

Maintaining Active Family Participation

Curtis W. Meadows, Jr., president emeritus of The Meadows Foundation, was designated Distinguished Grantmaker by the Council on Foundations in 1997. He was interviewed by Thomas W. Lambeth, recently retired as executive director of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, Inc., in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Lambeth: When did you first realize there was a Meadows Foundation?

Meadows: Well, my uncle formed it back in 1948 and he involved the family in it very, very early on. The foundation was essentially a gift Al Meadows was making to his family on behalf of others, because he was saying to the family, “I trust you above all others that I can think of to do this right and appropriately, and do it keeping with my interests and concerns.”

Lambeth: How important is donor intent in The Meadows Foundation?

Meadows: After my uncle’s death, when the family accepted the legacy of responsibility for governing and administering the foundation he created, I was really kind of overwhelmed with the sense of trust he placed in his family.

When I became president of the foundation, I hung my uncle’s picture in my office and I got up every morning and looked at the picture and asked the question, Are we doing OK? Are we still on track with your values? Because the world has changed and the circumstances are so different. I always tried to be accountable to him.

Honoring donor intent is a trustee’s first obligation, but it does not exist in a vacuum. It must be considered in the context of the changing times, public expectations, and other legal and moral responsibilities that are attendant to the existence of the foundation.

Lambeth: You have really made your board and staff about as family-oriented as you can. Why is that important?

Meadows: After my uncle’s death, one of the first things I did was go around the country and look at foundations that had started with the family connection to see those that had sustained it over time and to ask the question, What did they do that made it sustainable?

What I found was that there was a natural evolutionary process away from family involvement that would occur in a family-based foundation if the family didn’t work at maintaining a connection through active, direct participation.

Lambeth: How do you keep it from being in-bred?

Meadows: It is a great fallacy to believe that families — because they are family — are all going to be cookie-cutter replicas of the same mentality. They aren’t — particularly a large family, scattered all over the United States, as we are.

So, there are very diverse views and interests, plus an accumulation of different life experiences within the family. But what united us as a family were the commonly held values such as responsibility, respect, caring, fairness, and a spiritual faith — not necessarily by denominations, though — but by a belief in the role of a Supreme Being in our lives.

The blood is why we are genetically related. The values we share make us a family.

But we realized that our life experience didn’t prepare us to make judgments about all that was needed in terms of grantmaking, without help from others who had gone through experiences different from ours.

Once we decided upon an area of interest, then we would try to bring in people who had extensive experience in that kind of work to educate us, to help us look at what were successful models, and to try and find those models that worked as we went about doing the grantmaking. And so, that was one way to bring into the family a lifetime of experiences and learning that we needed to deal and cope with unfamiliar issues and solutions.

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