

The Personal History of a Church's Fundraising Effort

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Before preservation can begin, a major fundraising effort is needed. But before you can consider a fundraising campaign, you need several support mechanisms in place. These include, of course, interested and enthusiastic church lay leaders and clergy. In the case of Fourth Universalist Society of New York, we also had a concerned and sympathetic neighboring community.

To initiate the fundraising and find volunteers to assist with it, several fortunate events coincided for us. First, some neighbors who live next door in a cooperative apartment building, a building which stands within the same certified historic district as Fourth Universalist, invited me to a breakfast to discuss our crumbling front steps and how the church might repair them. These neighbors were prepared to offer some limited funding. We noted that not only were our steps crumbling but our tower was collapsing, our flat rooftops needed replacing, our chimney repointing, our windows releading and more. In fact we were so overwhelmed by the fearful costs of these restoration problems that we were beginning to consider the idea of accepting a developer's offer to demolish the building and build a high-rise cooperative complex on our site. It was a repugnant alternative but perhaps we had no other choice. This prospect greatly alarmed our neighbors. We explained that we did not want to do this; what could they suggest as an alternative?

Knowing that neither we nor our neighbors wanted our building replaced with a modern high-rise, we called a meeting of local building president, the block association president and interested church leaders. We laid out our case. We had a financial crisis. We would need to have a serious fundraising campaign but we could not hope to raise the sufficient funds from within our own limited membership (about 100 at the time). Would these concerned neighbors care to contribute? They said they were interested, but if they joined in seriously contributing to our campaign, they would want some assurances. What assurances could we give that we would not still go ahead and sell our building site and develop a tower? Why should they trust us? Additionally, Many of our neighbors were not interested in giving money to a church or supporting any of our religious or social programs. They were just interested in preserving our historic church building. We would need to give solid assurances, contracted assurances that we would only use the donated funds for building repairs. We also have to prove that the repairs we wanted were truly necessary. Finally, we would need to establish that a fundraising campaign could succeed.

We decided to invite our neighbors, local preservationists and concerned citizens to join with us in creating a not-for-profit secular corporation dedicated to the restoration of the church building. We determined that this organization would be composed equally of church members and outsiders (community activists and preservationists). Half of the officers would be from the church and the other half from the community. The organization would be dedicated to fundraising and would turn over its collected funds to the church which would manage and pay for the repairs.

The repairs were verified and documented as necessary by several autonomous preservation groups, principally by the Director of Technical Services of The New York Landmarks Conservancy. This credibility was important.

The church was apprehensive about an invasion of its own privacy and its right of self-determination. Members did not want outsiders telling them how to run their own business no matter how generous and well intentioned they were. Thus, the new charitable corporations could have nothing to do with the operation of the church. It was solely a fundraising arm. But, the directors of this new organization (which we named S.O.U.L., Save Our Universalist Landmark) would be able to see the church's financial records and discuss its restoration program. They could oversee the use of their donations for the building.

Before S.O.U.L was formed the church held a congregational meeting. The members unanimously agreed to support an effort to save the building, fund feasibility study, and pledge 100,000- from their small (\$300,000) endowment to S.O.U.L. S.O.U.L.'s total financial goal was set at \$500,000. This was \$200,000 more than the professional conducted feasibility study said was possible. However, it was the smallest amount necessary to do the projected essential repairs. The community was asked to raise \$200,000, corporate grants and foundations to contribute \$100,000, the church's members to contribute \$100,000, and the endowment transfer would account for the final \$100,000. The project was scheduled to require three years. At this writing we have succeeded and raised more than the original goal.

The community partnership with the church members was exciting. All of us shared a commitment to save the church's building. New relationships were created which have contributed to helping us solve other problems. For example, neighbors interested in beautifying our garden have joined with members who share this concern. The church became a model for other institutions troubled by their own financial hardship and the struggle of preserving an historic property. We have consulted with many churches, temples, and preservationist groups seeking our experience as a pioneer in creating a community/church preservationist alliance.

To solve the technical building preservation issues, S.O.U.L. invited some graduate students from Columbia University's Historic Preservation program to study our church and its particular problems, and propose some solutions. We worked closely with the technical services department of The New York Landmarks Conservancy, and we retained an architect and structural engineer. We learned that in restoration efforts, what appears to be a small problem upon initial examination can really be a big problem upon closer inspection. As a result we had to reprioritize our repair list. Consequently, our largest stained glass windows have yet to be reled. But they can wait for the next phase. We are pleased with the results of the restoration effort so far.

Finally, I should discuss the church's other fundraising tools. After retaining a professional fundraiser for the study and after considerable work with other experienced persons preservationist organizations other churches who had tried fundraising campaigns, we decided to do our fundraising in-house. This proved to be adequate with one exception. When we decided to host a giant fund dinner we hired a professional and support. This was a result, in one evening we net about \$75,000 (our gross this, so you can see how expensive party is!).

We learned the hard way you have a personal contact you do not have much of funding. So, we looked for served on foundation boards, find personal connections own network.

We sought it high profile New York media and found a publicist who volunteered her time We learned that we could initial public kick-off event ready had some large gifts in with the help of our publicist a non-event event.

Because experienced a fire or some disaster we had to attract at more novel way. We drew our tower. It was unsafe and losing its pinnacles to the sidewalk lay 10 feet below. Once the surrounded by the requisite bridge and scaffolding it became symbol of our crisis. Today restored the fundraising goal and we can look to saving other historic religious properties.

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