

Can charitable agencies be saved? It's a matter of faith

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Churches seek ways to ease the pain of United Way's cuts.
By Tim Funk

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As United Way gets ready to make deep cuts to scores of charities, Charlotte houses of worship have begun asking whether — and how — the faith community can fill the gap, to make sure the growing number of hurting people get served.

“We talk about it all the time,” says the Rev. James Howell of Myers Park United Methodist Church. “The United Way cliff: We're about to fall off of it. What can we do?”

The United Way will soon announce allocation cuts of as much as 40 percent to agencies. That's because of a \$15 million drop in donations, to \$30 million.

Individual churches, including Howell's, have anticipated the cuts by sending more and bigger gifts to some of the 90-plus agencies. Plus, Mecklenburg Ministries is co-sponsoring a “community conversation” at the end of this month to raise awareness and discuss possible actions to help nonprofits and the people they serve.

So far, though, no plans have emerged for a church-led communitywide effort to help agencies, including small charities that could be forced to close if the cuts are too deep. A joint campaign by houses of worship could come later, after the cuts are announced June 23.

“Once we know exactly who is going to be negatively impacted — the faith community will be able to say: ‘Here are some things we'd really like to continue,’” says the Rev. David Chadwick of Forest Hill Church, who says he's spoken with Howell. “It's been on my heart that maybe some of us should lead that parade.”

Will churches come to the rescue?

“We're in the test now,” says Crisis Assistance Ministry board member Shay Merritt, who also sees roles for businesses and others. “(Charlotte) has always taken a lot of pride in supporting the arts and those in need. Now we're going to see who's invested.”

One big complication: With the sour economy, collection plates at many churches and synagogues are lighter, causing some to lay off staff, slow building projects and, yes, cut back on what they give to charities.

“Some are saying: ‘We're having a hard time paying the bills,’” reports the Rev. George Thompson, head of the Charlotte district of the United Methodist Church. He's encouraged his churches to do what they can.

Says Howell: “If all the churches could step up, that would ameliorate most of (the United Way reductions). But

churches are cutting, too.”

Opportunity for partnership

Charlotte's churches have a history of leadership in tough times: During another nasty recession, in the mid-1970s, a group of churches in Dilworth and Myers Park launched Crisis Assistance Ministry, which continues to help people struggling to pay their rent and utility bills, as well as Loaves & Fishes, a food bank, and Friendship Trays, which serves senior citizens.

The current recession could also become an opportunity “for greater collaboration and partnership,” says Maria Hanlin, who heads Mecklenburg Ministries, an interfaith group of nearly 90 houses of worship and religious organizations.

On June 30, Mecklenburg Ministries, Community Building Initiative and the Community Relations Committee will sponsor a 90-minute panel discussion, featuring representatives from nonprofits, Mecklenburg County government and the Charlotte Chamber. It will start at 7 p.m. at Little Rock AME Zion Church.

“We hope it'll lead to a plan,” Hanlin says. “We know that the faith community is a big part of the solution. . . . This (need) is greater than any one congregation. Together, we can do so much more.”

Catholic Social Services would also be interested in joining any effort, says Elizabeth Thurbee, executive director. “As we move through the summer,” she says, “we'll be in a better position to know where we are and how we can collaborate effectively.”

What form that help could take is evolving. One suggestion floated by Rabbi Murray Ezring of Temple Israel calls for each house of worship to help at least one agency in trouble.

“Imagine how much good we could do,” Ezring says, “if we spread it around rather than do one big thing?”

Good Shepherd steps up

Though many of their pews aren't as crowded as they were during that rescue effort in the mid-1970s, the city's houses of worship still enjoy the public's trust. That's a trait that would seem to make them good candidates to fill any vacuum.

This respect for religion is especially pronounced in the South, which, surveys say, has long led the nation's other regions in average household giving to churches.

One church where collections are actually way up is Good Shepherd United Methodist in Steele Creek. It recently gave 10 percent of the \$410,000 from its capital campaign to Crisis Assistance, a United Way agency that could see its allocation cut by \$100,000.

“To have any integrity,” says Good Shepherd pastor Talbot Davis, “we also had to give to the community.”

While they brace for the United Way cuts, some agencies have been reaching out to churches. And vice versa.

The Relatives, which relies on United Way for almost 10 percent of its operating budget, helps teenagers who have run away, are homeless or have a crisis at home. To stave off any cutbacks in service — it housed 264 kids since July, and 1,113 called its crisis hot line — the agency has been trying to boost its grants, donations and volunteers from

churches.

“We’re really trying to make sure churches know what we do here,” says Brennon Graham, the executive director.

Also contacting houses of worship: KinderMourn, which counsels parents who have lost children and kids grieving over the death of a family member or friend. The agency, which also trains hospital chaplains and nurses, gets a quarter of its budget from United Way.

“It ain’t going to be pretty,” KinderMourn’s Pat Jones says of the cuts. “We’re doing all we can to keep the door open.”

Individual churches are offering cash, volunteers, even office space.

Christ Episcopal Church is sending additional money to its 22 charitable partners, a lot of them United Way agencies, and is planning to do more, says Aimee Norman, director of outreach and mission.

“The community needs to know that we will be there for them,” she says.

With the recession, Park Road Baptist has had to cut expenses 10 percent. But, says the Rev. Amy Jacks Dean, co-pastor, “generosity isn’t always about money.” So instead of sending a big check, the church offered space, volunteers and expertise to two charities that needed all those things.

The church put off plans to renovate its old chapel for weddings and funerals; instead, the space went, rent-free, to Loaves & Fishes, which needed another place to give out food. Church members also built a sidewalk, installed phone lines and put up a temporary wall.

Also housed at the church: a Crisis Assistance office that, because of increased workload, had to increase its hours of operation to five days a week.

“Churches can look to creative ways to respond,” says the Rev. Russ Dean, the other co-pastor.

Great role in time of need

United Way board chairman Carlos Evans, a member of First Presbyterian Church, says he’s aware some houses of worship have limited financial resources right now.

Still, he says, he would welcome any help churches, synagogues and others could offer.

“It’s a great role for them to play,” he says. “The needs have never been greater and we all have to pull together.”