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## Mission Works, Donors, Challenges

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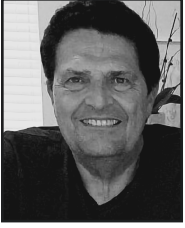
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Mr. Ray Sylvester

Mr. Ray Sylvester has served as the grants/social media coordinator for the Spiritan Office for Mission Development (SOMA) in Houston for the past seven years. He is a Seattle native, Jesuit-educated, and the father of two adult sons. His first career was in the hospitality field with Westin Hotels & Resorts, in seven U.S. cities and two in Scandinavia. With Westin he held senior positions at the corporate level as well as that of managing director of individual and groups of properties. Prior to working with the Spiritans he directed social outreach at St. Michael Catholic community and consulted for St. Mary's Seminary, both of which are in Houston.

*Circumscriptions are seeing their real estate patrimony diminish*

## MISSION WORKS, DONORS, CHALLENGES

### INTRODUCTION

Fr. Jean-Marc Sierro's article, "Money, Providence and Spiritan Mission," *Spiritan Horizons* 14 (Fall 2019) caused me to reflect on the seven years that I have been working with the Spiritan Office for Mission Advancement (SOMA). The result of that reflection is my attempt to open a broader discussion on the long-term viability of the Congregation's current mission outreach.

### PROTECTING ASSETS

Circumscriptions are seeing their real estate patrimony diminish, to such an extent that we must consider the prospect of no longer having enough to live on in the next ten or fifteen years.<sup>1</sup> Given this environment, it is prudent to extend the life of the Congregation's hard physical assets and to utilize the distribution channels available to retain and grow those donor segments providing the funds for mission projects. The increasing requests from confreres in the South for assistance to maintain present structures or to support construction of new structures are not sustainable.

Spiritan mission structures, seminaries, residences, health clinics, schools, even churches all have a natural life span that are influenced by changing times. In order to assess that lifespan, it is necessary to have a broad understanding of the present and near-term needs of a circumscription. The life of these assets can be extended through timely maintenance and by fulfilling the intended purpose or the timely re-purposing of the structure for other needs. Neglected routine maintenance and improper purposing of structures can divert funds, preventing the completion of projects of a more immediate need.

There undoubtedly are examples that can be cited where lack of maintenance has resulted in almost uninhabitable structures. One seminary deferred maintenance, rendering parts of the building unsanitary and uninhabitable. Another example was the condition of the priests' kitchen at that same location. In both cases one must ask the question, "are those acceptable conditions in which to place confreres"? Certainly, the morale of those living in such conditions can be negatively impacted, especially when help is not readily available or seen to be forthcoming.

Conditions such as these can be more efficiently addressed with the establishment of minimum standards of maintenance for structures and oversight responsibilities

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through the circumscriptions and provinces in reviewing these structures on a consistent, scheduled, basis. Such reviews allow for priorities to be established, re-purposing to be explored, and possibly combining facilities and even closing others.

Provincials and circumscriptions should have information on each structure, what the operating costs are, and the future financial needs for each, assuring that they are properly maintained. Certainly, donors expect the Congregation to be good stewards of the gifts they provide, and efficient management of structures is evidence of that good stewardship.

It is important to ensure the long-term viability of a mission project. That continuity and sustainability can be compromised by the rotation of superiors / provincials, and bursars. Projects thought important by one leadership group can take on a lesser priority by the succeeding leadership team.

