

CRASH COURSES *in* YOUTH MINISTRY FUNDRAISING

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UMCyoungpeople.org



DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES
The United Methodist Church

A crash course (in training or education) condenses lots of practical material so that you can read and understand it quickly. A crash course is not where we strap you behind the wheel of a youth ministry bus, point you downhill towards a target and say, “*Hope you don’t crash!*” as you hit every bump possible on the road ahead.

Each of these crash courses in youth ministry are loaded with practical tips and basic wisdom that you can read today and put in to practice tomorrow. If you are a part-time or no-time (amazing volunteer!) youth worker, these crash courses are especially for you. (They’re also great for anyone leading a youth ministry. Just saying.)

Additional crash courses are available at:

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Further training for a variety of leadership roles in ministry is available in the e-learning section of Discipleship Ministries’ store at:
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INTRODUCTION

IN YOUTH MINISTRY, YOU CAN SPEND A LOT OF TIME TRYING TO RAISE THE MONEY YOU NEED TO DO THE THINGS YOU FEEL PROVIDE SPIRITUAL TURNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS.

A while back, I was talking to a friend at the end of a car wash he'd hosted to raise money for an upcoming youth camp. He was frustrated because they had made very little for all the time they had sunk into the fundraiser. After lamenting the lack of actual funds raised, he said the most dangerous words in youth-group fundraising: *"But they had a ton of fun!"*

Though having fun can be a great side benefit to doing a fundraiser, that is not the main objective. It's FUNDraising, not FUNraising after all. The goal is simple: raising funds. If your students enjoy washing cars but make little money out of it, do car washes as "random acts of kindness" service projects. If the activity doesn't take in money, it needs to be taken off your fundraiser list. This article is about giving you the tools you need to design, evaluate, and plan successful fundraisers. And don't worry, we'll end by giving you several ideas you may not have heard before!



01 WHAT DOESN'T WORK

LET'S START BY SHARING AN UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH—THERE ARE OVERUSED AND INEFFECTIVE FUNDRAISERS.

Consider avoiding these fundraising approaches if you have a choice. A fundraiser is overused if multiple churches and organizations all offer similar versions of the same concept. A fundraiser is ineffective if it does not provide enough “bang for the buck” or a return on the investment of time and resources that you have to put into it.

Selling Things From a Catalog

Besides the fact that every high school band will have already beaten you to this fundraiser, catalog sales are a huge headache and generally provide little profit. Students may sell hundreds of dollars of cookie dough or gift wrap, only to net fifty dollars for themselves. Once all the ordered merchandise comes in, someone has to store it, itemize the delivery, and get it to the customers. Too much work for too little profit.

Car Washes

No reason to beat this one up even more, but it takes the right day and enough traffic, and you eat up parking



spots at the church. They can be a lot of fun but generally make a small amount of money. But that fun factor is why we recommend it as a great way to thank volunteers in our [Keeping Volunteers Crash Course!](#)

Branded Apparel & Swag

Selling shirts, water bottles, and hats will not go well for many reasons. First, there's not a lot of profit in such items because of the small quantity you'll likely be able to sell and thus order. Second, most youth ministries also do shirts for events and retreats. That is the swag your kids will want; creating others to sell will most likely end up with you sitting on a couple of boxes of unsold shirts, hats, and other items until you decide to give them away.

Asking the Same People All the Time

One of the pitfall patterns with youth ministry fundraising is continually targeting your church members and active participant families to raise money, often beyond their regular giving. It can get tiring constantly being asked to support the youth for their next trip or event, especially if you are a parent who is paying registrations AND being asked to give additionally. When you plan fundraisers, make sure you don't keep asking the same people to help. Be creative in finding new parts of your community to enlist in funding!

Flocking/Forking/TP

There are several versions of fundraisers that offer to prank someone by putting a bunch of birds or forks or anything else in their yard for a fee. Besides the fact that these can be cumbersome to run, it's also a bad look—especially when people on the edge of your community are publicly embarrassed because they didn't come to church knowing they needed to buy insurance against the youth group pranking them. Also, if you are pranking in communities with HOAs, these fundraisers will not make you friends.

