

ANTICIPATING THE EFFECTS OF THE U.S. ECONOMY ON CONGREGATIONAL GIVING IN 2008-2009

Tips for Unitarian Universalist Congregation Leaders
By Laurel Amabile, Director of the Annual Program Fund

Like many religious and nonprofit organizations, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations is feeling the adverse affects of the slowing U.S. economy. It looks like this trend will continue to have an impact for months to come. A recent [Advancing Philanthropy](#) article by Mary Ellen Collins, *Enjoy the Ride: How to effectively raise funds in a roller-coaster economy*, offers some advice that may help congregations manage the challenges successfully.

According to the article, professional fundraisers agree that the best strategies for successful fundraising during unpredictable economic times involve foundational elements of philanthropic fundraising.

- **Appealing Mission Statement**—a dynamic and unique mission appeals to people’s interest in the value of the organization and the causes it supports.

Unitarian Universalists need to know their contributions to their congregations, districts and UUA make a difference because these entities are making a difference in the wider world. We must be prepared individually and collectively to articulate our UUA and APF mission, purposes and principles in appealing and compelling ways that elicit high levels of giving and support.

- **Acknowledge the impact of the economy on the organization’s ability to fulfill its mission.**

Nurturing relational bonds within congregations and among congregations strengthens Unitarian Universalism and our ministry in the wider community. It is important for congregants to know their congregation is a valued part of a covenantal association of congregations and district structure. Careful tracking of giving activity is necessary in the coming months. Leaders can watch for warning signs or trends that suggest unpredicted shortfalls or financial distress.

When faced with difficult financial choices, leaders are encouraged to connect with their District and UUA offices for helpful fundraising and stewardship information, resources, and services: (www.uua.org/aboutus/professionalstaff/congregationalservices/) Congregation leaders must also be responsive to their member’s questions, ready with information about the congregation’s stewardship program and funding needs, and proactive in their communication on financial matters.

- **Avoid dramatic shifts in fundraising methods and changes in staffing.**

Most congregations rely on the members of their professional and support staff to maintain the week-to-week functions and ministries, particularly in the area of record-keeping and finance. At times of heightened anxiety or crisis the pastoral and programmatic needs of the congregants and surrounding community can increase. Staff and lay leaders must work together to develop and model effective stewardship methods and practices that sustain their congregations financially.

- Keep public relations and marketing strong.

As you know, the UUA conducted a major national advertising campaign this year. Our President Bill Sinkford has worked throughout his tenure to increase our visibility through public witness, media coverage, and partnering with organizations with common values. The UUA website has been completely redesigned to be more visitor-friendly. Our Association has increased its marketing staff and is working with marketing professionals to develop appealing and compelling print materials for UUA programs. For more information contact: marketingoutreach@uua.org.

At the local level, congregations can make use of available UUA marketing materials and resources: www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/marketing/congregational/index.shtml Website development resources for congregations can be found at the Prairie Star District's host website: <http://www.firstunitariansociety.org/templateproject/>

- Keep the organization “recession-proof” by spreading the enthusiasm about what the organization is doing.

As Unitarian Universalist leaders, it is essential to talk in positive ways our UU faith, our congregations, and the wider Association: what we are excited about, how we support the organization financially, and what we are doing to make good things happen. Those in staff and leadership roles interact with many people—in local communities, congregations, districts, and nationally—as representatives of Unitarian Universalism. Your enthusiasm will catch peoples' interest and attract those seeking religious communities making a positive difference in the world.

- Practice openness and accountability.

Share information about how contributions are used to fulfill the congregation's mission and purpose. Educate congregants about the importance supporting Unitarian Universalist values and the appropriate infrastructure and systems necessary to sustain the congregation and Association over time. In addition, congregation leaders and staff benefit from knowing where to find the UUA and district information online: www.uua.org and specifically UUA budget and giving information: www.uua.org/giving.

- Meet regularly with donors, if possible, informing them of the organization's needs. Invite questions.

A relational approach to stewardship and annual fundraising is essential to sustain the highest levels of generosity and giving in the congregation. Regular personal contacts throughout the year via phone, email, and postal mail are critical to promoting strong relational ties to the congregation and wider organization. Individuals need to know they are valued and important to their congregation beyond any financial contributions they make. Saying “Thank You” in as many ways possible is a priority.