

Talk about inspirational: Raising cash raised spirits

by Lynn O'Shaughnessy

Even though the holidays have just passed, I'd like to share an inspirational tale that I've been sitting on for several months. This is a story about some kindhearted souls, who seized upon a simple plan to leverage their charitable donations far beyond what they could have done by writing their own checks.

The plan, which you could now argue has been elevated to more of a phenomenon, began during the Sunday services a few years ago at a church not far from where I work.

Denny Bellesi, who was then pastor of Coast Hills Community Church in San Diego, handed out crisp \$100 bills to 100 volunteers during the Sunday church services. As the perplexed guinea pigs stood in front of the congregation eyeing the money, Bellesi explained what he hoped would happen to the \$10,000.

The pastor urged them to think of a creative way to spend the money on a worthy cause and report back to the congregation in 90 days. The inspiration for this task, which he named The Kingdom Assignment, was the Parable of the Talents in the New Testament.

It's the story of a master who gave his three servants money and what the men did with it. The servants who multiplied the cash were rewarded.

Bellesi acknowledges that it was tough coaxing church members to volunteer before they knew what their mission was. He recalls losing eye contact with nearly everyone sitting in the first few rows when he made his pitch for volunteers.

But those who left their pews ultimately embraced the challenge to multiply their seed money. One woman approached bookstores to match her \$100 to buy books for hospitalized children. A Cub Scout leader successfully urged his troop and their parents to raise money for a needy group of boys who didn't have

enough money to buy uniforms or handbooks.

Another church member raised money from old frat brothers, college roommates, co-workers and others to pay the funeral costs for two siblings, who had died of a genetic disease. During the process, a surviving brother received needed dental work.

The most dramatic success story, however, belongs to a dynamic woman named Terry Zwick, who attends the church in the Aliso Viejo area of San Diego. She leveraged her money to create a battered women's shelter, as well as a transitional women's facility.

She and a few other people had talked for months about their dream to start the facilities, but The Kingdom Assignment jump-started the project. Hours after the church service, she shared what had happened during her birthday party at a restaurant.

Friends tossed in money, as did the owner of the restaurant. She ended up persuading someone to give a \$75,000 donation, and a construction firm donated \$150,000. When the local press publicized her project, more cash flowed in.

"The Kingdom Assignment," she told me, "grew this ministry very quickly and grander than it would have been."

Ultimately, the original church members turned \$10,000 into a windfall of \$1 million. The story, however, didn't end with self-congratulations. Bellesi has called what has happened in the years that have followed as an "underground movement that keeps chugging along."

Across the country, hundreds of other churches have launched their own Kingdom Assignments. A teenager at a church in Texas used her seed money to hold a concert at a church that raised \$3,000.

In San Diego, a woman held a shoe party by inviting each of her friends to bring a new pair of shoes for the poor in Mexico. Elsewhere, a woman used her \$100 to throw a party for Hurricane Katrina victims and she got others to kick in money for decorations, invitations and gifts.

If you'd like to learn more about The Kingdom Assignment, you should visit the Bellesi Web site at www.kingdomassignment.com. Bellesi and his wife, Leesa, have also written two books, "The Kingdom Assignment" and "The Kingdom Assignment 2," to provide further inspiration.

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