

There are two ways to move water:

1. Try to pump it up a hill
2. Let it flow down a hill

The former is a never ending effort consuming large amounts of energy with lots of opportunities for failure while the latter is guaranteed to succeed. Always.

Most efforts to solve problems focus on trying to move disengaged or disagreeing people towards a new course of action. Think of all the challenges that were faced by those who tried to end segregation. Decades of effort, still underway in many ways today, called for informing and enforcing a change upon people who were perfectly happy with the way things were – even though it was at the expense of others.

Then there are some efforts in which the people are in agreement but the problem to be solved is difficult to tackle. For example, most Americans, inspired by President Kennedy, wanted to land people on the moon, but the challenge, while eventually met, was hugely difficult for a whole host of reasons.

AmpleHarvest.org seeks to take on problems where the people are largely in agreement and the conditions are largely amenable towards effecting the change. What is most often missing in this case is awareness and information needed by the people to enable them to do what they wanted to do in the first place.

AmpleHarvest.org was founded ten years ago because the nation's home and community gardeners, many of whom grew more than they could use, hated to see that excess food lost to waste and therefore wanted to donate it to help end hunger. They however had also been told over their entire lifetime that they could not donate the food (“jars, can, boxes” mantra at food drives), and therefore had to let the excess harvest go to waste. They also faced the additional difficulty of not knowing where local food pantries were located, and the food pantries themselves were reluctant to accept fresh food out of fear of needing expensive refrigeration.

In short, gardeners wanted to donate the food and the pantries needed the food. All that separated them was information.

Over time, AmpleHarvest.org realized that connecting more gardeners to more food pantries, required continual new approaches to reach those pantries and gardeners that had not yet been reached.

Since 70% of America's food pantries are located in a house of worship and 80% of Americans describe themselves as people of faith, it became clear that a critical partner - the faith community – needed to be invited to the table to help get excess food to hungry families.

Clergy of all faiths have historically preached the need to feed the hungry – typically by helping them get food, and the people in the pews wanted to provide the charity needed to help end the hunger.

What was missing was the awareness that an important step towards ending hunger starts with using the food we already have – ending the waste of food.

A new program from AmpleHarvest.org, piloted over several years starting in 2016, was to reach out to the clergy to inform them about the issue of food waste (specially prepared information, links to other important food waste sites, videos and more), provide them with faith specific sermons (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Unitarian/Universalist and even spiritual but not religious communities), provide food waste calls to action for the congregants and even religious school material. This would provide them with everything they'd need to start including the issue of food waste along with their hunger sermons.

The fundamental idea of engaging a population of people who are already primed for action (gardeners wanting to donate food but under the belief that it was not allowed, and clergy already talking about hunger but unaware of the theological aspects of food waste), and then using technology (food pantry search engine for the gardeners, web hosted sermons and other material for the clergy), are the key components to AmpleHarvest.org's theory of change.

The important benefits of seeking out problems already primed for solutions is that it calls for the least amount of energy and time to accomplish it, sets the stage for other problems to be solved by giving the stakeholders confidence that they can actually solve the problem, and its viral. As one gardener or one faith leader speaks to another, the solutions travel.

Solving some problems, like how to get to the moon, require a massive expenditure of time and money, while solving some others, like how to leverage and engage a community to end the waste of food, requires only creating awareness about the problem itself and then providing the resources needed (food pantry search engine for the gardeners, online faith based sermons for the clergy) to enable them to spearhead change in their community.

The decentralized approach is low cost, efficient, and sustained because it's based on a groundswell of engagement by people who were already onboard in the first place. Additionally, it does not require permanent nurturing by a nonprofit. At some point in time, a program like AmpleHarvest.org will have accomplished its mission and can close its doors leaving resources to be redirected towards solving other critical problems.

Just as water always flows downhill, unleashing the passion of people who already want to and are positioned to solve a problem, results in change.