Teen Laborers

Over the years, hiring teens out in a variety of ways to do labor for people in the church has been a solid money maker; however, this can be problematic on several fronts. Kids' value being set monetarily by the church can affect teens' perception of their value to the community or even their self-worth. Ramifications of students getting hurt while working offsite and probably unsupervised creates very real Safe Sanctuaries' complications.

When you are doing fundraisers, be conscious of the potential downsides that have nothing to do with how much money you have raised.

02 HOW TO EVALUATE FUNDRAISERS

THE KEY TO CREATING A HELPFUL, SUSTAINABLE FUNDRAISING SYSTEM REQUIRES CONSISTENT EVALUATION OF EFFORT AND ENERGY TO MAKE FUNDRAISERS HAPPEN.

Of course, you will be asking standard questions like; “Did everyone like it?” “Would we do it again?” “How much did we total?” But when it comes to fundraisers, you’ll need an additional layer of evaluation.

To start, calculate the average “hourly wage” of all the people and the work it took to create the fundraiser. This can take some time because you will need to talk to people who were involved in the fundraiser to find out how many hours they spent. Once you have that information, total up all the hours worked by you, the kids, and the adult volunteers. Then, divide your total earnings by that number to come up with the average hourly wage. If everyone involved could have worked for minimum wage, less taxes, for that same amount of time and made the same amount of money, it’s a sign that your fundraiser was minimally effective on an individual scale.

How much does the average hourly wage of a successful fundraiser need to be? That answer is one you have to



develop based on your context, but minimum wage isn't the right answer. In short, if you have a fundraiser that makes \$2,000, but it took 400 people-hours to make it happen, your average hourly wage is \$5. A total raised can look great, until you start to evaluate just how many hours it took to make that total happen.

If your hourly wage seems reasonable based on your context, or if it shows promise, it's time to go to the next evaluation step: simplifying. If you are like most youth pastors, you've never run an hourly wage on your fundraiser. You've let people help in all kinds of inefficient ways and possibly expanded the fundraiser far beyond its initial concept. The next step is to look over all those hours and look for places to trim.

Where are you spending the most time? Where are your volunteer hours going? Are there any places you can cut? Are there any aspects of the fundraiser that you could spend a little money to save a lot of time? Answering those questions can make a big difference in your hourly wage. Armed with that knowledge, you can estimate what kind of increase in the hourly wage you can expect if you choose to repeat the fundraiser.

Now that you've trimmed time expenses, it's time to look at ways you can increase income. With the goal of making money firmly in view, look at where the money came from. Were you selling tickets? Items? Collecting donations? Once you see where the money came from, ask, "How can we increase that income?" Adding ten percent to the cost of a ticket can be a nominal change

for the customer and can significantly increase income. By the same token, having a suggested minimum donation can take the floor out from under a donation-only event and create a huge change.

Increasing income can come from other sources. For example, what if you opened the fundraiser up to the larger community? What if you allowed businesses to “sponsor” the event in exchange for advertising? What if you added a competitive element to people’s giving like in a silent auction or live auction? What if you spent some money on digital advertising? Taking time to ask yourself how you can increase your income can quickly take your fundraiser from a nice stream of income to something much more significant.

03 CASE STUDY: THE PUMPKIN PATCH

LET'S TAKE A CASE STUDY FROM A POPULAR HIGH-INCOME FUNDRAISER: THE PUMPKIN PATCH.

Your church had been doing this fundraiser “forever” when you are hired, and you come on right before it begins. They’ve got everything laid out so that you can observe. At the end of October, after all is said and done, you gross \$20,000 from pumpkin sales. The fundraising company charges you fifty percent commission, leaving you ten thousand dollars in profit. It seems impressive; but for due diligence, you decide to run the numbers. You spent five hundred dollars printing flyers and advertising materials; and your biggest sale weekend was your fall festival, where you spent \$2,500 on inflatables and all kinds of other fun for families. You’re now at seven thousand dollars in profit.

