actually look forward to capital campaigns. They enjoy the challenge and are looking forward to working with like-minded people, meeting new people, and helping to build God's Kingdom. Perhaps they're the type of persons who have it in their DNA to be positive about everything, or they remember the good from a previous campaign that left a lasting impression on them.

But in spite of these brighter notes, diocesan campaigns can be difficult and challenging. My intention here is not to be negative or to offend anyone, but to be transparent and acknowledge the challenges a campaign faces. For until those difficulties are named and there is a willingness to go through the struggle to address and overcome them, a successful campaign will not take place.

Even in the best situations the prospect of a capital campaign is often met with reluctance, suspicion, fear, apathy and, at times, anger. One can overhear comments like: it's the wrong time, the economy is bad, people are already doing all they can, we're busy enough without one more thing to do, all the church ever does is ask for money, things are fine the way they are.

Issues of trust, whether perceived or real, present significant hurdles. Others feel that it is hard to send money "downtown" when there are so many needs right at the parish. Such parochialism separates many parishes from the larger mission of the church. And when it comes to ecclesiology some people are not well informed and there are others who simply don't agree with the ecclesiology of the Church. All these issues can foster an atmosphere of tension and negativism between the diocese and parishes, regardless of the original causes and history.

With that being said, you might wonder why I

am a proponent of diocesan campaigns. Let me share with you why despite all the challenges, I see diocesan-wide capital stewardship campaigns as a way to strengthen, energize, and deepen the spiritual life of all who prayerfully participate.

First, a diocesan campaign sharpens the vision of each parish and the diocese as a whole. Proverbs 29:18 is translated in various ways. One of the most common is "Where there is no vision the people perish". A more literal translation is "Where there is no vision the people are unrestrained." In other words where no vision exists people go off in all directions doing their own thing. When this occurs unity is broken, effort is depleted, and the impact the Church has on the world is diluted. While not all people will always agree on a leader's vision, a clear vision provides purpose and direction, maximizing the effort of those who serve, and the resources available for ministry.

The Bishop's vision for the local church provides the centerpiece for every campaign. While components of his vision may include such diocesan-wide emphases as priestly formation, Catholic school tuition assistance, cathedral renovation, or ministry development (these vary from diocese to diocese), O'Meara Ferguson recommends that individual parishes also have an opportunity to receive great individual benefit from a campaign. To quote one of our clients, "strong parishes create a strong diocese". For that reason the individual parish vision is also critical. Parishioners are encouraged to work with their pastors to build the campaign around their understanding of their parish's mission. If a parish does not have a clear vision for ministry, consultants are able to guide parish leaders as they seek to discern what God's will is for their parish, thus building the campaign around fulfilling critical mission components. A clear statement of mission transforms the campaign effort from raising money to fulfilling God's purpose for the parish at this time. The campaign becomes the "plan" or strategy that will help the parish

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The Benefits of a Diocesan-Wide Capital Stewardship Campaign (page 2 of 3)

fulfill their calling in Jesus Christ.

As the Bishop casts his vision and encourages each parish to shape and fulfill their own mission within that vision, something else happens. The “we versus them mentality” begins to ease and is replaced with a realization that everyone in the diocese is about the same work: making God’s kingdom visible and influential here on earth. Admittedly, coming to this realization is a slow process and a united campaign is just the beginning. Nevertheless, as parishes enter into a campaign, the atmosphere begins to change. Bishops have opportunities to connect with people by listening to their concerns, hearing their stories, correcting misinformation, and getting to know each individual on a more personal level. This leads to another benefit that is realized through a diocesan-wide capital stewardship campaign: leadership development and engagement.

I have yet to serve in a campaign where new leaders did not come to the fore. A central part of every campaign is providing settings where bishops and other diocesan leaders can influence people on an individual basis. The development of these relationships motivates people to step forward to take a leadership role. When they are listened to, valued, and when they understand their leader on a personal level, they are inspired to serve. In fact I witnessed one person who moved from the skeptic of all skeptics to a supporter of the bishop and diocesan ministries because his bishop took the time to talk with him, answer his questions, and follow up. As a result this individual became the catalyst who gradually helped the entire parish re-embrace their bishop and collectively take up their role as a leading parish in the diocese.

As relationships grow, trust grows. Few would disagree that there are trust issues in many dioceses. It exists in parishes toward the diocese and in the diocese toward parishes. A diocesan campaign, for lack of a better way of saying it, forces

communication. Divisive issues are out of necessity brought to the table. During the ramp up phase of a campaign, derisive meetings may take place. Because we are people of faith who are grounded in Christ’s love we try to avoid such meetings and discussions. In doing so there is often the danger that an undercurrent of pain and negativism may grow and dominate. Unless we are willing to engage in these discussions the pain and negative undercurrent will continue to exist. The dialog and discussion in these meetings can lead to healing and hope. They can form the foundation for a new relationship of openness, understanding and trust. In one case a parish’s first campaign meeting of about 120 people was filled with anger, resentment and accusations. After an hour and a half the meeting drew to a close with little resolution, but a window had been opened. At one of the final meetings of this campaign, once again approximately 120 people attended. But unlike the first meeting, this meeting was one of joy and celebration. Were all the problems solved? No. But there was a new sense of purpose and trust as people responded to the bishop’s vision and the vision and needs of their parish.

Let me close with a few examples of things that have happened as a result of diocesan campaigns, things you might not expect, and conclude by sharing some thoughts about the spiritual dimension and benefits of a campaign.

Keep in mind that the events described below happened because people stepped forward in faith, although sometimes reluctantly, and were willing to work through the tough issues:

- A pastor, now a bishop, commented that his parish experienced a 4% increase in weekly giving following a campaign. He attributed the increase to the spiritual focus of the campaign and to people’s deeper understanding of what it means to be a steward of God’s gifts.

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The Benefits of a Diocesan-Wide Capital Stewardship Campaign (page 3 of 3)

- In another parish the campaign prayer team of 80 people decided to continue as an ongoing parish ministry.
- Yet another parish, as a result of one of the strategic activities of the campaign, learned that they needed to strengthen their ministry to the elderly and shut-ins.

We would all agree that it takes money to conduct ministry. Indeed, one of the objectives of a capital campaign is to raise money for ministry. But the campaign is not just about money. It's about seeking God's will, discovering God's will, and responding to him individually and as a community of faith. Too many companies, organizations and individuals view giving and raising money as something that takes place outside of and in addition to our walk of faith. But in our modern world where money has become the agent of exchange and purchase, giving of one's financial assets is the act that most often enables each of us to

engage in the corporal works of mercy that are so central to our faith. To put it simply, giving is an act of faith that is central to our faith. It is an acknowledgement that God is the source of all that we have and all that we are, and we are privileged to be stewards of his blessings. Our giving demonstrates our dependence upon God as we respond not by doing what we think we can do but by doing what God is calling us to do. And many times, this level of sacrificial giving reveals to us that what we think we can give and what God is calling us to give are quite different. O'Meara Ferguson believes that every capital campaign is a journey of faith during which transformation takes place as people, guided by the Holy Spirit, commit themselves to prayerful discernment.

The most gratifying part of our work is not the amount of money that is raised, but the people who come up to us at the end of a campaign and share with us how their lives have been changed and their faith deepened.

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