



## **Miracle Sunday – A Year's Income in A Day** **As presented by Rev. Dr. Wayne C. Barrett**

In the early 1980s we were confronted with a fund-raising dilemma. Churches needed major building improvements, but the traditional fund-raising strategies based upon pledges and amortizations were rendered inoperative by high mortgage rates. Double-digit interest rates quadrupled the total cost of building projects financed over long periods of time. Eroding the fund-raising potential further was an “iffy” economy marked by inflation and uncertainty regarding employment. These economic issues made long-term pledging difficult as people were reluctant to make major commitments amid such uncertainty. What could be done to raise the capital needed funds in such an environment? Driven by desperation, pure inspiration, or divine intervention, we began to encourage congregations to break out of the cycle of debt-driven capital projects and solicit current gifts instead of pledges. Eliminating pledging as the primary funding strategy had the following implications:

- It reduced the anxiety regarding the future economy since no long-term commitment was required
- It reduced the potential for capital fund-raising to erode the giving base in future years
- It focused the responsibility for contributions upon a more limited constituency, those who could make a current gift (usually older donors)
- It lowered the risk of fund-raising, since whatever happened would be completed in a comparatively short period of time and even potential failure would be of short duration

In the context of these issues, we designed a fund-raising program that stressed current gifts rather than pledges, “gifts” rather than cash, and contributions from donor capital rather than donor income. The result was an intensive campaign culminating in a major offering received on one day, which came to be known as “Miracle Sunday.”

## **What Exactly is Miracle Sunday?**

Miracle Sunday is much like a traditional capital funding campaign, except that on a targeted Sunday donors make an offering of gifts – cash, checks, securities – rather than pledge cards. Results from a successful Miracle Sunday will be within a range of 75%-125% of the current operating budget. A congregation with an operations budget of \$200,000 may expect a Miracle Sunday offering of \$150,000 - 250,000. Exceptions to this principle would be congregations with a young, homogeneous membership who will raise a little less and small congregation with a few major donors who can be expected

to raise more. Indeed, we have worked with smaller congregations who have raised over 250% of the operating budget in a single day thanks to a few lead gifts.

### What Isn't Miracle Sunday?

A successful Miracle Sunday is much more than a “special offering.” We often hear from churches that they have had a targeted offering that raised 20-25% of the budget in a day. Although these may have used the “Miracle Sunday” nomenclature, they are really just special offerings.

Miracle Sunday is not another name for Commitment Sunday where pledges are received. While some congregations with particularly large projects (2-4 times budget) have had success with a combination of current gifts and future pledges, we recommend limiting Miracle Sunday to receiving current gifts.

Miracle Sunday is not a gimmick that will raise money when other strategies have failed. An unpopular project remains an unpopular project whether the donor is asked to pledge or make a current gift. Much of the mixed results of unsuccessful Miracle Sundays can be traced to congregations attempting to use this as a “strategy of last resort” after traditional efforts have failed.

## **What Makes Miracle Sunday Work?**

The driving principles of a successful Miracle Sunday are:

- Many people, particularly older members, can make their entire contribution all at once rather than spread over 156 weeks
- Money is much more valuable to the congregation “up front” rather than trickling in over a period, and contributions are not subject to “shrinkage” as are virtually all pledge campaigns
- A dramatic fund-raising event is more exciting (and fun!) to promote than another pledge campaign in which “just a little more” is solicited
- There is substantially more giving potential available when gifts of capital are encouraged – gifts of appreciated property or more beyond the cost of a cash gift
- It enables a congregation to determine quickly whether sufficient support exists for the proposed project
- Because gifts come primarily from your most committed members, some liberties can be taken with promotion

## **Steps Toward A Successful Miracle Sunday**

### **1. Organization (4-6 Weeks)**

Miracle Sundays do not “just happen.” They are the result of careful organization and preparation. Allow a period of 4-6 weeks to recruit the necessary leadership, develop an outline of tasks to be accomplished, and establish a plan that will take you to completion.

At a minimum you will need a committee in which the following skills are resident:

- A leader who can move the group, and, ultimately, the entire congregation
- An organizer who can put the pieces together and deal with the considerable detailed work
- A promoter who can develop a plan for publicity and promotion

- A “project person” who serves as a liaison between the Miracle Sunday committee and the relevant project groups – building committee, organ committee, trustees, etc.
- A major gift prospect who can relate to other major donors as a peer

There may well be additional skills or personalities you will recruit to supplement the gifts and graces described above. Depending upon the availability of professional church staff you may need to include secretarial or support skills in the make-up of your committee. One step we would not recommend, however, is to appoint the current Building Committee to become the Miracle Sunday leadership. While the committee has considerable project-expertise and enthusiasm, such a committee seldom is recruited based on their potential for fund-raising success. The fresh perspective of new people is critical to the task of putting together an effective fund-raising organization.