Now it’s time to gather the total hours. You get the pumpkins on trucks filled with loose pumpkins, and you have two “unload days,” where volunteers need to come, and one-by-one, unload two eighteen-wheelers full of loose pumpkins. Those events take twenty people two hours of work. That is eighty hours so far. You have staffed the pumpkin patch with two people from 8:00 am–6:00 pm each day in October, except for Sundays, when the hours are noon–6:00 pm. Assuming there



are four Sundays, that totals 294 hours of “open for business” time. Multiply that amount times two people working each shift and adding the unload brings the total to 668 hours!

You also do field trips for local preschools that require three additional people to read stories, do a craft, and talk about pumpkins with the kids for two hours. You average six field trips a week for four weeks. That adds 144 additional hours, bringing your total to 812. Now add in the big fall festival you estimate took about thirty hours of your time in planning, recruiting, and so on. On the fall festival day from 10:00 am–1:00 pm, you had ten additional volunteers working. That adds sixty, bringing your total to 872 hours to make \$7,000 in profit. That is a lot of hours. When you do the math, you are making about \$8 per hour. Not a great hourly rate.

But the total profit makes this pumpkin fundraiser feel worthwhile, so it’s time to think about simplifying. The biggest single hour cost is the unload. Starting there, it’s hard to imagine how you could do it faster, but a little research reveals that a grocery store orders pumpkins that come in boxes that are unloaded with a forklift. Suddenly, you could take a twenty-person job and turn it into a five-person job with one forklift operator and five people opening boxes and arranging pumpkins. That one tweak brings your average hourly rate up almost twenty percent.

When you talk to the local grocery store manager, you discover that the wholesale prices you are going to pay

to have them delivered in boxes are a lot less than the fundraising company would charge. This seems like a great potential deal, so you look at the fundraising company's arrangement. The fundraising company charges you a percentage of your sales, which means you didn't have to pay for pumpkins up front, and the fundraising pumpkin company has lowered the risk you are taking on by charging you after the fact. If you are willing to take on some added risk, you could switch to the grocery store to provide pumpkins (or even a local farmer if you're lucky!). If you sell the same number of pumpkins at these prices, you lower your cost by thirty percent. That adds \$3,000 to your bottom line, making your average hourly wage shoot up to more than \$20 an hour. Raising \$24 per hour worked surely sounds better than \$8 per hour, right?

A few other potential tweaks could be: to work with the preschool that meets at your church and replace a few field trips with reading and pumpkin times with those classes; to partner with the evangelism or outreach teams from your church to create a community-based event for the fall festival and consider replacing expensive inflatables with less expensive carnival games and prizes.

These are all tweaks I've seen made in parallel experiences, not just limited to a pumpkin patch. At the original hourly rate, this was not an effective fundraiser; but with a little thought, we found lots of room for improvement. Less work and more money.

That being said, a pumpkin patch is still a high-cost fundraiser—both in dollars and in time. If you are looking just at the bottom line, there are several options that require significantly less time and may make a similar amount of money. But it's not ALL about the bottom line. As you evaluate, consider the impact that the pumpkin patch has on your church and community, as there can be benefits beyond funds if you are intentional about developing them.

These kinds of large-scale, public-facing fundraisers can bring a lot of new people onto your church campus and can give all sorts of ministry opportunities. If the fundraiser is a “sacred tradition of youth ministry” in your setting, there is some value to keeping up that tradition as well. As you evaluate fundraisers in your setting, bring important stakeholders into conversation. I'm confident that most people would be willing to increase the financial impact of fundraisers while decreasing the amount of time and energy it takes to pull them off.

04 LEGAL & TAX QUESTIONS

BEFORE WE GET TO THE AMAZING LIST OF FUNDRAISING IDEAS, THERE'S ONE LAST THING YOU NEED TO THINK ABOUT: LEGAL AND TAX LIABILITIES.

