A broader appeal: How crowdfunding inspires creative ministry

by Adam J. Copeland in the May 27, 2015 issue

Cover illustration by James Yang

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow tells the story of Glenn D. McMurry, a young man born in 1917 who wrote an autobiography about his life in rural Kansas. McMurry writes about his Methodist church and describes a method of raising money used by the congregation when a particular need arose. The leader of the finance committee would explain how much money was needed. The secretary would write the financial goal on the board, and then the chair would ask, “Who’ll give 25 dollars?”

When hands went up, the secretary dutifully noted the names of the donors and subtracted the total pledged from the goal. “Now who’ll give 20 dollars?” the chair would ask. “Usually,” McMurry said, “they were able to get what they needed.”

For congregations, this was a pre-Internet version of Kickstarter, a crowdfunding website where an individual or group raises money for particular purposes by asking for financial backing from those who support the cause.

We can trace crowdfunding back through history to the time when Bach, Brahms, and Beethoven each had wealthy patrons. Today many musicians still rely on commissioned work for reliable income. But because of crowdfunding, the historic, reliable patronage system has gone viral: today anyone can become a backer of any project. Last fall, for example, the South Carolina Philharmonic commissioned a new work by Dan Visconti. Using Kickstarter, the group raised $7,150 from 93 backers and exceeded their goal. The piece will debut this year.

Founded by three young entrepreneurs active in the arts community, Kickstarter is the largest crowdfunding platform in what has become known as the crowdfunding industry, one facet of the growing “collaborative economy” (think Uber, Airbnb, etc.). Other crowdfunding companies include Indiegogo, GoFundMe, Razoo, and CrowdRise.

Kickstarter has successfully funded more than 75,000 projects from over 7.5 million backers to the tune of more than $1.4 billion. Its approach is relatively narrow. Projects must be creative: launching a new record, sponsoring time to write a book or make art, or bringing a prototype to completion and eventually to market.

The Kickstarter web platform makes giving simple. If a project makes its funding goal, Kickstarter takes 5 percent of the proceeds. If a project does not meet its funding goal, the project’s backers are not charged and Kickstarter receives no money. Other companies operate differently. Indiegogo, for example, has two categories of campaigns. If a Flexible Funding campaign fails to reach its goal, it is still partially funded, but the site charges a 9 percent fee; if the campaign is successful, the site charges 4 percent, or 3 percent if the funds go to a verified nonprofit.

Kickstarter encourages project creators to offer incentives for giving. For example, a campaign that receives a $25 gift toward a project to self-publish a book may send the backer a signed copy of the book. Small donations may bring an “air hug,” thank-you postcard, or one’s name on a recognition list. Donations of $1,000 or more often come with an invitation to a Skype session or meal with the project creators.

Crowdfunding is not, however, an investment platform; the system does not allow cash payouts. The returns come in the form of the proposed products or experience. Project launchers use a template to describe their project, often a short video that

describes the plan and indicates why the project is worthwhile. On Kickstarter, potential gift dollar amounts and rewards line the right-hand column of the project page.

As a faith leader I'm drawn to crowdfunding for three reasons. First, the platform encourages generosity. (I do not mean that giving to a crowdfunding platform is always an act of generosity. Some campaigns are actually structured very similar to traditional financial transactions.) When I gave $50 to a documentary project on Indiegogo, I did so not because I'll receive a DVD of the documentary but because I support the aims of the film, which will tell the story of a community fighting to keep its way of life amid the North Dakota oil boom.

Henri Nouwen once described the work of fund-raising as "proclaiming what we believe in such a way that we offer other people an opportunity to participate in our vision and mission." Indiegogo gave people the chance to participate in making a documentary. The campaign has raised over $22,000 and received 745 shares on Facebook, and it gave me the opportunity to give to something I value.

