



Inspiration from Fundraising History

The Civil Rights Movement

By Holly Fincke

EVER READ OR SEE A DOCUMENTARY about a social movement and wonder, “Now, where did the money come from to make that happen?” Rarely is the answer obvious. It’s as if past movements never had to fundraise.

The information void is part of, and feeds into, the idea that money is a dirty distraction from the real business of organizing for social change. But what if we knew more about how fundraisers before us did their work? Maybe we’d not only avoid mistakes of the past, but we’d also be inspired to change the way we think about and carry out our fundraising activities.

One powerful example is the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and ’60s. Foundation funding came late to the Movement and certainly didn’t extend to every locality where resistance was bursting forth. And foundations put pressure on the movement to downplay more radical strategies (which is an interesting—and longer—story for another time).

Instead, the many local struggles that made up the Civil

Rights Movement supported themselves. In *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, author Aldon Morris gives strong examples of how the local movements raised all or nearly all of their money from within economically struggling black communities in the South and the North.

As Morris points out, African-Americans in Southern cities were overwhelmingly clustered in the lowest-paid and dirtiest jobs: in a typical Southern city in the 1950s, approximately 75 percent of black men worked in unskilled jobs, and 70 percent of black women were domestics or low-paid service workers.

It was from this base of mostly poor people that movements in various cities raised the money it took to make history. In Birmingham, for example, approximately \$312,000 in today’s dollars was raised over three years from the local black working class and poor community. If today’s local organizations raised even half that for their work, it would be a huge step forward in terms of financial and political independence.

So step back in time with organizer fundraisers of the Civil Rights Movement and reflect on how their example might inspire your work today.

The Community Finances Efforts Aimed at its Own Liberation

A key fundraising strategy in any city was to raise donations from churches and at church-based mass meetings. The income

Shreveport, also worked in Northern Louisiana and Northwest Texas, waging campaigns on issues ranging from bus segregation to political disenfranchisement. Many of their activities didn't require much money, but they raised what they did need by organizing through ministers and churches. This strategy prevented them from jeopardizing people's security and enabled them to tap into many sectors of the community.

Fundraising tactics had to contend with the fact that those

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from these strategies was so great, in fact, that many of these communities could wage successful campaigns with little or no help from outside the black community.

The Baton Rouge 1953 bus boycott provided the model that was followed in other cities, including for the longer bus boycott in Montgomery three years later. The success of the boycott relied on organizing carpools as an alternative transportation system. The first monies for it came through asks in black churches. Then nightly church-based mass meetings powered the strategy, action, and fundraising. Said Reverend T.J. Jemison, leader and spokesperson for the movement, "The black citizens, mainly, and a few whites, contributed enough money to pay for all the tires, and batteries, and gas and my bodyguards. And we owed nobody nothing. The black community paid for all that."

Three years later, in Birmingham, the same dynamic unfolded with huge success. According to Morris, "A Southern Conference Education Fund publication issued about 1959 reported that 'Since June, 1956, a total of \$50,000 has been raised and spent by the ACHMR (Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights), most of it on court litigation. Most of this has been contributed by the Negroes in Birmingham, many of whom make scarcely enough to live on.'"

Reverend Shuttlesworth, an ACHMR leader, later explained, "I doubt very much if we have gotten over \$8,000 from outside Birmingham in the three years in which the Movement has been organized. Our major weekly source of income is derived through weekly contributions at mass meetings." As Morris says, "In short, it was the Birmingham black community that financed efforts aimed at its own liberation."

Creativity, Leadership and a Role for All

The United Christian Movement, Inc (UCMI), based in

dependent on the white power structure could lose their jobs if they overtly identified with the movement. Dr. Simpkins of the UCMI said, "Why expose them to that for a few dollars? And if you can talk to their ministers, the ministers can preach to them. They know the message. When the old slave sings about

Bringing the Learning Home

Share the examples in this article with your organization and discuss the following questions:

- Grassroots communities powered the fundraising described here. Is your organization maximizing the interest and ability of poor and working class people to give? If not, what stands in the way? What could be done to overcome that barrier?
- Could your fundraising more strongly align with your community's culture and institutions?
- Are you giving to your organization and sharing the power of your example with others?
- Are you thinking creatively about soliciting fundraising contributions from many parts of your community, as opposed to a few?
- The Great Migration was the movement of African-Americans to the North and other parts of the country. Given the movement of people today—within regions and globally—are there ways your organization could be doing stronger fundraising with a regional, national, or global network of people and institutions?

‘There’s a great day coming’ —the old spirituals—the message is in there, and the ministers gave a certain sermon. [The people] knew what was going on. They put extra money in the collection plate. You couldn’t trace that.”

It started with the leadership showing their financial support. Dr. Simpkins said later, “Our people [members of the organization, the ministers] put their money into it. If you believe in something you put your own money into it....When we do that, you’re going to have no trouble in other people putting theirs in. People will come to you and want to give you something. ‘Cause they realize you’re putting your life on the line.”

Professionals, too, contributed. According to Morris, “Teachers were called upon to supply the movement with stencils, paper and money. At times, professional blacks placed garbage barrels at designated places for movement activists to pick up. Inside the garbage containers were the names of prominent blacks who wanted to support the movement in any way they could....Members of the UCMI secretly made contact with those named and put to use whatever services and resources they could provide....The UCMI, then, operated under the assumption that all strata of black society would support the movement.”

Following the Migration of People and Institutions

The 1956 Montgomery bus boycott was a watershed event for the Civil Rights Movement. On the ground, part of its success relied on the year-long operation of a complex alternative transportation system. Where did those resources come from?

Morris writes “The MIA (Montgomery Improvement Association) relied on both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ money....The Montgomery movement was initially organized and supported by donations collected at mass meetings. This source of support remained central to the MIA throughout the bus boycott. However, large sums of money came from outside, especially the North. This has led some writers to conclude that the Montgomery effort was successful because of the money it received from Northern white liberals. There are serious problems with this interpretation. For one thing, most of the ‘outside’ money was raised by black churches, organizations and individuals in the North. Indeed, many Northern blacks identified with the movement because they had relatives in the South and because they had found racism, not the Promised Land, in the North.”

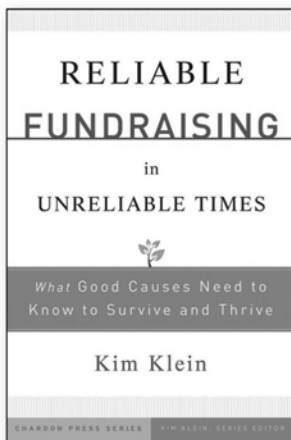
The Power of the Base

The movement in these cities and others exemplified what is possible when a movement’s time has come and when that movement truly believes in the power of its base to achieve its goals, including its fundraising goals. This history is a powerful reminder of the strength of uniting organizing and fundraising and shows that with commitment and resourcefulness, we can raise the funds to make incredible things happen. ■

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New Book Shines Light on How Grassroots Organizations Can Thrive Even During Economic Crisis

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For more information, see:

The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change, by Aldon D. Morris (Free Press, 1984).

Political Process and the Development of the Black Insurgency, 1948-1970, by Doug McAdams (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Thanks to Asian Pacific Environmental Network, which was originally interested in locating these resources to inspire their own thinking about fundraising and movement building.