(I know, that is why you got into ministry—your deep love for financial regulation). Sometimes people assume that because they are giving money to a church, that money is automatically tax-deductible as a charitable contribution. That isn't necessarily the case. If you aren't careful, you can run afoul of the IRS, damage relationships with church members, and even risk losing your church's nonprofit status.

To be clear, I'm not a tax lawyer or a tax accountant. I didn't stay in a Holiday Inn last night and have nothing to say other than what has been explained to me. Before you rely on this information, double-check it with a qualified professional to get the most accurate and up-to-date information. This information might come from a person on the finance committee at your church, a staff person overseeing church finances or a treasurer, or a member of your church who is involved with banking or finance who could help connect you to accurate information in your area.



All that said, a church financial professional in Alabama once explained it to me this way: if people are buying or paying for something specifically, that money does not count as a contribution and cannot be deducted from their taxes. That means that tickets to a spaghetti dinner or snow cones sold at the fall festival, or even the pumpkins you've sold at that incredible pumpkin patch are not tax deductible. So, when your church sends out year-end giving letters, and generous church members begin to do their taxes, and donations made to your fundraiser don't show up on the list, you may need to be prepared for conversations with folks who participated in your fundraisers if they did not know that the amount, they spent on the fundraiser was not tax deductible.

That same principle can also apply to people paying for a specific child's trip and even a portion of a specific child's mission trip, as that could be considered paying for something specific. If you are going to solicit donations toward trip or retreat fees, do so in terms of general scholarship funds that the church then decides how to distribute rather than paying for a specific youth's trip by name. In short, people can give directly to the church in support of a general "Youth Scholarship Fund" and even come to a thank-you spaghetti supper with videos and testimonies after the trip is done and have their donations considered tax deductible. If you sell tickets to that same spaghetti supper, those would not be tax deductible for your donors.

Again, check with a professional before implementing new policies, but we would be remiss if we didn't mention taxes when we talk about fundraising. Also, for additional support on budgeting and finances, make sure to read our [Crash Course on Administration](#).

05 GOOD IDEAS THAT MAY BE NEW TO YOU

OK, NOW FOR THE REASON YOU PROBABLY DOWNLOADED THIS ARTICLE—FUNDRAISING IDEAS WE’VE SEEN WORK OTHER PLACES THAT YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD OF (AND SOME YOU HAVE).

When considering a new fundraiser, remember that success in some other part of the world doesn’t mean success in your part. Make sure you talk to local leaders and see which they think are non-starters and which get their fundraising interests piqued.

Donation Subscription

The pitch for this fundraiser is that you might be able to do away with all your fundraisers with a single campaign. If your congregation has fundraiser fatigue, this is for you! All you do here is total all the fundraising you need each year, divide it by your worship attendance, and then divide that result by 12. (For example, \$20,000 annual need for fundraising / 85 average worship attendance = \$235.29. Now take \$235.29/12 to get \$19.60. If you could get 85 people to automatically give your youth ministry \$19.60 per month (or \$235.29 annually or \$4.52 weekly), you would not have to organize or bother people with fundraisers! If you pursue this fundraising strategy, it is incredibly important to



get buy-in from church leadership before jumping in with both feet. Some churches see this as a slippery slope that will lead their congregation to completely designate their giving only to ministries in which they take an active part or that really excite them. That could create challenges for the church's general budget that helps keep the lights on. If church leadership buys in, then in your messaging, ensure that you communicate to the congregation that this is additional giving, beyond what they would normally give to the church as part of their generosity and tithing.

Once you calculate these figures, tell your congregation that if they can each give x amount per month, that will be all the funding you need to make the huge impact you do every year through youth ministry (and you might add you won't do any other fundraisers if you meet your goal!). Then you use a recurring giving service through anything from PayPal to Square to the ACH that your church finance office recently approved and give people the link to sign up for a subscription. As long as people keep up their monthly giving, done!