Crowdfunding can also be used by churches. This religious potential is the second reason for my interest. Churches that use crowdfunding report mostly positive experiences, yet few churches have taken advantage of the platform. One that did is the Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In a difficult year, leaders decided to eliminate a staff position. Jennifer Frayer-Griggs was responsible for organizing the Table Ministry, a community meal on Tuesday and Thursday evenings that provides hot meals and community for more than 200 people, most of them living on the margins. Cutting her staff position made the future of the Table Ministry uncertain.

Frayer-Griggs went on Facebook to ask her friends if they thought it'd be possible to crowdfund her position. When they said yes, she met with the church finance council. After developing a strategy and praying for God's guidance, the church launched an $8,500 campaign for the Table Ministry and Outreach. It worked. After only 60 days, 94 funders had pledged $10,700 on Indiegogo.

In a 2012 blog post at the YouthWorker Movement website, Todd Lovell argued that the church could learn from crowdfunding sites. He says that people today want to give to a specific cause about which they are passionate rather than fund a general, unified church budget. (The Table Ministry campaign may have worked because the

church featured a particular piece of its budget.) Faith-related organizations have caught on to this trend and are using crowdfunding campaigns to fund the work of the gospel with “asks” that tend to be for specific projects.

Third, I admire the ability of crowdfunding sites to spur creativity. As Kickstarter suggests, crowdfunding is more than fund-raising. It’s about “supporting their dream to create something they want to see exist in the world.” Giving to Kickstarter is contagious: it passes on to the giver some of the thrill associated with making a dream come true. Amanda Palmer successfully launched a book, album, and tour on Kickstarter. “There’s just something magical about Kickstarter,” she says.

Palmer also describes a sense of community that develops among the artists and backers of an artist’s project. Leaders of the church-related projects agree that crowdfunding helps build community.

Humble Walk Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, describes itself as a “teeny-tiny church that has a big heart, and a very small budget.” In 2013, members commissioned songs for worship from local artists who were on grant-funded “worship art” residencies at Humble Walk. The congregation wanted to share the compositions and turned to Kickstarter with a “Humble Walk Artist Compilation” campaign of $8,000. Thirty-two days later they had raised over $9,000. Jodi Houge, pastor and mission developer, says that after a few meetings with their creative team, “We just put it out there.” They shot the campaign’s video in one take on a cell phone.

The notion of spirit-filled creation permeates the way Houge talks about the process: “Artists got to write songs. Our studio people got to do what they are created to do. We get to give it all away. And, we got to invite others along in the process.” Her comments echo Kickstarter’s rhetoric: “Our mission is to help bring creative projects to life.”

Looking back, Houge admits that her team did not accurately anticipate how much time and energy it would take to mail copies of the CD compilation to project backers, but she still recommends the process to other churches with a creative idea. “How do you know if it will work unless you try?”

Last summer Broad Street Ministry, a church and social service ministry in the heart of Philadelphia, launched a $150,000 Kickstarter campaign to start Rooster Soup Company, a new line of restaurants. The church would partner with a Philadelphia-

based restaurant chain that disposes of more than 1,000 pounds of excess chicken parts each week. Instead of paying to have the chicken removed, restaurateurs Steve Cook and Mike Solomonov would use the leftover parts in Rooster Soup Company restaurants. Net profits would go to—you may have guessed—Broad Street's Hospitality Collaborative.

When BSM leaders launched the Kickstarter campaign, they wrote, "Instead of a one-time donation, your Kickstarter dollars will help us build a perpetual money machine: nearly free chicken stock in, jobs and donations out."

Founding pastor Bill Golderer emphasized that support for the campaign would indicate that backers believed in the values of the campaign. The campaign page used language like "radical hospitality" and "shared values" instead of Christo-centric language. Pastor Andy Greenhow wrote:

> As with Broad Street Ministry as a whole, stakeholders came from a wide variety of places. Some just wanted a damn good soup restaurant. . . . Some were interested in the social mission of BSM. Some love Jesus and gave because he told them to. Some gave because they believe in Broad Street Ministry's identity. . . . We wanted everyone, no matter their motivation, to be able to buy into the project and see it how they wanted to see it.