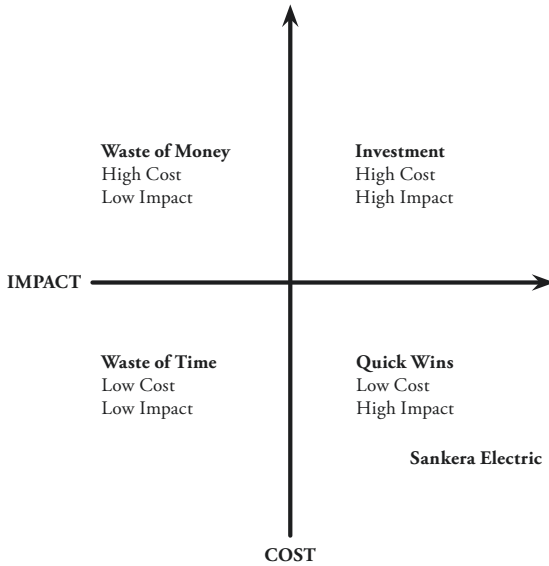
An example: in a parish, a few years ago, a pastor was faced with the presence of several widows in his congregation who had no means to support themselves and their families. The solution was to create a sewing cooperative where the women would make clothing for their families, and produce garments, such as school uniforms that would provide them with income. When inquiring about the progress of the project a few years after its inception, the “founding” pastor, now in another location lamented the fact that the project had not been continued by his successor, even though it had demonstrated the desired positive, tangible results.

## **DETERMINING NEEDS**

The question to be asked always is, “what is the best use of donated funds to build and animate mission projects?” Decisions to build a structure should be made based on real data as to how the planned structure will serve the priorities of the Congregation. Construction costs should include the furniture, fixtures, and equipment to be installed in the structure. Likewise, an operating plan for the facility should include provision for timely routine maintenance and resources to sustain the project. Armed with this acquired information and well-articulated, consistently communicated Congregation priorities, circumscriptions can make competent decision on how to proceed.

## **DETERMINING VALUE**

The following is a useful tool for assessing the viability of a proposed project. As needs are determined, they can easily be plotted on an effort/impact matrix, as a means of graphically estimating the cost of a project and of the potential number of



**Effort / Impact Matrix**

**EFFORT:** *the amount of time, money and other resources it will take to complete the project.*

**IMPACT:** *the number of people who will be served, now, and into the future.*

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lives to be affected with its successful completion. This is a useful tool for provincials whose confreres have requested approval for multiple projects, allowing all projects to be ranked in a similar fashion, and province priorities established.

A recent example of a low cost, high impact project may be useful. Holy Ghost College in Sankera, Nigeria lacked enough nighttime electrical supply, and relied solely on a costly, fuel driven generator. A project was completed at a cost of \$4,700 to connect the campus to the neighboring electric grid providing a continuous source of electricity for the 300 students and staff, during the typical, daily 12 hours of darkness. The project is also sustainable as the cost of electricity is well below that of generator fuel. In this case the project would be placed in the lower right-hand box.

**GRANT PROCESS**

The present process begins with a confrere or confreres living in situ and recognizing a need that would better serve those to whom they minister. The idea is shared with the provincial, and with his concurrence, and written approval, a project application for funding is developed.

The confrere project owner reaches out to known sources of potential or past funding. Those sources include foundations, governmental or NGOs, as well as the regional Spiritan development offices of the Congregation, such as SOMA, CESS-Kibanda, etc.

There are things that the development offices can do, and donor applicants must understand those parameters. For example, a \$50,000 grant application may represent a third of a development office's annual giving budget.

For the most part, however, I have experienced a steady realization on the part of grant applicants that they, too, must do more of the heavy lifting when it comes to fund raising.

When funding is approved by SOMA, CESS-Kibanda, etc. those development offices should place consistent funding conditions on the use of the grants, namely, to apply the monies only to the intended project as designated by the donor. A

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signed statement of acknowledgement from the applicant and superior should also be requested. The grant recipients also have a responsibility to provide progress reports, with time-dated images, as well as a final report evaluating the effectiveness of the project. Failure to provide this valuable feedback damages our relationship with donors and jeopardizes our ability to assist future grant applicants.

These foregoing activities engender credibility in the eyes of our donors and provide information that can be shared with them as to how their donations are being spent.

All projects begin with the best of intentions, yet some begin and remain uncompleted for months or years. One church project was started in 2013, and almost seven years later, it remains a shell, with an incomplete exterior and interior. The funds for completion were “promised,” but not received. In another case, a youth center was started with only 50% of the project cost in hand. It sits in an unfinished condition, open to the elements awaiting funds to complete the project. With hindsight one might question whether these were the best uses of those funds, and how much of a project’s total cost must be in hand before the approval is given to commence.

