

I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.
Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

GETTING AND GIVING THE 4-1-1

Whether beginning a daycare or creating a sense of partnership within a neighborhood, we clergy often lament the lack of money, volunteers, or technical assistance necessary to carry out community ministries. Recent studies by The Polis Center indicate that most congregations and clergy fail to leverage one critical commodity that is accessible and inexpensive – information.

We have several common terms for information that is genuine, reliable, and useful: the real low-down, the inside story – or, as the kids say these days, "Give me the 4-1-1." How do we find out what are the current needs and assets of our neighborhoods? Why do some problems get immediate attention and others go unheeded? How do some programs manage to flourish while others never get off the ground? Where are the calendars that help us avoid conflicts with important civic events? Who are the important decision-makers and information brokers?

The knowledge you want may be closer than you may imagine. Pastors, neighborhoods, and community organizations that keep in touch find mutual support and guidance and may even create partnerships. Polis director of research Art Farnsley offers some tips for finding and sharing information.

Keep Telling Your Story – Fifty-five percent of the people in Indianapolis claim no religious affiliation. In other words, there's a good chance that over half of your neighbors, including community leaders, have no idea how your congregation operates. When people complain that "congregations don't do enough," they may be right – or they may simply have no idea what congregations really do. Inviting community leaders to meetings, planning sessions, or special events may better acquaint them with who your congregation is and what it does in the community.

Learn More About Others – The shoe fits even more snugly on the other foot, as Farnsley likes to say. Few clergy are well versed in how neighborhoods work or how not-for-profit agencies contribute to civic life. Most civic and neighborhood leaders are eager to tell their story to congregations. I often see some of the city's best informed religious and civic leaders sharing lunch or a cup of coffee.

Cross the Boundaries – Your congregation has a particular mission and ministry but that doesn't mean it can't learn from the secular models and organizations around it. Members of your congregation may volunteer or sit on the boards of neighborhood and civic institutions. Ask them to share their expertise with your planning committee, or to carry relevant news of the congregation to their organizations.

Don't Be Afraid to Ask Questions – We are bombarded with information, but often it needs interpretation. It's worth asking who gathered the information (and how, when, and where) and for what purpose. We need to keep in mind our grade school teacher's maxim that there are no dumb questions.

Information-sharing won't necessarily lead to partnerships, but it can make us better connected and more efficient. Perhaps more important, it allows us to see one another as teachers. Who are your teachers? What are the resources you and your congregation find most helpful in better understanding and serving the community? I hope you'll call or write and let me know. In future issues we'll be sharing your suggestions for giving and getting the 4-1-1.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kevin".

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