

## **The Mustard Seed Model: How Churches Can Build Their Membership and Actually Engage Unlikely Voters**

Here it comes! The barrage of election year communication. Candidates, parties and issue based organizations will spend millions (or billions) of dollars in a desperate attempt to get voters to the polls. We'll run ads, hire canvassers, and poll test messaging, and, in the end, if history is any indication, the electoral numbers won't shift too much. A huge number of registered voters won't vote and a similarly distressing number of potential voters won't even be registered. What's more, the community based organizations who have been running registration and get out to the vote (GOTV) drives, will be left with very little to show for it in terms of new members, leaders, and power.

In local churches, we will do the same thing. Candidates will make the rounds visiting our pulpits. Some congregations will host candidate forums and "Souls to the Polls" events. Pastors and social concerns committee chairs will exhort everyone to vote. We may even make our churches voting sites. But, in the end, we find that our congregations haven't really grown and our elected officials are no more accountable to us than they were before.

Having organized in both faith-based and non-faith based settings for a number of election cycles, I've seen this scenario play out enough to know that it isn't working. Our registration efforts fail to engage hard-to-engage and unlikely voters in a way that actually gets them to the polls, and our frenzied activity is stretched too thin to actually produce any new members and power for use when the election is over. So rather than continue this depressing cycle, perhaps it's time to imagine a new paradigm for faith-based institutions to engage elections.

### **Why Elections?**

Nearly every church I have ever engaged with seeks greater connection with the neighborhood around it. As congregations have grown and aged, fewer and fewer of the congregants live in the blocks surrounding their churches. Elections provide an opportunity to engage our neighborhoods in a very direct way and to show that the church is concerned about the cares and issues facing its neighborhood. Elections are also times of high energy and interest that can help motivate congregation members to do something and get involved. And, unlike other outreach efforts, an election provides a clear focus for those efforts with a start and end date. Volunteers can commit to giving 3-4 months of effort with a dual goal of impacting issues they care about in the political sphere and growing their church's capacity and outreach.

### **Why Churches?**

Local churches, particularly in low-income communities and communities of color, still carry a certain amount of community trust and cache. At the very least, they are known entities that have been seen and recognized for years. Neighborhood members know that the church has been present in the community for years before this political season and will still be when the election has passed. Some are even the polling places for people to vote. Additionally, churches bring a set of volunteer leaders and members who are committed to their institution and the neighborhood around it thriving and can be engaged to spend their time and energy based on this commitment.

## **Key Components of a New Paradigm**

To create a model of voter engagement that actually succeeds at both engaging hard to reach voters and building an ongoing base for engagement and action after the election, we need to change the way we approach electoral work:

### **1. Get Small – Focus on your precinct or a discrete turf**

Elections tend to happen on large scales – the country, state, or city. Even local city council elections represent pretty large districts with tens of thousands of people in them. Impacting something this size as a single congregation, or even a congregational network, can feel daunting. Spreading ourselves across an entire electoral district will likely be outside of the capacity of most churches and guarantee that we will be spread too thin. It will also mean that we will be far away from our church and makes it unlikely that most of the people whose doors we will be knocking on will know our church.

Instead, focus on your precinct or district.

The election precinct is usually the smallest official unit of government, and the average precinct is about 1,100 registered voters. But this doesn't mean that there are only 1,100 people. There are hundreds of potential voters who are not yet registered and, even if they are registered, an extremely large number rarely or never vote. The precinct is as close as you will get to an official government unit for your church's neighborhood. And it's the size that a congregation can actually measure and impact. Your church can actually take ownership of changing the way its precinct votes in a meaningful way.

Alternatively, think about an even smaller discrete area. Is there a large housing complex near your church that has hundreds or thousands of people living in it? Are there

Check with your local election authority and find out the voter turnout for your precinct in the last election (or the last comparable election since presidential elections tend to have higher turnout overall). Then set your church a goal of how much you can change that!

### **2. Get Deep – Real human connection will move unlikely voters**

Trying to transform your neighborhood and church's political power isn't easy. The usual methods of voter engagement- mailers, commercials, phone banking, even normal door knocking with a practiced message, may bump irregular voters to the polls. But moving unlikely voters, who never or rarely vote, who feel disconnected and disempowered from the process, to not only vote, but to begin engaging with the neighborhood and community organizing activities of your church, will need a different tool.

