

Ask Alban: Capital Campaign: Six Keys to Success

by Fred Oakes

Q: My church is about to embark on its first capital giving campaign in many years. We want to renovate and expand our facility. What advice do you have for us before we start?

A: Our congregation, which was established in 1832, recently completed its first capital giving campaign in 40 years. Our theme, “From Heritage to Horizon,” was a phrase I had read in an article published in CONGREGATIONS. These are some of the things we learned that may be helpful to you:

1. Begin with a plan. Before you publicly promote the campaign, develop a clear plan for renovation and/or expansion of your facility. Design a planning process that is inclusive, and which represents the many ages, attitudes, and interests of the congregation. Doing this work well requires a significant investment of time and resources, but broad ownership of the campaign goals will help ensure success. If possible, seek the advice and expertise of professionals like building inspectors and architects. A drawing or other rendering that depicts how your facility will look when the project is complete can be a wonderful promotional tool.

2. Choose a consultant. Interview several capital campaign consultants, and select the one who seems to be the best fit for your congregation. Our congregation interviewed only consultants who work for a specified fee rather than those who receive a percentage of the funds raised during the capital campaign. Hiring a consultant is not inexpensive, but congregations that hire campaign consultants almost always enjoy a significantly greater response to the campaign appeal than those that do not.

3. Care for your inactive members. During our campaign, all members were contacted three times over a period of about three months. The contacts were timed to correspond with our small group meetings, campaign banquet, and the campaign commitment cards. To avoid having some inactive members feel that your only interest in them is to secure their contributions, I recommend contacting all inactive members 6 to 12 months before the campaign begins. In these initial contacts, there is no mention of a capital campaign: Their purpose is to offer care and prayer support, which can reinforce a sense of belonging. If systematic contacting of inactive members is already ongoing in your congregation, so much the better.

4. Ask! Big dreams invite big investments. The largest financial gifts ever received by our congregation came in response to the vision we cast during this recent campaign.

Most members may be eager to make a significant investment in a significant vision for ministry—but they are waiting to be asked. Don't be shy about sharing your vision and inviting a generous response! Be prepared to receive gifts in many forms; there are many ways to make connections between ministry and resources for ministry.

5. Tap teamwork. Committed teams can accomplish tremendous things. The teams assembled by the lay leaders who directed our campaign did a lot of good work. This gave us a sense of joy and satisfaction—and some teams have continued to serve since the campaign ended. For example, our prayer team is still going strong. We believe that the skills learned by these leaders and teams will enable us to meet new challenges with faithfulness and determination.

6. Claim all of the benefits. Capital stewardship campaigns are not solely—or primarily—about fundraising. Ours was a time of focused, prayerful reflection about God's call at this particular point in our congregation's 169-year history. We have experienced many benefits to the process of discerning that call and formulating a faithful response, but only one of those benefits can be registered on a calculator. The others unfold daily in the life of our congregation.

Rev. Fred Oaks has served as senior pastor of Southport Baptist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana since 1992, and has served as a consultant to the Alban Institute's Indianapolis Center for Congregations since 1998. Before joining Southport, a 650-member congregation, he was pastor for an urban congregation in Saginaw, Michigan and a rural congregation in Paw Paw, Illinois.

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(703) 964-2700 | (800) 486-1318 | (703) 964-0370 fax webmaster@alban.org