Societal needs continue to spike upward making it difficult for any single non-profit to accomplish its mission single handedly. Increasingly, agencies will choose the option to act in partnership with other like-minded organizations.

## **DONORS**

The global multitude of worthy causes has reached staggering proportions, resulting in heated competition for funding.

Job number one for provinces and circumscriptions is staying close to present donors and widening the net to those who have not heard the Spiritan story.

Although the study from Fidelity Charitable, on The Future of Philanthropy<sup>2</sup> was conducted in the U.S. in 2016, the following findings remain relevant today.

- An increasing number of donors are becoming results-focused. Donors are also more discerning about where their dollars go, what programs will their donations serve? What percentage of their gifts will be used to deliver the intended result? Do the non-profits have compelling stories demonstrating a need that their money can quickly impact? What type of feedback are they providing me as a donor?
- Donors also take advantage of social media connections to learn more about causes and to connect to issues they

*staying close to present donors and widening the net to those who have not heard the Spiritan story*

care about—another empowering tool for individual donors.

Studies indicate that the #1 reason that people donate is that the cause or organization is important to them (59%). Causes become important to people when they become aware of them, and they are compatible with their individual or family values.

*communication is the key to gaining friends of the Spiritans and retaining them*

The operative word, then, is “awareness.” How do we get the mission work of the Congregation in front of potential donors?

Not surprisingly, communication is the key to gaining friends of the Spiritans and retaining them. Today that means using various modes of communication, including emails, newsletters, direct mail and social media. In another five years new modes will emerge requiring the Congregation to continuously invest in technology as well as the on-going education of key staff members working in this area.

Fundamentally, the Congregation must shift from a passive development attitude, relying on government subsidies, annual novena, mission appeals, etc. to a more aggressive and realistic one. Simultaneously, the burden of fund raising should be one stressing that the grant applicant must be actively engaged in some form of collaborative fund raising.

Additionally, grant applicants would benefit from a broader understanding of what is realistic to raise in challenging economic times, living within their provinces’ means. One aspect of that process might call for the Congregation’s development offices to inform applicants of the annual budgets of each of those offices, and the average amount granted over past periods. An example can be found on the “grants” page of the U.S. Spiritans website.

*Every circumscription should be planning towards a sustainable future*

Every circumscription should be planning towards a sustainable future. Measurable goals should be established for growth and funding to support their confreres, and their ministries. That can be achieved, provided decisions are made to organize and leverage the resources of the Congregation towards a common goal and move away from operating in separate silos. The silo mentality can impact cooperation and results, reduce morale, and may contribute to the overall failure of this organization and its culture.

As mentioned earlier, there is tremendous competition for discretionary monies, i.e., donations from individuals and foundations. Retaining loyal donors is far cheaper than the cost to develop new donors, although efforts in both areas are essential for growth. We must stay connected to our donors, provide opportunities for them to “touch” the beneficiaries and results of their gifts, communicate with them consistently, and

provide them assurance that our work is achieving our shared goal, namely: to change lives for the better.

## CHALLENGES

Currently we are experiencing an historic global pandemic which results in additional economic and social upheaval, added to the existing crop failures and locust infestations in sub-Saharan Africa.

*COVID-19 ushered in a near global economic collapse*

COVID-19 ushered in a near global economic collapse. Personal wealth vanished for many; unemployment in the U.S. reached depths not seen since the Great Depression of the 30s. It may be years before the non-profit community returns to pre-January 2020 donation levels.

As a result of the recession of 2008–2010, total giving in the United States was reduced by 7.0% in 2008 and by another 6.2% in 2009.

*The most recent data show that the growth rate in charitable giving between 2009 and 2011 was the slowest of any two-year period since 1971 with only one exception: the recession of 2001 in the wake of the 9/11 attack.<sup>3</sup>*

At this writing, the first quarter of 2020 experienced the largest drop the Dow Jones experienced since 1987, and the World Monetary Fund was predicting the worst global recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

*It may be years before the non-profit community returns to pre-January 2020 donation levels*

For the first time, U.S. based international outreach entities that historically bring relief to developing countries are delivering their unique services here at home in America in the wake of the coronavirus. Doctors Without Borders, Feed the Children, Direct Relief MediShare, and Samaritan Purse International are but a few of them.