## 2. Kick-Off (1-2 Weeks)

Only when a strong campaign organization is in place and a clear timeline up to and beyond Miracle Sunday exists are you ready to announce the Miracle Sunday campaign to the entire congregation. The announcement of both a Miracle Sunday date and a financial goal is the beginning of the campaign proper.

The Worship service provides an excellent forum for kick-off announcements. The first week's announcement must be dramatic and exciting.

Letter #1 – The first all-congregation mail piece serves to announce the date of Miracle Sunday, the purpose of the funds to be raised, and a clear statement that the Miracle Sunday offering will be made up of gifts do not pledge. While the letter may come from the entire committee, it should bear the signature of a single individual. This person does not need to be the chair of the committee but must be a leader with high credibility within the congregation. In addition to the announcement function, it should include an invitation to Meeting #1 – a project-oriented meeting described below.

An important component of both the first letter and any other kick-off announcement is the publication of your Miracle Sunday financial goal. If you cannot establish a financial goal that you are willing to announce to the congregation, you may not be ready for Miracle Sunday. It may be helpful for the goal to be expressed as a range, perhaps 75% - 100% of current church income.

This range will provide flexibility while still establishing the important “target” that the goal will be substantial. We encourage a goal that closely parallels 100% of church income for the preceding year.

### 3. Promotion (5-6 Weeks)

After the initial announcement of Miracle Sunday and its attendance goals and expectations, the promotion phase will continue up to the actual Miracle Sunday itself.

**Meeting #1** – As announced in your first mailing, the first meeting provides a forum to make your case regarding the project for which Miracle Sunday funds will be committed. The responsibility for this event can be shared with the appropriate body who will receive the benefit of Miracle Sunday proceeds – trustees, building committee, organ committee, etc. This group presumably will be most knowledgeable regarding your proposed project. Invite them to design and resource a meeting where:

- The proposed beneficiary project is described
- Care is given to detailing the project's benefits
- There is much opportunity (and expectation) for questions from the audience
- Potential donors come away with a clear picture of what their contributions will be used for.

It is important to note that previous forums where the project has been discussed, even voted on, cannot replace the need for this project-centered meeting. The primary reason this is necessary is that a discussion or authorizing meeting will create quite a different context. People will have a different attitude when the project is about to be funded.

Note: Each of the two meetings is important enough to schedule when the maximum potential for participation exists. Strive to have meetings when you can attract a crowd. “Prime time” for your congregation may be on a Sunday when most of your people are already at church. If your meetings are scheduled in a way which requires participants to return to church, in the evenings perhaps you will need to provide an additional drawing card, such as a meal or dessert.

**Major Gift Development** -Perhaps the greatest determinant of success or failure in a Miracle Sunday campaign is the degree of success in receiving lead or major gifts. Such gifts “make or break” any capital fund development including Miracle Sunday. Traditional fund-raising theory suggests that you will rarely raise more than 10 times the largest single gift. A \$100,000 goal, for example, will require a \$10,000 single gift, \$500,000 will require a \$50,000 gift, and so on.

Sometime after the announcement of your Miracle Sunday, and before Meeting #2 (see below), you will need to contact those donors whose gifts will have the greatest influence on the success of the campaign. In general, the determinants of who is included in such major gift contacts are:

- Those whose potential gift is \$10,000 or more
- Those whose potential gift is “major” in terms of its impact upon your campaign, even though it may be less than \$10,000
- Your top 10 current donors

A small major gift task force should make personal contact on all major gift prospects. I say “contact,” because this is not a solicitation. You will not need to ask for money at this time. The contact is to clarify the donor prospect’s attitude toward the campaign and their likelihood of making a lead gift.

The content of this personal contact may be no more than asking two questions and making an invitation. The first question is, “What are you hearing about our Miracle Sunday campaign?” We express this as “what are you hearing,” because we do not wish to make the prospect defensive. What they tell us may be their own opinion, but they do not need to claim it – it is merely something they have “heard.” Eliciting this response gives you an opportunity for rumor control. Occasionally, a fine project will fail due to misunderstandings and ambiguity. People may be confused over cost, project sequence, or the nature of Miracle Sunday itself. Identifying such issues early among this critical major gift constituency may allow you to redeem an otherwise lost cause. If the donor prospect merely misunderstands any element of the project, this contact is the ideal time to correct it.

If you reach a time when the reaction to “What are you hearing...” appears positive, you may ask the second question: “And how are you feeling about Miracle Sunday?” No matter what the prospect’s response may be – positive, negative, or neutral – it is important to remind them of the importance of their gift to the campaign’s success.