This fundraiser also has huge potential for outreach. Say you wanted a new youth or new family to be able to enjoy a youth ministry retreat or trip at no cost to them. Add \$5 or \$10 to the total you calculated and set it aside as an ongoing scholarship fund specifically to be used for welcoming new families. Church members may be willing to give a little extra, knowing that this special outreach fund now exists!

You could also consider taking your church's address and having some fun. Let's say you are at First UMC at 7238 John Wesley Way, for example. You could invite all church members to give \$72.38 annually to the youth ministry, with the promise that they will never be bothered for youth fundraisers, ever (if you hit whatever number of donors you need for your total!)

The Wall of Wonder

This harnesses the power of math to raise a lot of money. Take every number between one and wherever you want to end with and print each of them on the outside of an envelope. Then you put all the envelopes on a wall (or table... Table of wonder just doesn't have that nice alliteration) and ask everyone at church to take an envelope, fill it with a donation that matches the amount written on the envelope and return it to the church secretary or the youth office. If you do that for all the numbers between \$1 and \$100, this fundraiser can bring in \$5,050. A little bit of work, a lot of potential impact. (The formula for this is $n(n+1)/2$; just replace "n" with the highest number envelope created. So, if you start at \$1, and your biggest envelope is \$200, the potential income becomes \$20,100!)

Golf (or Other Sports) Tournament

Find a golf pro who can help you set up a tournament for golfers in your area. The tournament itself can be a little complicated if you aren't in the know, so you'll need to secure that volunteer first. Once you have a

tournament scheduled, the funds you raise will not be just from registrations. The real funds are from advertisers. Equip your students with the ability to go out to local businesses selling sponsorships that give them things like a sign at a specific hole, a sign on every golf cart, or a sign everywhere. The more exposure, the higher the sponsorship level. This is great because you can target friends of golfers in your church, not just church members. If you don't have golf pros in your congregation, who do you have who has connections to sporting facilities and could help organize a bocce ball, corn hole, ultimate frisbee, or basketball tournament?

Concessions at Sporting Events

There are opportunities at all kinds of sporting events for you to take a percentage of the concessions for that game; these could be local club sports all the way up to professional leagues. You call and agree to provide the volunteers. The sports facility will provide the food and everything you need to be able to sell concessions. At the end of the day, your group gets a percentage of the sales as opposed to hourly wages. This can also be a great way to involve your congregation without directly asking them for money. You simply invite them to come to the game and let them know you are receiving a percentage of concessions. And, if your church has its own sports league, you can get all the profit. Once you get approval, you'll go to your local wholesale store for supplies and set up your own concessions!

Additionally, if your community has larger-scale public gatherings or events (youth choirs, music festivals, plays in the park, and so on), talk with the organizers of those events to see if you can set up concessions and sell from a table or back of a pickup truck. This can be great outreach for your church in addition to potentially making some money from events where church members will already be in attendance.

Princess & Superhero Banquet

You have seen the pictures of your church members paying a ton of money to go to a character banquet at a theme park, so why not let them experience that for less money while supporting your ministry? For this fundraiser, ask your students to dress up as princesses and superheroes. (Or, if lacking motivated youth, you can hire a character impersonator for a reasonable amount and have youth volunteer to be their bodyguards and organize photo areas.) Set up a bunch of tables in long rows like a big banquet and serve child-friendly (and inexpensive) food like chicken nuggets and hot dogs. Then after the kids are seated and eating, the princesses and superheroes can mingle throughout the crowd. When everyone has finished, you can have the superheroes lead the kids in practicing cool superhero moves and even have a sing-along with a princess or two. (This is a great place to use your youth choir!) Some caution with this one: specific characters are copyrighted, so you can't advertise them by name. Stick with generic terms like "princess and superhero" as opposed to trademarked character names.

If you want to kick up the promotion ahead of time, you can have a princess or superhero standing at the table selling the tickets!