*CARE, an international humanitarian and development organization, announced its first-ever domestic aid initiative in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The program will provide monetary assistance, food, and essential supplies to individuals in need and at risk, including essential workers, frontline medical personnel, and caregivers, in the form of CARE Packages.<sup>4</sup>*

It is uncertain as to how long countries like Ireland and Germany will provide taxpayer funds for international mission projects. Fr. Michael Begley, C.S.Sp., Director of CESS-Kibanda is forecasting a 50% funding drop over the next two years from these countries.



This situation has obvious implications for continuing the historic level of U.S. charitable funds moving from North to South.

Not all U.S. non-profits will suffer equally, however. Those with a history of transparency, successful delivery, and well communicated, compelling stories of need will continue to find support for their missions. These include local food banks, churches, and other community social service outreach providers.

The winners during this period of recovery will be those non-profits that have cultivated recognized brands over decades and remain close to their donor bases through ups and downs in the global economy.

Time will tell what the impact on charitable giving the 2020 recession will have. However, there is historic economic evidence that indicates that local social service agencies (food banks, churches, proven non-profit programs, etc.) are the first focus of donors as the economy recovers from recession. The arc widens to regional and national causes (St. Jude Hospital, March of Dimes, Feed the Children, etc.) as the recovery advances. Finally, as the economy shows real staying power international causes (SOMA, CESS-Kibanda, Doctors Without Borders, religious orders, CARE, Catholic Relief Services, etc.) receive the consideration of potential donors.

Unfortunately, support for Spiritan mission work clearly falls within the latter group. Additionally, the work of the Spiritans is often in remote locations many thousands of miles away from prospective donors.

One way to bridge this geographical expanse is to create tours, made available to our contributors, to travel to locations such as Tanzania and Kenya where they can meet local Spiritans, visit completed projects, and interact with project beneficiaries.

Another way to bridge the geographical expanse is to leverage the resources of the most important, unused constituency available to us. I refer to the vast number of people who were evangelized, educated, or in other ways had their lives changed by their relationship with a Spiritan or group of Spiritans. Many have immigrated from their countries of origin, and are now in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Identifying and reaching these "Spiritan Alumni" may be impractical now, however, consideration should be given to ways we can reach them in the future.

Two other challenges continue to loom on the horizon. The first deals with human resources. While Africa and Asia continue to attract and prepare men for the priesthood, Spiritan vocations in Europe and the Americas have been in decline since the 1970s. Many priests are ageing or retiring, having reached their 70s. Is it time and feasible to initiate a Spiritan Lay

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*Is it time and feasible  
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Initiative?*

Missionary Initiative? Ultimately, the current situation requires conversations around how long the Congregation can maintain the present scope of mission works faced with declining resources, both human and financial.

Lastly, perhaps the greatest challenge organizations face is remaining relevant, staying current, up-to-date, reliable, and evolving. Relevancy requires a conscious striving for continuous improvement in an ever-changing world. It requires the organization's presence and promotion in its category. Commitment to employing these disciplines will be key to the Congregation's long-term relevancy.

*Mr. Ray Sylvester  
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Spiritan Office for Mission Advancement  
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#### **ENDNOTES**

1. Sierro, Jean-Marc, "Money, Providence and Spiritan Mission," *Spiritan Horizons* (Fall 2019) 62–79, here 63.
2. The Future of Philanthropy, 2016 Fidelity Charitable
3. Reich, Rob & Wimer, Christopher, Charitable Giving & Great Depression October 2012, The Russell Sage Foundation and the Stanford Center on Poverty & Inequality
4. CISION PR Wire, April 29, 2010, "International NGO CARE Launches New 'Care Package' to Help U.S. Essential Workers and Caregivers on the Front Lines of COVID 19."