Ultimately, the campaign attracted 1,587 backers, raised over $179,000, and anticipates generating $100,000 for Broad Street's mission each year.

St. Lydia's Dinner Church in Brooklyn, New York, launched a campaign for $30,000 in 2013. Pastor Emily Scott started the church five years ago in her apartment, as the Indiegogo campaign page puts it, "in collaboration with friends and colleagues, and about a million supporters like you, cheering us on as we grew." The 2013 campaign would help fund a move from a rented space to a renovated space that the church would own. Congregants had already raised $80,000 of $120,000 needed for moving costs. The Indiegogo campaign would help cover the difference.

The congregation calls itself a dinner church: on Sundays members gather for worship around a meal that they cook together. The four-minute campaign video shows clips of members talking about the uniqueness of their church and the need for the new space. As well as serving as a worship space, they explain, it will be "a spiritually focused collaborative community" space for people from the neighborhood.

The campaign raised over $33,000 from 263 funders. Scott explains that this did not happen without careful planning and a process that was all-consuming. “I basically spent a month online, replying to everyone who tweeted or posted about the campaign, thanking people, and creating Facebook posts to keep the energy of the campaign going.”

Perhaps due to the nature of the campaign, the congregation’s leaders planned more carefully than did Humble Walk’s creative team. After consulting with a friend who works in fund-raising, Scott obtained prelaunch commitments so that the campaign could announce having 10 percent of the campaign money raised before it launched. Leaders also reserved some promised gifts to spur giving during the campaign’s final week. Yet the hard work didn’t discourage the team. As Scott says, “Everyone felt like they had a role to play, and the energy and excitement of the campaign was contagious.”

Scott credited crowdfunding for other benefits. “A campaign like this builds community in a serious way,” she said. “A few days into the campaign, I realized that I wasn’t the only one refreshing my browser every few minutes to see when the donations were coming . . . it was an exciting thing that the community could participate in, and it built a lot of ownership.” Although the congregation’s Sunday meals draw around 50 people each week, the Indiegogo campaign was shared more than 2,200 times on Facebook.

Anna Woofenden, pastor of a new church plant in San Pedro, California, used Razoo for a campaign. The website allows donors to pledge one-time, weekly, monthly, or annual gifts. “Seed Money for the Garden Church” asked for both one-time and recurring monthly gifts. This option aligned well with the Garden Church’s goal to raise $2,000 a month from a team of regular givers.

According to Razoo, the campaign raised $4,320, but since the website tracks only the first month’s gifts, this number is somewhat misleading. Woofenden says that three-quarters of those who gave to the campaign would probably not have given in other ways. She also measures success in the “sheer building of community and relationships and people who are engaged,” not to mention the more than 50 additional names added to the church’s mailing list. Since those who donate once are more likely than others to donate again, Woofenden credits even one-time gifts as a “total success.”

Other successful church-related campaigns have launched in recent months. The Bridge Fair Trade Market and Coffee House, a faith community in St. Charles, Missouri, raised $24,000 on Kickstarter to help it move to a larger space. Faith-related singer/songwriters have recorded records or launched album tours with the help of crowdfunding. Indiegogo even has a religion category, although a general search revealed a surprising number of campaigns that have received little or no funding. Often these are never even promoted on Facebook, which suggests a campaign's lack of sophistication, support, and planning.

Established congregations can organize successful crowdfunding campaigns; in fact, their broad networks and firm financial foundations are a good starting point for crowdfunding. For the best chance of success, congregations should consider crowdfunding campaigns, not for funding the annual budget, but for supplemental, innovative, specific projects.

Crowdfunding helps broaden a church's financial support network and encourages additional gifts from those who regularly contribute. Emily Scott emphasizes that a crowdfunding campaign "gives [people] an opportunity to be part of something that they really want to make or help build."

Apparently the spirit of giving is alive at crowdfunding sites. It's time for more churchpeople to join the crowd.