If a banquet isn't your style, consider screening movies that princesses or superheroes appear in; invite people to come in costume; and have movie snacks like popcorn and candy available for purchase. This could be done inside or outside as a drive-in movie if you have adequate projection and sound.

Grub for the Big Game

Each region has its own huge sporting event that most of the population gets excited about. Whether it's that American football championship that everybody must watch, a seven-game basketball, hockey, or baseball series, soccer tournaments, and so on, you can make money off the need for snacks and tasty foodstuffs. Everything from making subs to barbecue pork can be a quick ticket to easy funds, especially if you theme the food you offer with the event people are watching. Set up a couple weeks in advance for presale (this way you can purchase very exact amounts of food supplies and not waste food or money), gather youth and adult volunteers for an afternoon of food prep, and give your customers a pickup time that gives them plenty of time to set up for the party. (If the sporting event is, say...an American football championship that is always played on a Sunday that we cannot mention by name...have youth make the pre-orders on Saturday afternoon or early Sunday morning, then have people pick up their

orders after worship.) You could even offer delivery for an added donation—if you've got willing volunteer drivers!

Mysterious Bunny Brigade

On Saturday night before Easter Sunday, volunteer youth can help out the Easter Bunny. Volunteers go from house to house hiding eggs in the yard for that family's kids to find the next day. Parents love this fundraiser because it is one less thing for them to do on Easter; little kids love this fundraiser because of the mystery involved; and youth love this fundraiser because they get to be out on a Saturday night doing some good. Sell this mysterious hiding service by the dozen (e.g., \$12 for a dozen, \$20 for 2 dozen, extra charge for filling with candy, etc.) by advertising to parents (or the community for that matter!) in the month leading up to Easter. In the week before Easter, spend youth group (or Sunday school or Bible study, etc.) filling plastic eggs and putting them in paper bags per order, labeled with the name and delivery address. Then on the Saturday before Easter, you can load up and go along and have a bunch of fun hiding eggs and not waking up kids—or simply relaxing while youth take care of the egg hiding under cover of darkness. A few tips on this one: if your church has more plastic eggs than it knows what to do with, this is a great way to get rid of them in one year. If you need to buy plastic eggs, look for bulk deals and order in advance once you know about how many you'll need to hide. Bulk order candy for the best prices. Do not hide chocolate eggs or

eggs filled with chocolate if you live in a climate where melting will occur before Easter morning! Have parents give the age range of their children (or difficulty level of hiding preferred) on the order form; this can guide how easy or difficult youth hide the eggs. Create a letter of some kind to leave on the home's front door with a brief Easter lesson and how many eggs have been hidden.

CONCLUSION

WHETHER YOU'RE GOING TO HELP OUT THE EASTER BUNNY OR SELL PUMPKINS, GIVE PHOTO OPS AND MEMORIES WITH PRINCESSES AND SUPERHEROES, OR GO BIG WITH ENVELOPES OR FOOD, FUNDRAISERS CAN MAKE A MASSIVE FINANCIAL IMPACT.

Raising funds increases access to transformative opportunities with youth; and organizing effective fundraisers can create meaningful relationships between adults and youth in the church and with the community at large. As long as you keep evaluating and being careful about taxes, these tools and ideas can help you take your fundraising to the next level!

Finally, I recommend that you consider follow-up communication with all donors to your ministry. You and the youth who benefit from the fundraisers must be intentional about sharing stories and the impact of the generosity on the youth ministry. Can you or a volunteer coordinate handwritten thank-you messages to donors from the youth? Is there space in worship or on a church's social media accounts for youth to share testimonies and verbally thank donors? Encouraging youth to say "thank you" helps them express gratitude and builds rapport with donors, increasing the chances of success the next time you're organizing a fundraiser.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [Top Five Reasons to Read Henri Nouwen's 'A Spirituality of Fundraising'](#) by Scott Gilpin
- [Field Preachers: A Church Planting Podcast - Episode 58](#) by Rachel Gilmore

