

From Church Party to House Party

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Mission Behind Bars and Beyond

NBA Incubate Initiative Affiliate Ministry

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As our ministry at Mission Behind Bars and Beyond (MB3) grew, we realized that we needed to be much better at “institutional development.” This is language that those who go around raising money prefer to use. As a minister, this just sounded like a mask for fundraising and our board didn’t seem too enthused about the prospect of going out and asking

for money. But slowly and surely, our minds opened to the possibility of long-term sustainability and the joy of giving people the opportunity to feel good about sharing in the successes of those we were serving—returning citizens or those judicially involved. This shift didn’t come about without a lot of urging and nudging and our board isn’t totally on board, but the ship is sailing. Working with a development coach was an important first step. She helped us to think differently about this whole process and gave us some great ideas and ways to implement them.

One of the ideas was the house party. This seemed simple enough. Ask someone to host a party in their home, invite people letting them know it was to support a good cause (ours!) and do a little planning. Our first two stabs at this totally missed the mark. Timid church people that we are, we thought we would host these in churches. Safe places. Places in which we were comfortable. Low impact surroundings. Yikes, were we off the mark!

They say you learn from your mistakes. And we did. These were total flops. Most of the people who attended, and there were very few, were already supporters, volunteers and donors. We raised very little money and didn’t really raise the consciousness of anyone. This was a gathering of people already on the ship.

Then, things changed. Our board secretary volunteered to host a winter fest at his home. We had a short and simple agenda. We brought some of our board members

and one of our “success stories.” Our gracious hosts provided a delicious buffet meal and beverages. We met and mingled. We gave a short program. And we added twenty people to our contact list and some money in our bank account.

This was painless. Our hosts were happy to offer food and drink as their contribution. And, it was a fun evening during which we met some fascinating people. We are preparing for our fifth “house party” in a real house in November. Already our hosts, who are friends of mine, have received RSVP’s from thirty of their friends. They prepared the guest list. They sent out the paperless e-vites. They are following up to make sure people are on board.

Each house party has been different. One was canceled because we didn’t get enough responses. The hosts felt badly so they asked us for envelopes that they could distribute to their friends who were interested, but unavailable on the scheduled evening.

One was on Good Friday and the hosts gathered their friends (as they did every Good Friday) to watch *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* together) and told everyone that this was fundraiser for MB3. I gave a little talk between the movies and people began writing checks.

The house party coming up will be a Sunday afternoon brunch. We ask our hosts to decide what they want to do and what works best for those they invite. We simply show up, roll out our little “dog and pony” show and enjoy meeting some great people.

Have these house parties filled our coffers to overflowing? Not hardly. But they have given us more friends and have grown our contact list. These new friends are receiving our newsletters and will be invited to our annual fundraising event.

I admit that I was nervous about embarking on this. But now, I look forward to these events. It’s a great way to share our story. Our “ask” is light and low-key. The chair of our fundraising task force is genuine and self-effacing, but he believes in our mission and people hear that. One thing we have learned is that a follow up “thank you” to those who attend these things is important. It tells people that their presence was noticed and appreciated.

So, when people begin talking about fundraising, try to ease that knot in your stomach. There's more than one answer to this stuff. Experiment and see what works best for you and your organization. If you want to know more about our house party program, just let me know and I will be happy to share what we have been doing.

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