

Challenge grant fundraising may seem like a daunting undertaking for small parishes. But the Episcopal Community Foundation has found challenge grants to be an effective way to extend the impact of ECF's funding. Grantees who are offered a challenge grant may find themselves asking:

How do we build momentum without exhausting our people? How do we balance a challenge campaign with annual stewardship? And can a congregation our size actually reach an ambitious fundraising goal?

The Power of Challenge Grants for Episcopal Parishes

For frontline advice, ECF checked in with Becky Schacht, a leader at [Church of the Resurrection](#) in Sautee Nacoochee which recently received a challenge grant from ECF.

Resurrection serves families affected by homelessness and incarceration by providing furnishings and household necessities through their HomeWare Assistance Ministry. To construct a permanent, climate-controlled storage facility for these much-needed items, Resurrection set a goal of raising \$30,000, and [ECF agreed to match it](#). When ECF announced the grant, Resurrection had surpassed their goal by raising \$32,000.

Proven Strategies for Reaching Your Challenge Grant Goal

For Resurrection, what didn't seem possible on paper turned into a series of lessons that may help your parish make the most of a challenge grant.

Prove Your Ministry's Viability Over Time

Resurrection first approached ECF about supporting the HomeWares ministry nearly two years before [submitting a grant application](#). At that time, the ministry was newly established, and the parish spent two years strategically positioning their work for success. They formalized partnerships with five local agencies that review families in need, and they gathered solid evidence of an ongoing, unmet county need. The result: a compelling case for funding they could present to ECF and individual donors.

Use Data to Tell an Authoritative Story

From the very beginning of HomeWares, Resurrection kept meticulous data records. "All that we've given out, all the donations, all the thank you letters, and all the receipts," Schacht said. They could then utilize this organized, concrete data to tell the authoritative story of the need they are meeting. This is essential for a successful grant application, and for recruiting new donors to your effort.

Recruit an Invested Leadership Committee

A challenge grant fundraising campaign needs a dedicated core team. Resurrection recruited nine leadership-minded church members who strongly believed a \$30,000 goal was achievable. They led early and by example. Before the campaign went public to the wider parish, five committee members stepped forward to commit \$1,000 each. These lead gifts provided momentum for the congregation to give.

Balance Challenge Fundraising with Annual Church Stewardship

Vestry members may naturally feel anxiety about a major fundraising project impacting the church's annual operating pledges. At Resurrection, their interim rector made the strategic decision to pause the HomeWares fundraiser during the autumn stewardship cycle. The separation preserved institutional trust, ensuring the fundamental health of the parish before asking members to stretch their outreach giving.

Strategically Use Mini-Challenges to Reengage the Congregation

Inevitably, a long fundraising effort will hit lulls, like Resurrection's hiatus during their stewardship campaign. Interest reignited when a parishioner made an anonymous \$5,000 match, but with a strict two-week deadline. That mini-challenge inspired gifts of \$7,000 that helped exceed the initial goal of \$30,000.

Expand Your Reach Beyond the Pews

Small churches shouldn't limit their fundraising to their parishioners when they are providing a community need like HomeWares. Local neighbors showed up for Resurrection's community takeout spaghetti dinner that raised \$3,000 and a winter gala that brought in \$7,000. There is immense power in tapping into a collective belief, not necessarily religious, that a caring community is greater than the sum of each individual.

Many forms of generosity are blooming through the ministry's growing pains. For example, because the new facility will not be finished until later this year, HomeWares isn't storing upholstered furniture like couches. Instead, the community is filling the ongoing need couch by couch.

"Every time we have had a family needing a sofa, within a few days I've received a call, 'I have a sofa to donate'," Schacht said. "It's happened every time."



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