Writing Foundation Grants for Faith-Based Organizations

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In most regards, writing competitive grant proposals for faith-based organizations is little different from writing successful proposals on behalf of any organization. The same fundamentals apply: do your research, tell a clear story, and make the need compelling.

The most important skills to develop when writing for faith-based organizations are the ability to: 1) recognize the interests of the funder to whom you are applying; and, 2) adapt your terminology and emphasis to fit the funder’s language and stated interests.

Funders Who Do Not Support Religious Causes

When you conduct your research, you will remove from your list funders who exclude giving to faith-based organizations. However, do not omit prospects too hastily. Foundations often state they will not make gifts “to religious organizations for religious purposes.” The words “for religious purposes” give you hope if the project you want to take to that funder is hunger relief or housing for veterans. In other words, if your organization is undertaking a social service that is not about promoting faith, you may be eligible to apply.

However, if your organization requires recipients of its services to be of a particular faith or to attend worship services as a condition for receiving aid, then the “no gifts to religious organizations for religious purposes” funders are not for you. Move on to another prospect.

Pro-Faith Funders

A pro-faith stance is usually stated in a foundation’s profile or on its website. It may use terms such as “supporting Jewish causes” or “promoting evangelism.” If the funder speaks in terms familiar to a particular faith or denomination in its materials, then it is likely safe to incorporate such terminology into your application to them.

If you need funding for religious education or a mission trip, then usually pro-faith funders are your only option. But realize that even pro-faith funders are more likely to be interested in addressing a community need. Most foundations we have encountered expect congregation members to bear the costs of building new facilities or delivering programs that serve their own members themselves.

Carefully examine each foundation’s giving history. Do they give outside their hometown? Do they by-pass local organizations and give only to national or international
ministries? Is it realistic to motivate a funder who makes gifts to Jewish causes in Florida and New York to support a temple in Idaho? Perhaps, but what will be your hook?

It can be tempting to be lazy about demonstrating need or outcomes to pro-faith funders because we believe these funders “get it,” that they share our dreams and goals. The reality is that you still must demonstrate why your organization is a wise investment and what sets your desired program apart from the thousands of others out there.

While evangelistic language may be exactly what you should use with a pro-faith funder who uses similar language in its materials, it is not appropriate for any funder, pro-faith or not, whose purpose is not evangelism. If the purpose is serving the hungry, then you need to speak in terms of serving the hungry.

**Faith-Neutral Funders**

After eliminating funders who explicitly exclude or include religious recipients, you are left with the “faith-neutral” funders, the largest pool from which to draw. These are funders that have no particular reason to support or not support your organization because of its faith orientation. If your research reveals a funder that seems like a perfect fit for your organization, but the giving history includes no grants to faith-based recipients, it is worth a phone call to clarify your agency and program’s eligibility.

For example, we recently contacted a foundation that had funded state universities to inquire whether a private, faith-based college would be eligible for funding. We received a resounding, “Yes, as long as the project meets a need in the community.” Since this funder is interested in preparing teachers and this college has an exemplary teacher preparation program, the college’s faith orientation would be a complete non-issue in this instance.

However, it is essential that all aspects of your proposal to such a funder be carefully examined for language that may possibly erect unnecessary obstacles to funding. Consider how every phrase could be interpreted (or misinterpreted) by a non-faith-oriented reader. As one example, when communicating with faith-neutral funders, what you normally call your “ministry” to the local community should probably be called your “outreach” or “service.”

In another example, while certain faith-oriented donors might respond positively to your organization’s mission to “send Christian teachers into the mission field of our public schools,” with faith-neutral funders, the emphasis should be shifted to something like “sending qualified teachers into public schools to serve some of our community’s most at-risk children.”

**Other Issues to Watch For**

Aside from avoiding overtly religious language in proposals, be prepared to encounter misunderstandings of who your organization is, what it believes, or how it serves the
community. While many foundations will give to faith-based organizations, they still may have concerns.

Be ready to discuss or respond to questions from funders about—

- whether your organization is under the auspices of a denomination or is independent
- how much control a denomination has (from appointing the board and controlling finances to nothing more than the denomination’s name being on the door)
- what board selection procedures are, such as whether all or part of the board is appointed by a religious body
- the composition of your board, such as whether it is comprised of ministers or members of one congregation or there is a balance of community members or service recipients
- whether you require participation in religious activities to receive services
- whether project activities benefit only members of your congregation or have an outward/community focus

To allay such concerns, it is a good strategy to mention other grants received, awards, or letters of support from community leaders not associated with your religion who can speak to the important role your organization plays in meeting community needs.

In Closing

An organization should never hide who it is or try to change who it is to appeal to a funder. However, selecting funders who are clearly a good fit, focusing on a community need, and speaking a faith-neutral language that funders will understand are essential steps to securing grant funds for your faith-based organization.