

Brilliant Ministry in a Struggling Economy

Practical Suggestions for Funding Mission

A *Travel Free Learning* Article

By

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How are you carrying out and paying for ministry these days? The financial world you live in makes that a tough assignment. You have a volatile stock market, historically high unemployment, tightened bank lending, a Gulf oil spill disaster, possible collapse of the European economic union, and many surveys that indicate church giving fell in 2008, in 2009, and is continuing to fall in 2010. In this article I revisit what I recommended in the Summer 2003 edition of the **NACBA LEDGER**, in response to similar conditions of 2001 and 2002.

1. Take Care of Mission.

Fulfilling mission is your primary goal. Mission includes identity, values, strengths for ministry and a strategic direction. Do not let reactive decisions impair your congregation's ability to carry out its mission. Be sure to ask, "Will how we are reacting to the economy and giving jeopardize our ability to carry out our mission?"

Often your mission is not deep enough into congregational consciousness. Communicate your mission over and over. Constantly illustrate your mission effectiveness. Emphasize the real outcomes of your mission. Take care of mission by talking about your unique mission and illustrating the good it does. Money follows mission. How strong is yours?

2. Practice Realism.

Nothing substitutes for a realistic look at your situation. Many churches have a divergence of five to 15 percent between the amounts for budget, contributions and costs. Church members can become accustomed to the fact that their total annual giving never meets the amount of the budget. Bring the budget, contributions and cost amounts into alignment and create a more credible reality for everyone.

Rather than focusing on whether or not you are increasing the budget or meeting the budget, communicate how well you are accomplishing your ministry goals for the year. Explain that your plan of ministry is vital to so many people and that sustained and increased giving will maintain and grow your ministries.

3. Ask the *Fourth Question*.

One strategy for planning ministry year after year is to ask three questions:

- What are our strengths, those things we do very well?
- What do we do okay and we should improve?
- What could we and should we begin to do?"

The fourth question is rarely asked. Now is the time to ask, "What is it that we should stop doing?" Many people will acknowledge that there are activities, events, programs or ministries that they do in order to be "full service", not because they are good at them. In a struggling economy, churches should focus on their core strengths in ministry and channel their financial resources toward them.

4. Enlarge Your Ministry.

Our current economic anxiety began with the talk of bailing out Wall Street. Days later the talk turned fearful with the need for rescuing Main Street. We are only now beginning to talk about taking care of the back streets of our society. How are you speaking and acting for the poor, the lonely, the jobless, the hungry, the sick, the homeless, and the frightened? How can you minister to those with no golden parachutes, 401K's, health insurance, or medicine?

Isn't this part of your calling? Increase your compassion capacity with a community safety net for those whose voices are soft and weak. Or increase your time, talent and money engagement in a community ministry that you already support. The more successful your church is in providing effective solutions for real needs, the more generous people will be in funding your mission.

5. Preach and Practice the Generosity of God.

Our Bible contains the record of God's great generosity in creation and to humanity. Many times we read not only of generosity but of God's extravagance. "More grace than we can comprehend. More love than we can know." (Seager)

Being created in the image of God, we inherit a spiritual gene of generosity, I believe. Once we put aside our fear and begin to trust God, we can awaken the slumbering desire to be as generous as we have always wanted to be. Now is the time for generosity. Churches demonstrate generosity in their commitments to the homeless, helpless and hopeless.

In many congregations the first reaction to less than anticipated contributions is to cut costs out of the annual ministry plan—the budget. It is the annual ministry plan that demonstrates not only the generosity of God but also your congregation's own generosity. Why shouldn't one of your first actions be to plan how to raise contributions to the level of the vision you had for ministry this year?

6. Ask Big.

According to Lyle Schaller in his 2001 book, *What Have We Learned?* the nonprofit big money game is asking for large contributions from donors' accumulated wealth. Churches should evaluate whether or not they will continue to rely only on member income for their annual ministry plan—their budget, or also ask for the big money to carry out their mission.

Present potential large donors with several options to consider. Any of these options, if funded, would enable your church to carry out its plan of ministry for the year. Examples include enlarged community ministry, new ministry position subsidy, website development, strategic church plant, new program funding, or a comprehensive church growth strategy.

7. Choose Your Economy.

Which economy are you living in; which economy is affecting you? Are you trapped in the boom-bust cycle of the North American economy? Are you taking your clues from Ben, Warren and Cramer for financial decisions? Or, are you aligning your financial actions with the economy of God's Kingdom?

Walter Brueggemann in his essay, *The Liturgy of Abundance and the Myth of Scarcity* notes that the idea of not having enough first appears in the Bible in the account of the multi-year famine. Out of fear, Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of cornering the grain market. A monopoly in grain is established. In order to eat during the years of the famine, the Israelites barter away all that they own until finally, they give themselves as slaves in order to survive.

Brueggemann writes that the Bible portrays scarcity as a myth. The Biblical reality is abundance, more than enough for every good work. If you choose to live in the economy of God's Kingdom, then remain

passionate about the mission God has given you. Strive to be realistic, creative, compassionate and generous in funding your God-given mission. That will lead to brilliant ministry.

Important Things to Know

Ruben Swint is a Ministry Partner with The Columbia Partnership. He has the lead role for resource development. In this role he focuses on capital campaigns, planned giving, and annual giving for congregations, denominations, and parachurch organizations. The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. ***Travel Free Learning*** is a knowledge sharing emphasis. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.