Rather than blanket advertising and canned messages, people need deep conversation and ongoing relationship. Recently, the term "deep canvassing" has come into vogue. The idea, put briefly, is that we should engage people in long, deep, two-way conversations when we canvas. This idea is dead on, and community and congregational organizers have been using similar methods for years, although not necessarily in electoral settings.

So when we canvas, we need to have a goal of having long (think 15-20 minutes at least) conversations with the people we meet. Our congregational volunteers need to focus on actually learning about the people in their neighborhoods, understanding what is happening in their lives and the issues that are impacting them and their families. And our volunteers need to share their own stories as well.

But instead of trying to move a specific issue agenda, our goal has to be to create an authentic relationship between the church member and community member, and for them to decide that they want to take action together, based in that relationship to change their neighborhood. And one of the first ways that we do that, is through voting together.

This is the other reason that locating our work in churches is so vital. The church is not going anywhere. So, to engage unlikely voters and get them to trust that we are actually not just trying to use them, but really want to move forward together, our work in our churches connects us into the future past the election. People are not dumb, and they have been lied to enough. If our interest is really just about what happens one or two or six months from now on election day, they can tell and they won't join us for action. But if we, as a local church they walk by every day, are really interested in investing in them and making change long-term, they may be ready to take a new step.

I also think it's worth noting that, though this is a bigger time commitment for training and actual number of canvasses for volunteers, they also tend to find it much more rewarding than the classic 2-3 minute doorstep pitch conversations.

### **3. Get Consistent – We need more than one contact and point of action**

As discussed above, our goal in engaging voters is to create relationships, we need to have several points of contact. This may mean knocking on a person's door more than once, but it also means having a way to structure engagement. In planning your strategy, a church needs at least three moments of action: one prior to the election (maybe a night to learn about the issues, or hear from candidates), one the act of voting (maybe doing a Sunday early vote as a community all together, or driving people to the polls on election day) and finally an action of some sort after the election (maybe a post-election accountability session with the winning candidates, maybe a what's next planning meeting, etc).

The volunteer who makes the contact at the door needs to be the one who does the initial set of invites to these actions, both during the first conversation and with a follow up call afterwards. If the new voter comes to such an event, then you can begin expanding who within the church they have relationships. But, if not, we need to maintain consistent contact from the church member who initiated the relationship, because the community member needs to be seen as a person, not just a vote.

### **4. Get Clear – Count what matters**

Finally, as the saying goes, we measure what we value and we value what we measure. What we choose to measure will determine how we build our program (and for funders should also determine how we fund this work). In my experience, the wrong things to measure are volunteer hours and signed voter registration cards. Both of these mean we push for large quantity, poor quality contact. Instead, we can measure actual change in voting in your precinct. This will be the ultimate goal post for your church to be proud of. If in the last comparable election, 40% of your precinct voted and in this one 60% did, you can take pride in the 50% increase that you created. We should also measure the number of community members who attend the events you plan. This is a real way of showing you created authentic enough relationships to actually move people to take action. Finally, we can measure conversations. How many did we have, where we can actually learn a person's contact information and real story? Using real individual conversation tracking forms can provide a good sense of how many conversations are had and the depth of the conversations.

## **Elections: Changing our Communities, Renewing our Churches**

As we lament the disengagement of the American electorate and the decline of so many of our churches, we actually have an opportunity to do something about both. Elections bring an infusion of energy and outside funding, which churches can marry to their long standing commitment to their neighborhoods to truly transform how we approach elections and build new and more powerful congregations for the work beyond the election. As more and more of our communities face attacks and disinvestment, we need to, paradoxically, get smaller and deeper to make broader change. Networks of churches can create change one precinct at a time, by truly focusing their efforts, recruiting strong teams of volunteers, and investing in real training, relationships building, and engagement. Funders and democracy advocates would do well to help support these kind of efforts, valuing the long history churches have in their neighborhoods and the building on the authenticity of these efforts.