Finally, invite these prospects to Meeting #2. Their giving potential is great enough that even incremental increases that might arise from their participation will produce a meaningful return.

**Letter #2** – This second mailing recaps much of what was in the first letter: announcement of the Miracle Sunday, emphasis that this will be a collection of gifts rather than pledges, plus the establishment of a goal. In addition to this repeated information, the second letter should include an

invitation to Meeting #2, described below. It is usually a good idea for Letter #2 to be signed by someone other than a signatory of Letter #1. This rein-forces the fact that Miracle Sunday has wide support, a critical issue in any fund-raising effort.

**Meeting #2** – This meeting is designed to present new giving strategies that have the effect of raising the sights of key donors. It may be helpful to give this meeting an intriguing title such as, “How to Give More at Less Cost” or some such appellation. This is your best opportunity to help motivated donors to discover the most effective and satisfying ways for them to make their gift.

Among the contents you will want to present at Meeting #2 are:

- Giving out of assets as well as income
- Identifying assets that can be the source of the donor’s gift
- Tax implications of giving property (special emphasis should be placed on donating appreciated securities and real estate)
- Some suggestions of “idle assets” that can be satisfying gifts – cash value life insurance, collectibles, etc. (encourage donors to liquidate these items and bring cash on Miracle Sunday)
- A gift annuity program through the United Methodist Foundation of Michigan or its equivalent is an excellent way for older donors to replace any income lost through gifts of investments

The purpose of the “How to Give” meeting is not to hype the Miracle Sunday, nor to encourage anyone to give beyond their true commitment to the program. The purpose, rather, is to present new giving strategies in hope that this will pique interest in more substantial giving than traditional “special offerings.” Because the goal of Miracle Sunday is so far beyond the usual, new strategies establish the important principle that this will require more than merely writing another check.

For this reason, a reliable measure of potential Miracle Sunday success is the size and responsiveness of the audience at Meeting #2. When the attendance for this meeting is much below 50% of worship attendance, committee leaders should view this with alarm. If most of your active members will not participate in learning new giving strategies, they have already made up their minds about their Miracle Sunday gift. This phenomenon is deadly, because it means such persons will give as they usually do – in small amounts not likely to make a miracle happen.

**Letter #3** may well be the most critical part of the entire promotional effort. This letter is a testimonial from at least one member of the congregation who enjoys complete respect from the other members. Every congregation has some people who are admired by the membership and whose opinions are held in highest regard. Such people must be recruited to write testimonial letters.

The longer I am involved in fund development in the church the more convinced I become that today's donors do not give money to institutions or causes. The modern donor is only giving to other people. The testimonial letter is your best opportunity to place a human face on your project.

There is power in a testimony. This influence is most strongly felt among the ambivalent, those who do not feel strongly one way or another. Often the catalytic effect of a fellow member declaring their support for a project is all that is needed to bring others aboard. Work at finding the right spokesperson for this task.

If members of your congregation are diverse, you may wish to have multiple testimonies drawn from representatives of the key constituencies of your church. While it is good to include newcomers and younger donors, it is critical that at least one of your testimonials be made by a mature long-time member. It is from the older constituency, after all, that you'll receive most your lead gifts.

Letter #4 is the final component of your promotional work. This is the Pastoral Letter. The message of the pastor need not say anything more than "I believe in this project." Many older members will not give complete support to any project the pastor is not clearly supporting. The pastor's message is meant to make it clear that all parties, including the clergy, are on board.

#### **4. Miracle Sunday (One Week)**

The great day has arrived. What should the Miracle Sunday service look like? The dominant theme for the day should be celebration and high expectations.

Because this will undoubtedly be the largest offering in your church's history, it should be given a great deal of special emphasis.

Have the offering early in the service to enable a tabulation to be completed before folks go home. If your tradition is to pass plates among the pews, why not have worshippers bring their gifts to the front of the sanctuary? Use a special receptacle such as a large basket or something graphic (a model of the new building, for example) to receive the gifts.

Make available special offering envelopes (No. 10 or larger) that will accommodate occasional non-cash gifts such as securities or life insurance.

Arrange for counters to tabulate the offering so that a total can be announced by the end of the service. If your congregation has more than one worship service, you will want to develop a special all-church event following the last service for this total to be announced. Have a meal or a special coffee hour to bring everyone together for the announcement of the Miracle Sunday results.

Miracles in the church are exciting. The atmosphere is dramatically charged as morale skyrockets and a powerful “can do” feeling pervades the congregation. If you have a valid project, a motivated congregation, and a firm belief in miracles you can experience Miracle Sunday at your church.